

Curbing Violence and Crime in Arab Society: The Risk of a Missed Opportunity

Ephraim Lavie, Mohammed Wattad, and Meir Elran | January 16, 2022

The government's long-term plans to curb crime in Arab society and encourage social and economic development in the sector have created a confluence of interests between the state and Arab society and its leaders, and a rare opportunity to transform the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. Smart implementation of these plans could not only mitigate underlying root problems, but also diminish the tension between Arabs and Jews, strengthen internal stability, improve personal security, and allay the mutual fears that were aggravated by the riots of May 2021. However, the belligerent rhetoric and conduct adopted as part of the campaign against violence and crime, plus references to the May 2021 events as a domestic "intifada," paint a distorted picture of Israel at war against an internal foe that threatens its security and stability. Such a framing might erode the prospect of achieving the worthy goal defined in Government Resolution 549: increasing the Arab public's trust in the police and law enforcement system as a necessary aspect of the enforcement effort. It might also bolster existing Arab and Jewish radical nationalist groups.

Framing the Fight against Crime and the Events of May 2021

The public acknowledgment that the government must assume responsibility and work relentlessly to curb crime and violence in the Arab society, along with the Arab leadership's willingness to cooperate with the authorities, has created a rare dual opportunity: to succeed in this effort, and to transform the complex relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The plans to fight violence and crime, along with the plans to enhance social and economic progress, could well help ease the rift between Arabs and Jews, strengthen internal stability, improve personal security, and allay the mutual fears that were aggravated by the May 2021 riots.

Yet in the framework of steps taken by the Israel Police against violence and crime in Arab society, there is an emerging picture suggesting that Israel has positioned

itself as in a war against an internal foe that allegedly threatens domestic security and stability. Statements by politicians and senior police and army personnel such as “We have moved from defense to offense” and “war on terror,” together with military-style actions in Arab towns,¹ taint the civilian-social enforcement conduct with belligerent and bellicose overtones. Such terminology is quite common in Israel, usually intended to reflect the determination of the enforcement agencies to accomplish their goals quickly.

While the violent clashes of May 2021 were defined by senior politicians and commanders as an “intifada,” these events did not reflect a popular uprising against the state, but rather the frustration of individuals and groups arising from their civic situation and their rage as an excluded minority. Still, the police responded to these events as a warning that preparations are needed for a future “internal intifada” of great intensity, including the use of firearms.² This framing reflects concern, if not fear, among the public and the law enforcement agencies, that violence in Arab society will be directed toward Jews, the state and its institutions, and even the military.

An example of this framing is the assessments sounded in public that in future clashes between Israel and its external adversaries, Arab citizens will try to interfere with army movements to the front and thereby assist the enemy. The police even issued a report that Hezbollah had started to smuggle large quantities of weapons to Arabs in Israel, to be used against the military in future crises.³ In addition, the IDF decided to broaden the guidelines for opening fire, making it possible to shoot individuals (in this case, Arabs) stealing weapons from IDF bases, or those who smuggle arms across the border.⁴ The IDF and the police have begun to prepare for such eventualities by setting up special border police and army units.⁵

¹ Such as actions like dropping counter-terrorism unit fighters from helicopters into an Arab town. See Nati Yefet, “The police staged a helicopter invasion of the home of a Bedouin family for public relations purposes.” *Haaretz*, December 28, 2021:

² Television interview with the Police Commissioner (Channel 12, December 3, 2021): “In Guardian of the Walls, within 24 hours we moved from defense to offense. That destroyed the intifada. We estimate that if there is another intifada it will be far more intense and serious. We are speaking about an intifada in the territory of the State of Israel. That means the use of firearms and incendiary bottles.” See also [remarks](#) by Minister of Internal Security, Omer Bar Lev: “An internal uprising in Arab society could happen again,” *Maariv* online, December 7, 2021.

