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Jewish-Arab Relations following the Kafr Qassem Incident:

The Danger of the Slippery Slope

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The serious incident that occurred at Kafr Qassem on June 6, 2017, in which an Arab citizen was shot and killed by a civilian security guard of the local police station, has emerged as yet another brick in the steadily rising wall of separation between the state and its Arab citizens. This incident follows the serious incident of January 18 in the southern Bedouin settlement of Umm al-Hiran, in which a Bedouin citizen was shot and killed by police operating to secure the demolition of buildings built without permits. The severe outcome in both cases was similar, despite the different circumstances. The shooting in Kafr Qassem occurred against a general backdrop of crime and violence in the Arab sector, including violence against women. In the past few years, this issue has assumed greater prominence and has significantly engaged the Arab population.

A July 2014 study of the Knesset Research and Information Center highlighted the troubling scope of the phenomenon. Data indicates that 49 percent of the criminal prisoners in Israel hail from the Arab sector. A breakdown of the number of open cases between 2006 and 2013 by offense indicates that Arabs account for 55 percent of all murder suspects and 49 percent of all murder indictments, as well as 58 percent of all suspects in cases of severe physical injury and 45 percent of all such indictments. In the case of aggravated robbery, the numbers stood at 1,625 non-Jews and 1,535 Jews.

In response to the Arab public's concern with the violence and crime in its midst, the local Arab leadership encouraged the Israeli police force to establish a presence in Arab localities. This was also the case in Kafr Qassem, where a local police station was established one and a half years ago, as part of a comprehensive plan for increasing law enforcement in the Arab sector. The plan envisioned the establishment of approximately ten police stations in Arab towns and the recruitment of more than 1,000 new police officers. The rising support within the Arab public for cooperation with the police to

combat crime and violence was reflective of the intense public distress caused by the phenomenon, as the introduction of a police presence into Arab communities is perceived as an infringement on the Arab sector's only autonomous space in the state.

However, police activity has produced little change. Following the incident at Kafr Qassem, a troubling picture emerged revealing the scope of activity of criminal elements in the locality, as a microcosm of the violence in Arab society as a whole and the weakness of the police in this context. Against this background, there were local attempts to secure businesses through an independent security provider, which in this case operates through the Southern (and legal) Branch of the Islamic Movement – which for its part has clear political interests. The extent to which the police force has come to terms with such independent action, particularly under the auspices of the Islamic Movement, remains unclear. This may also have affected the intensity of the police reaction during the events at Kafr Qassem and the readiness to clash with locals.

The charged encounter between the Kafr Qassem population and the police is yet another manifestation of the complex relationship between Israeli law enforcement authorities, which are state agencies, and the Arab population. The chasm between them widened following the events of October 2000, in which 13 Arab demonstrators were killed by police gunfire. According to the Mossawa Center, 48 Arabs have been killed by police under varying circumstances since the year 2000 – a fact that arouses deep resentment and suspicion toward the police throughout the Arab population. Arab citizens may believe that the proximity of the incidents in Kafr Qassem and Umm al-Hiran, despite the different backgrounds to the events, are evidence of a trigger-happy Israel police that has become increasingly willing to clash with the Arab population.

Whether the incidents were indeed the result of intentional police policy remains unclear. However, it is difficult to separate aggressive police activity in the Arab sector and the wider context of relations between the state and its Arab citizens. The tense relations have been exacerbated in recent years by government policy toward the Arab population. Recent political and legislative measures that aim to exclude the Arab minority from Israeli society and politics are pronounced expressions of this trend.

The Israeli establishment's primary effort has been directed toward the minority's leadership on the parliamentary and extra-establishment levels. In the past two years, the government has taken resolute measures aimed at reducing the presence of Arabs in the legislature (with the raised electoral threshold in Knesset elections, the law facilitating dismissal from the Knesset, and the move to illegalize the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement). These measures were taken concurrently with other legislative initiatives, including the nationality law and the draft "muezzin law." These join a palpable anti-Arab political discourse that has seeped down from senior levels to the rank and file of

Israeli society and resulted in increased distance, hostility, and acts of hatred and racism in large parts of Israeli Jewish society.

What happened in Umm al-Hiran and Kafr Qassem may be instructive of a troubling phenomenon: the downward spillover of the “spirit of the commander,” from the political echelon to executive parties within the Israeli establishment, without a decision necessarily taken by senior police officials. The discourse within the police force following the events signals such a trend. They are also indicative of the danger that lurks in the creation of a slippery slope that may cause further deterioration in the already tense relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Unlike the stringent approach of the Israeli political leadership toward the Arab minority, directed primarily against this sector’s political leadership, the police force comes into contact with the Arab population at large. With the encouragement (or incitement) of extreme political elements, this population may respond with inappropriate violence to what it perceives as police aggression. Protest measures can easily deteriorate into uncontrollable violence, especially in the absence of restraining figures among both Arabs and Jews.

In these ominous circumstances, the political echelon must understand the severity of the current situation and the serious risks it poses. Government ministers should take action to assuage the tense atmosphere and convey the need for moderation to the police, as well as the need for restraint in their action against civilians, even in serious cases of disorder. At the same time, major responsibility also lies with the Arab political leadership, which tends to be swept up by events and disseminate provocative nationalist positions instead of helping to reduce the tension. Increasingly vocal voices within the Arab population have been severely critical of the political leadership on this issue and are calling on the Arab citizens to take responsibility for their fate, recognizing the preference of addressing the internal challenges that are endangering their wellbeing and prosperity.

It is important for the police, in conjunction with the local authorities, to develop new conceptual tools for contending with the challenges facing the Arab population in terms of violence and crime. These should join the existing plans, which focus primarily on the establishment of new police stations and the allocation of more manpower. Critical in this context is the joint work with the Arab local authorities for the establishment of local-urban policing bodies like those developed in the Jewish sector. Such a process will certainly encounter difficulties, but it and others like it could help promote stability, reduce violence, and improve the social atmosphere. These are urgent undertakings that command immense importance on Israel’s complex social agenda.