

Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel, April-May 2021

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Jewish and Arab leaders and public figures at all levels in Israel should now mobilize to assuage feelings of animosity between the two sectors. They must condemn hatred and racism loudly and clearly, and emphasize that this is a vital interest for both Arabs and Jews. Instead of holding a grudge against Arab society following the recent clashes, a government plan for combating violence and crime should be funded and implemented in coordination with the Arab leadership. Multi-year economic and social programs should be launched, including in education and employment. Such a policy might well accelerate the integration of Arabs in Israel, both at the state and societal levels, and reinforce the trend of Israelization among them, even while maintaining Arab identity and its balance with a state identity. The possibility of including Arabs in a government coalition is likely to contribute to this trend.

Background to the Events

During the holidays and memorial days for Muslims and Jews in April-May 2021 (Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Nakba, Jerusalem Day, Shavuot) and the military campaign in the Gaza Strip (Operation Guardian of the Walls), the worst clashes between Arabs and Jews in two decades took place in mixed cities and other locations in Israel. These clashes included deadly attacks; deliberate acts of arson to religious sites, homes, public buildings, and vehicles; and vandalism to public and private property. The authorities dealt with these events by deploying additional regular police and border police forces; the use of the army was also considered. In an unprecedented step, a civil emergency was declared in the city of Lod. The Israel Police commissioner and the head of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) categorized these clashes as pogroms and acts of terrorism; intelligence gathering capabilities were used in order to halt the rioting and bring the perpetrators to justice. The National Insurance Institute announced that those injured in the riots would be recognized as victims of hostile action / hate crimes. Most of the Arabs involved in these riots were young people on the margins of society with no political affiliation, while the Jews involved were members of the extreme right, among them the so-called hilltop youth, some Jewish residents of the West Bank, and supporters of the La Familia and Lehava bands.

The violence was ostensibly unexpected, given that general calm prevailed in recent years and relations between Arabs and the state and its Jewish majority were peaceful. This trend in part reflected a growing desire in Arab society to integrate into Israeli society and join decision making processes at the national level, and recognition by the country's leadership and most of the Jewish political parties of the importance of encouraging and promoting this integration. On the other hand, a process of radicalization has begun within the Jewish public in recent years, reflected in the strengthening of extreme right wing organizations, some of which have been granted political legitimacy by the state leadership.

It appears that the outbreak of violence stemmed from clashes between the police and young Muslims in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount, at Damascus Gate, and in Sheik Jarrah, in which Kahanist groups and organizations, among them La Familia and Lehava, were involved from the beginning. These groups advocate the exclusion of Arabs from Jewish neighborhoods, the entry of Jews into Arab-inhabited Jerusalem neighborhoods, and the exclusion of Arabs from any government coalition, whether right or center-left – an option under consideration in the efforts to form a government.

The events in Jerusalem and Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip, given their national and religious contexts, generated a bitter collective mood within the Arab public in Israel. This bitterness affected young Arabs in mixed cities, and was the spark that set off the conflagration. Most of these young people have no political affiliation, employment, or educational framework, and some are also influenced by criminal organizations in Arab society. They have experienced the state authorities' neglect of the Arab population and the effects of exclusion by religious Zionist students and displacement by gentrification. They expressed their rage by assaulting their Jewish neighbors, while the police were unable to enforce law and order there.

Extreme right wing groups interpreted these attacks as anti-Jewish pogroms. Groups of La Familia and Lehava supporters went into the mixed cities of Jaffa, Ramle, and Lod, accompanied by Jewish residents of the West Bank and the hilltop youth, on the pretext of defending the Jewish residents against attacks by the young Arabs, while taking the law into their own hands. They alleged that Israel Police had been negligent in protecting the Jews, and that it was therefore their duty to do so. Their actions were justified and supported by rabbis, among them Safed's Chief Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu. The clashes between Jews and Arabs spread to other mixed cities. Violent demonstrations were held in Arab communities in the Galilee and the Negev, where tires and trash cans were burned, roads were blocked, passersby were assaulted, and police stations were attacked, leading to clashes with the police.

Are These Clashes Seminal Events in Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel?

The spread of these events from mixed cities to many Arab communities in Israel indicated that the conditions for these outbreaks existed and were deeply rooted in factors relating to the state of Arab society, following many years of discrimination, deprivation, and social and political exclusion. The Arab public and much of its national and local political leadership showed restraint, and were not dragged into the riots perpetrated by the disaffected youth. For many years, they protested nonviolently against deprivation and discrimination by the state, while expressing their demand for a change in the distribution of resources and an agreed structural change that would define their status and national identity in the country.

Public opinion surveys in Arab society conducted by Prof. Sammy Smooha indicate growing support among Arabs in recent years for the use of violence and all other means to advance their situation and status in the country (35 percent of the Arab public expressed such support in 2019). It is therefore possible that unless the situation improves, future Arab protests motivated by deep disaffection will be more broadly based, no longer confined to marginal groups.

