



The Crisis in Relations Between Jews and Arabs in Israel: Can the Rift Be Healed?

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Brief Analysis

Without genuine, serious introspection, any resolution to the current tensions between Arabs and Jews in Israel will likely be superficial.

The rioting that broke out in Israeli Arab society during Operation "Guardian of the Walls", an armed conflict between Israel and Hamas lasting from May 10 to May 21, 2021, was one of the lowest points in relations between Jewish citizens and Arabs in Israel. Unlike previous crises like "Land Day" in 1976 or the incidents in October 2000, which consisted of clashes between Arab citizens and the security services in Israel, most of the most recent confrontations were between citizens from the two sides of Israeli society.

This recent outbreak saw extreme violence, including violence towards symbols of governance and random vandalism, in all parts of Arab society in Israel. The violence was particularly prominent in mixed-society cities, such as Lod, Acre, Haifa, Jaffa, and Ramleh (mostly Arab violence against Jews), but was also seen among Bedouin localities in the Negev (mainly the blocking of central traffic ways and the damaging of civil infrastructure), the so-called "Triangle" comprising of eleven towns near the Green Line in Israel's center, and towns and villages in the Galilee.

The incidents were not the result of any type of organizational framework or orderly leadership, but were rather spontaneous eruptions resulting from the societal realities in Israel. Likewise, while tensions on the Temple Mount, al-Aqsa Mosque, and in the Gaza Strip sparked the violence, it was also driven by the many years of foundational problems in Arab-Israeli society and its relations with the Israeli authorities and Israeli Jewish society.

These recent events put on display the frustration and rage that have developed in Arab society. The situation has

become particularly acute over the last few years over the steep increase in crime and violence in these communities, described as a spreading plague resulting from intentional government neglect. The Israeli Arab public likewise feels deeply oppressed due to discrimination, as well as legislative initiatives they see as prejudicial—the most extreme example being the “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People” passed by the Knesset in July 2018.

The younger generation in Arab-Israeli society experiences a particularly severe distress over a sense of twofold alienation—both towards the state and towards their own loci of leadership, which include parents, clerics, heads of extended families and clans, and the political parties. Young Arab citizens of Israel feel adrift and deeply frustrated; the fact that 30 percent of 18-to-24 year-olds neither work nor go to school is particularly telling.

Extremists—first and foremost the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movements—are taking advantage of this disaffection to engage in longstanding incitement, which exerts a deleterious influence on young people’s attitude towards the state and the Jewish public. In addition, the situation has led to gradual weakening in state governability over all foci of Arab society, which has manifested in the strength of Bedouin criminal groups all over the Negev, which focus on smuggling weapons, damaging civil infrastructure, and stealing valuable property from IDF bases and Jewish localities,

With all these forces coming to a head during Operation "Guardian of the Walls," the crisis began with spontaneous outbreaks of violence. This spontaneity, however, became more intentional as relevant actors attempted to attach a political and/or ideological aspect to the events. This was evident in the effort of the political leadership—especially members of the Joint List and the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel—to define the rioting and the May 18 general strike (observed jointly in the West Bank) as a precedent-setting manifestation of the assimilation of Arabs citizens in Israel within a national Palestinian system managed simultaneously in all its loci.

In turn, the viciousness of last month’s events have created a deep rift in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel and a profound sense of distrust on both sides as to the possibility of forging stable coexistence in the long term. The alienation between the two societies has already been visible, and it is clearly reflected at the socioeconomic level, where contact between Jews and Arabs has shrunk significantly. This challenge was the motivation behind the recent Arab initiative called "the National Economy week" which was aimed at encouraging the purchase of Arab products in order to face the damage that was caused because of the dramatic reduction of Jewish purchases.

In contrast, an unprecedented development took place at the political level when Ra`am—the United Arab List—the Arab party that represents the southern wing of the Islamic movement in the Knesset—signed a historic agreement with Jewish parties on June 2, establishing Israel’s new government. With this, Ra`am has become the first Arab party in Israel to be a part of ruling coalition. However, it is still not guaranteed that the government will exist for an extended period of time. Moreover, the potential effects of these dramatic developments on the public level in the two societies is unclear and of questionable importance.

