

The Israeli Arabs:

Defending al-Aqsa or Fighting for Equality?

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Brief Analysis

The riots and violent demonstrations of Israeli Arab citizens in the last few days have been the most violent in 18 years and can be compared only to the violent protests that occurred in response to the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilah by Christian Phalanges in September 1982. Israeli Arabs did not give vent to such violence and rage even during the Palestinian Uprising (Intifadah) in the Territories. Although most of the Israeli Arab citizens have not taken part in the current violence, it seems from their reactions that most of them--especially the Muslim population--identify with the expressions of rage (Christian, Northern Bedouin, and Druze villages took no part in the latest incidents).

The current uprising has been named the Al-Aqsa Intifadah, a phrase coined by Knesset Member Dr. Ahmad Tibi. The phrase implies that the rage that led to the violent events was a direct consequence of the "danger to the fate of Al-Aqsa." October 1st has been declared "Al-Aqsa Day," and is supposed to be commemorated in the coming years, perhaps as an alternative to "Land Day," which has lost its appeal to most of the Arab population.

An Escalation on Several Fronts The events, which came as a complete surprise in terms of both scope and intensity, stunned Israeli Jews. Unprecedented, Israeli towns and villages were closed and under siege for several days, while main transportation arteries were blocked. There were at least three cases of shooting at Israeli vehicles. Eight Israeli Arab citizens were killed by the Israeli police.

The Arab leadership, including members of Knesset, made extreme statements, comparing the Israeli police to Nazis and calling the Israeli government the enemy. They did nothing to stop or to calm the rioters. Voices calling for co-existence, in the past the slogan of the Communist Party and many Arabs, totally disappeared.

For the first time, demonstrations within Israel occurred in tandem with those within the Palestinian Authority, whose police, security forces, and Fatah's military infrastructure (Tanzim), were prominent in the violent events in the Territories. It seemed as if the "Green Line" between Israel and the Palestinian Authority--formerly strictly adhered to by the Israeli Arabs--vanished entirely. Furthermore, the extreme faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel was revealed as the primary political power among Israeli Arabs, despite the fact that its closest Palestinian counterpart-- Hamas--took no part in organized events in the Territories.

Causes of Violence in Israel In addition to the issue of Al-Aqsa, which has in recent years become the most prominent issue raised by the Israeli Islamic Movement, there are three main reasons for the present outbreak and its intensity:

The sense of confrontation in the wake of the arrest of tens of Israeli Arabs suspected of terrorism in the last year. The statements of Israeli officials, mainly high-ranking police officers have also played a role.

The notion among the Palestinians in general--and reinforced by the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon--that the Israeli government and the Israeli public cannot confront popular force and violence.

The belief among Israeli Arabs that the expected final-status Israeli-Palestinian agreement leaves them with no improvements to their own situation.

It should also be noted that following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, Israeli Arabs took part in public expressions of enthusiasm over the "victory of Hizballah." They participated in the ritual of visiting the Israeli-Lebanese border, where they met Palestinian refugee relatives, and in some cases, encouraged the throwing of stones and other objects from the Lebanese side at Israeli soldiers. The effects of the "Lebanese victory" and the calls for "Lebanonization" of the Palestinian struggle in the Territories must have influenced the Israeli Arabs too.

No doubt all these factors played a role. However the religious element cannot be ignored. The violence in recent years has tended to center in Umm al-Fahm, the "capital" of the Islamic Movement. The main areas of confrontation with the police in the first two days were the towns and villages in the northern part of the "Triangle" and the Galilee-places where the Islamic Movement is most influential. The flags raised in the demonstrations were the green flags of the Islamic Movement. Later on the riots spread to other places and Palestinian national flags began being raised as well.

The leadership of the extremist party of the Islamic Movement has in the past decade succeeded in instilling in the Israeli Muslims the importance of Jerusalem in general and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in particular, as the symbol of their national aspirations. Furthermore, protecting the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which Islamists claim Jewish extremists wish to convert into a synagogue, has become more important.

The visit by Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon and other Likud Knesset members to the area of the Al-Aqsa Mosque on Thursday September 28th was used by the Palestinian Authority as a trigger for rioting the next day. This event influenced Israeli Muslims as well. Sharon was immediately linked by Israeli Arab leaders and demonstrators to the massacre at Sabra and Shatilah, exactly 18 years ago.

The Israeli Arabs, mainly in Umm al-Fahm and the Galilee, found another "enemy" in the form of Northern District police chief, Alik Ron. In the past weeks, Ron publicly and bluntly warned of incitement to and the escalation of violence among Israeli Arabs. Ron's words were met with extreme and verbally violent reactions from Arab leaders. Sharon as the "enemy of the Palestinians," and Ron as "the enemy of the Israeli Arabs," were used by Israeli Arab leaders to symbolize allegations of discrimination and police brutality against the Arab population in Israel.

Surprisingly, Israeli Arab leaders and demonstrators have only rarely denounced Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak--an omission that is all the more noticeable given recent events. Moreover, it seems that the Arab leadership has made some efforts to keep the events under control, and expressed their immediate willingness to meet with Israeli officials. Israeli Arab leaders generally welcomed moderate statements made by Israeli government officials.

A Shift in Political Focus A significant change has occurred in recent years in the Israeli Arab leadership that may have influenced recent events. Unlike the 1970s and the 1980s, when the Israeli Arab leadership was composed primarily of mayors and local municipal leaders, the present center of mass of the Arab leadership is in the Knesset. Most of the present Arab Knesset members come, not from the municipal sector, but from the field of political activism. Their priorities are not necessarily budgets and development projects but in unifying the Arab minority on Palestinian national interests.

Conclusion Of crucial importance for the future of the delicate relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel is the question of the motivations of Arab violence. Is the main issue one of nationalism and religion, or is it the basic struggle for equality, characteristic of Arab political activity for so many years?

From the statements of secular Arab leaders--even in the last few days--this main focus is still on equality. The change, which is significant, is the notion that the use of force and violence is now a primary means of achieving this goal. The reactions among Israeli Jews to these events have been mixed. On one hand, there is anger and

expressions of hostility. On the other hand, there is a greater understanding of the social causes that feed this violence, and a willingness to allocate resources to the Israeli Arabs for the improvement of their situation.

However, the violent events have established new "red lines" between the Israeli Arabs and the Israeli government and society. Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa have become symbols for Palestinian nationalism on both sides of the "Green Line," and the Islamic Movement in Israel has made another step in instilling the religious Islamic element in the Israeli Arab struggle. This may lead to an increase in the participation of Israeli Muslims in terrorist activity in the coming years--an increase that began in the past decade, primarily among members of the Islamic Movement.

Reuven Paz is the academic director of The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel, and a 2000 Meyerhoff visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.



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