³ Guy Varon, “The Police: ‘Hezbollah is smuggling weapons to Arabs in Israel to arm them for judgment day,’” Channel 12, November 22, 2021.

⁴ Yaniv Kobowitz, [“The IDF is widening the procedures for opening fire: It is possible to fire at thieves stealing weapons, including in firing areas,”](#) *Haaretz*, November 14, 2021.

⁵ Aharon Haliva and Gal Perl Finkel, “A national guard is needed – additional lessons following Guardian of the Walls,” IDF/ Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Thinking, issue 34; Yoav Limor, [“The IDF will recruit reserve units to secure routes against Israeli Arabs in the next campaign,”](#) *Israel Hayom*, November 24, 2021.

Such actions and rhetoric encourage a distorted and biased image of reality, branding Arab society as disloyal to the state and casting it as an enemy. This is liable to damage relations between Jews and Arabs. Furthermore, continued statements and actions of this sort might undercut the prospect of achieving the government's goals as defined in Resolution 549 (of October 24, 2021), which approved the five-year plan to curb crime and violence in Arab society. These officially stated goals refer to the need to strengthen the Arab public's trust in the law enforcement agencies. However, if the present narrative persists, it will be hard to improve the image of the police and its credibility in the eyes of Arab society. The Arabs are more likely to see this as a continued expression of their exclusion, thus reinforcing existing nationalist-oppositional groups. Such statements also have an impact on the Jewish public, particularly the more nationalist radical fractions, which in any case tend to see Israel's Arabs as hostile, if not actual enemies. Such messages harm Jewish-Arab relations, and in particular, the massive efforts invested in the fight against violence and crime.

Is Crime in Arab Society Tied to Nationalism?

A convergence of circumstances and changing conditions in Arab society, along with the government's longstanding discriminatory policies and deficient law enforcement, have contributed to the growth of violence and crime in Arab society. Specific causes are the high rates of poverty and unemployment; high numbers of school dropouts; breakdown of the clan/family structure and undermined authority of parents and educators; acquisition of weapons by gangs and criminal organizations, as well as by ordinary citizens for self-defense; fundamental grievances regarding land and housing; and the emergence of a black market. The comprehensive report of the Chief Executives on Combating Crime and Violence in Arab Society also suggests that the collapse of Jewish crime organizations in the early 2000s transferred criminal activity to Arab towns, where police presence is lacking and enforcement is ineffective.⁶

The main victims of crime and violence in Arab society are the Arab citizens, who suffer from this phenomenon. Their leaders have repeatedly demanded that the government act swiftly, with determination and perseverance, to curb the criminal organizations that have taken control of many areas of life following years of a governance vacuum. They reflect the demand by Arab society to remove the curse of crime and violence, which endangers their ordinary lives and their efforts to

⁶ "Recommendations of the Chief Executives' Conference on Handling Crime and Violence in Arab Society," Summary, Policy Document, July 2020, p. 30.

integrate into the Israeli society and economy, and represents a significant obstacle to young people as they seek personal growth, advancement, and integration.

The spread of violence and crime in Arab society and the growth of criminal organizations thus do not perforce arise due to nationalist reasons and are not an expression of isolationism. They reflect neither popular protest against government policies nor a revolt against the state, nor a threat to its security and territorial integrity. Even the troubling developments in the south, which are often referred to as a "Bedouin takeover" of the Negev, are not driven by nationalism. Moreover, those who are engaged in violence, and certainly those associated with organized crime, are generally careful to avoid targeting the state's security and identifying with radical nationalist groups or with Palestinian terrorism.