In general, the Jewish public is dismayed by three phenomena that emerged in this crisis. The first is in the broad identification of the Arab-Israeli public, whom they often consider to be their Palestinian brothers, as the enemy with which they are locked in a military struggle. The second is the severe violence that broke out in Israeli Arab society, which has aroused the fear that this is not just an expression of frustration with prejudice and discrimination or a reaction to the events in Jerusalem and Gaza, but rather a reflection of deep-seated hostility. And the third is the fact that the voices in Arab society condemning the violence were largely saying, “too little too late.”

This being said, there were standouts among Israeli Arab leadership who called for peace, including MK Issawi Freij of Meretz, a new minister in the recently formed government who courageously urged other Arab leaders to issue unequivocal condemnations of violence, and MK Mansour Abbas, who serves as the head of Ra`am and pledged to

the mayor of Lod that he would reconstruct the synagogues that were damaged during the rioting. MK Abbas subsequently received intense censure from other figures in Israeli Arab society because of this act.

The profound distrust is also evident among the Arab-Israeli public, amplified by assertions of discriminatory practices of the Israel Police when breaking up the violence on both sides, though it is important to note that the number of participants in violent incidents was higher in the Arab sector. Likewise of great public concern are the mass arrests on the basis of political opinions—more than 2,000 Israeli Arabs have so far been taken into police custody since the outbreak of the conflict several weeks ago (according to several assessments, up to 10,000 Arab citizens were involved in the riots all over Israel). Likewise, there is anger at the fact that it took a threat against the Jewish public to force the state into taking aggressive action against crime and violence in the Arab sector, issues that Arab voices have decried for years. This Israeli action included unprecedented help from the "Shin-Bet" (the Israeli Security Agency).

Moreover, the most recent rift in relations between the two societies is particularly severe because it involves a crisis of unmet expectations. Before the latest round of Israel-Hamas violence, there was a widespread sense, particularly among Jews, that relations between Jews and Arabs were changing and that the "Israelization" pole among Israeli Arabs was gaining strength at the expense of "Palestinianization."

Politically, Arab influence was waxing, as manifested in the unprecedented willingness of Ramat Gan to become part of the ruling government; publicly, there was a sense of shared destiny and cooperation against the COVID-19 pandemic; and in the economy, the academe, culture, and sports, the integration of Arab citizens of Israel was gaining momentum. The shift from that optimistic peak to the low of the Operation "Guardian of the Walls" was sharp and swift, creating in both societies difficult collective feelings of mutual suspicion, fear, and despair regarding the reality of harmonious, shared existence.

Now, many in Israel assume that things will not go back to the way they were before May 10, when the riots began. While the situation in most of Arab society, especially in the mixed cities, is now calm, it is not in any way content. Beneath the surface, a tremendous amount of rage continues to roil and it is liable to explode again should there be new friction between Jews and Arabs.

Making matters worse, Hamas considers the tension among Arabs and Jews in Israel as one of its finest strategic victories in the last round of violence, even if it was not defined as one of Hamas's goals and did not develop due to its efforts. Senior officials of the movement—mainly Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar—called the outbreak in Arab society a "revolution that destabilized Israel and erased the concepts of Israelization and coexistence," and they made it clear that Arabs in Israel are an active force in the struggle against Israel, hinting that they will sooner or later try to fan the flames of dissent yet again.

To restore mutual trust and calm on the ground, it is critical to promote practical policies whose fruits will gradually ripen. From the perspective of the state and the Jewish public, it is necessary to realize already-formulated programs that address the core problems in Arab society, such as crime and violence, in order to ensure the safety of Israeli Arabs, an objective that also requires expanding broad investment in welfare, youth, and infrastructure. In addition, there is a need to improve the care of youth, develop the civil services in the Arab sector (mainly education and welfare), and find a solution for the broad problem of unrecognized localities, mainly in the Negev area.

However, though these reforms would be a positive starting point in healing this relationship, they are insufficient by themselves. Entrenching the concept of coexistence requires deep introspection in both societies. The Jewish side must recognize and address the prejudice and discrimination that Israeli Arabs face, currently a well-fed petri dish for growing alienation and hostility. In turn, Arab society must also engage in soul-searching, especially when it comes to the tendency to explain away or over-contextualize violence—tantamount to justification. Likewise,

leaderships must recognize that there is a serious problem: Israeli Arab society has lost its grip on the younger generation, which is facing a deep sense of despair.

Without sincere, mutual introspection, both societies may return to a semblance of shared existence. Under the surface, however, relations will be rife with suspicion and fear, focused on the knowledge that the occurrence of another incident is only a matter of time. ❖



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