Some Arab political leaders condemned the rioters' actions, and demanded that they stop attacking Jews and vandalizing property. Ra'am Party leader Mansour Abbas visited a synagogue damaged by arson in Lod, and offered to help repair the damage. At the same time, the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel declared a general strike by Arabs on May 18 in protest against the military campaign in the Gaza Strip and what it described as the attack on Palestinians in Jerusalem, on the Arab public in general, and in mixed cities in particular. Participation in the general strike was widespread; it ended with no exceptional events.

It appears that the severe clashes all over Israel exposed an ongoing and dangerous pattern of the state refraining from exercising its authority in various areas. It has disavowed responsibility for the dismal socioeconomic state of Arab society, including the large number of illegal weapons in its possession, and has displayed a general attitude toward Arabs as a hostile and illegitimate minority. This situation was reflected in the authorities' failure to prevent the entry of extreme nationalist right wing and other radical elements into the mixed cities under the pretext that they needed to protect their Jewish residents from the Arabs since the police had failed to do so. The result was severe damage to the delicate fabric of relations between Jews and Arabs in the country and a widening of the rift between them, including mutual expressions of racism and hatred. Incitement on social media and in demonstrations included slogans such as "death to the Arabs" and "death to the Jews," which encouraged young people to commit crimes of

violence and terrorism for nationalistic reasons. Such calls are incitement of racism and violence, and are illegal in Israel.

The leadership on both sides has almost no ability to persuade Arabs and Jews to restore relations to previous norms. Leaders' political weakness and the heterogeneous nature of the population, which is split into separate and religiously, ethnically, socioeconomically, and politically diverse groups with their own leaders, political parties, and movements, make this a particularly daunting task. Positive initiatives by organizations in civil society are underway throughout Israel to promote reconciliation and encourage projects aimed at coexistence, but their influence is limited. Acts of violence on both sides hamper the ability to restore relations to their former state, even in places such as the healthcare system and institutions of higher education.

At the same time, it is too soon to assess the effects of the clashes on relations between the two societies beyond the immediate future. Rebuilding relations is possible, mainly because a majority of the Arab public still wants to integrate into the Israeli economy, society, and politics. It regards such integration as an existential need, now and in the future. The Arab political leadership is aware of this desire, and its willingness to cooperate politically with the Jewish political parties is therefore likely to persist. A majority of the Jewish public as well wants proper relations with the Arab minority and its inclusion in Israel's civil and socioeconomic fabric. The willingness of the right wing and center left Jewish political parties to cooperate politically with an Arab political party is also likely to persist if that is what it will take to form a government coalition. Thus, both sides have a clear interest in stability and cooperation, and in avoiding the dangers of violent clashes.

Since coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Israel is an established fact, the recent clashes may prove to be an opportunity to bridge rifts and live in harmony and mutual respect rather than a point of no return in relations. This requires both top-down and bottom-up efforts: from the state and the leadership on both sides and from the two societies.

Recommendations for the Near Term and Beyond

Jewish and Arab leaders and public figures at all levels should immediately join in the effort to assuage the animosity between the two sides. They must condemn hatred and racism loudly and clearly, and emphasize that this is a vital interest for both Arabs and Jews. Instead of holding a grudge against the Arab minority over the recent clashes, a government plan for combating violence and crime should be funded and implemented in coordination with the Arab leadership. Multi-year economic and social programs should be carried out, including in education and employment. Such policies are likely to

accelerate the integration of Arabs into Israeli society and politics, and reinforce the trend of Israelization among them while maintaining Arab identity and its balance with an Israeli state identity. The emerging possibility of including Arabs in a government coalition would likely contribute to this trend.

The government should halt the processes of radicalization that have developed within the Jewish public, and deny any political legitimacy to extreme right-wing organizations such as La Familia, Lehava, and the hilltop youth. If these processes continue, they are liable to generate more clashes in the future. The government can reduce societal racism, hatred, and violence in general, and toward Arabs in particular, in part by stepping up law enforcement in these domains and including suitable programs in the educational system. It should also refrain from any kind of social, economic, or political exclusion of the Arab public, and halt the ongoing erosion in the Jewish perception of Arabs as Israeli citizens with equal rights. As part of this effort, solidarity and equality in all spheres must be fostered.

The law enforcement system has been used to bring rioters on both sides to justice. The Israel Police should enhance training and guidance for police officers and commanders about the likely negative consequences of harsh police actions toward Muslim and Christian worshippers, and Arab residents in general, in order to preserve public order – especially during religiously and nationally sensitive times and in sensitive locations. Jewish police officers must understand the importance to Israel of good relations with Israeli Arabs.

These measures can be put into practice. Their implementation is essential for the future existence of the Israeli state and society.