In general, the Arab society in Israel has demonstrated its loyalty to the state over the years. While maintaining its national identity, it has avoided active and illegal participation in the Palestinian national struggle, and has worked toward integration in Israeli society. It sees Israel as the center of its political, economic, and social experience, and commonly demonstrates its association with the state. The non-violent patterns of protest it adopted during military clashes relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent decades and their social-political nature prove this clearly. Radical nationalist or Islamist groups such as the outlawed Islamic Movement's Northern Branch are currently a tiny, shrinking minority and their influence on society is negligible, although they still have some impact on the radical factions in the Arab sector.⁷

Nevertheless, within the Jewish public, and particularly among the extreme right, the view has taken root that most Arab citizens are unwilling and unable to identify with the state, instead identifying with the "enemy," namely, the Palestinian people. Many Jews in Israel perceive the Arabs as a national demographic challenge that threatens the Jewish character of the state. The fact that Arabs do not serve in the IDF brings their loyalty into question (although mandatory service does not apply to them). There is therefore ongoing tension between Jews and Arabs, which occasionally escalates into violence, as occurred with greater severity in May 2021 in the context of Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza.

Contrary to the prevailing belief in some elements of the Jewish public, most Israeli leaders today recognize that the Arab population is a significant component of Israeli society, and its integration into the country's national life and economy is a

⁷ The Government decision in November 2015 to outlaw the Northern Branch allowed the Southern Branch to play a more significant role in the organization of welfare, *da'wa*, and religious activities.

national interest of vital importance to social resilience. Moreover, the reality is one of daily proximity and contact between Jews and Arabs. In areas of public encounters there are various types of cooperation that create a routine of work and business relations and a social dynamic in which each side gets to know and accept the other. Experience shows that in times of disturbances and military conflict, this joint activity may slow down, but in most cases there is no deep or lasting rupture, economic considerations prevail, and dynamics gradually return to normal.

May 2021: A “Popular Uprising” and Change of Direction?

Despite their severity, the riots of May 2021 signified neither a turning point in Arab loyalty to the State of Israel, nor preparations for a revolt designed to damage state security, nor the emergence of an active extreme nationalist movement with radical isolationist tendencies among the Arab citizens of Israel.

The clashes between Arabs and Jews, particularly in the cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations, began along the seam line in East Jerusalem against a religious and political backdrop centering around Muslim and Jewish festivals and memorial days (Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Nakba Day, Jerusalem Day, Shavuot) and reached a climax in the military campaign initiated by Hamas in Gaza and leading to the IDF’s Operation Guardian of the Walls. The immediate triggers of the internal flare-up were clashes between the police and Muslim rioters on the Temple Mount, at Damascus Gate, and in Sheikh Jarrah, incited by extremist political elements, including the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement. Their representatives blamed the government for the disturbances at al-Aqsa Mosque on Jerusalem Day⁸ and stated that “the Arabs were the victims” of the resulting clashes.⁹

Most of the Arab rioters were young men with no formal or other political allegiance, with many of them unemployed and school dropouts, and some with criminal records. These vigilantes, who have personally experienced state neglect and the effects of gentrification in mixed cities, where they feel marginalized by religious Zionist communities,¹⁰ expressed anger by violently harassing their

⁸ Sheikh Kamal Hattib, deputy head of the Northern Branch, said that “This victory generation does not hesitate and strikes the representatives of the occupation with an exposed arm. They showed this in Jerusalem, in Jaffa, and everywhere.” See Assaf Gavor, “[Jerusalem Day approaches: Disturbances expected all over the city](#),” *Makor Rishon*, May 9, 2021.

⁹ With reference to an earlier attack on a Jewish man in Jaffa: “[Abu Shahada on the disturbances: Proud of the youths of Jaffa, we are the victims](#),” *Ynet*, April 19, 2021; “[Sami Abu Shahada on the events in mixed towns: ‘The Arabs were the victims’](#),” Knesset Channel, August 3, 2021.

¹⁰ See Yael Shmaryahu-Yeshurun, “The strange surprise of the Torah-Garinim at the violence in mixed towns,” *Siha Mekomit* website, July 14, 2021.

Jewish neighbors, while the police did not impose law and order. Some of the disturbances occurred in Arab towns and consisted of vandalism against public property that serves the Arab public. From the start, extremist Jewish groups, whose declared goal is the removal of Arabs from Jewish localities, were involved in the clashes. In all, some 520 violent incidents were recorded over ten days, including deadly assaults, confrontations with the police, arson attacks on houses of prayer and private residences – all to cause significant damage to property, and on rare occasions to cause injury or death.

The scope and intensity of the damage, as well as the outcome of the events, was not foreseen, mostly in view of the ongoing trend towards moderation and normalcy between Arabs and the state and the Jewish majority. This positive trajectory can be seen, inter alia, in the growing desire of Arab society to integrate into the state and in dramatic transformative decisions taken by the government, based on the recognition by the Israeli leadership of the importance of encouraging and promoting this trend. However, and perhaps even because of this, recent years have seen a radicalization process also among Israeli Jews – represented by the growing presence of extreme right wing organizations with a clearly anti-Arab agenda – which has received political legitimacy from parts of the right-wing political leadership.

The general picture of the disturbances is that they involved small groups of rioters on both sides. The majority of the Arab public and its national and local political leadership showed restraint and refrained from lawlessness, while denouncing the riots. Most of the Jews confronting them were activists guided by an extreme right wing ideology, including "Hilltop Youth," supporters of "La Familia," the anti-assimilation group "Lehava," and "Jewish Power." They were joined by groups of settlers from the West Bank, who arrived at the mixed towns to defend the Jewish residents from Arab rioters, sometimes taking the law into their own hands, contending that the police failed to protect the Jews.

The fact that serious violence spread from the mixed cities to many Arab towns shows that due to the challenging situation of the Arab society, the basic conditions for the outbursts had already existed. The conflicts also exposed the ongoing and dangerous passivity of law enforcement agencies in exercising their responsibility. The most telling example is that the spread of illegal weapons in Arab society has effectively been ignored.

The violent events of May 2021 constituted a complex and significant threat to internal security and social stability. They intensified the existing vicious circle of mutual suspicions, fear, and hatred between the majority and the minority, and

also reinforced existing doubts within the Jewish public about the loyalty of Arabs to the country. These negative feelings were reflected in recent opinion polls carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the Hebrew University's aChord Center – Social Psychology for Social Change. The INSS survey of December 2021 revealed that:

- a. About 55 percent of the Jewish public and 46 percent of the Arab public said that their sense of security had diminished following the riots.
- b. About half the Jewish and Arab publics expressed fears of similar incidents in the future; over 43 percent of the Jewish public and almost 30 percent of the Arab public feared a future disturbance would be more severe.
- c. Fifty-two percent of the Jewish public and 66 percent of the Arabs responded that their attitudes toward the other sector had changed for the worse following the violent events.

The aChord Center survey of 1000 Jews and Arabs, taken in August 2021, saw the following findings:

- a. Seventy-four percent of respondents expressed despair over the situation, and over 63 percent reported anger at the other group. Eighty-nine percent of the Haredim and 94 percent of the religious Jews reported feelings of anger toward Arabs following the disturbances.
- b. Levels of hatred and fear experienced by young Arabs toward Jews rose significantly in comparison with previous years, and their willingness for contact with Jews declined.
- c. Levels of hatred and fear experienced by young religious and Haredi Jews toward Arabs remained significantly higher than young Arabs' hatred toward Jews.¹¹

Despite these troubling figures, we believe that a large majority of the Arab public continues to aspire to integrate in Israeli society, the economy, and political system, seeing this integration as a basic need. Their goal is apparently embraced by the majority of the Jewish public, who are interested in good relations with the Arab minority and its integration into the country's civilian society. Both sides have a clear interest in maintaining stability and cooperation, and avoiding the dangers

¹¹ “Jewish-Arab relations after the escalation,” aChord Center, August 2021, and the [full report](#): “Attitudes of young men and women in Israel and the educational response required,” aChord Center – Social Psychology for Social Change, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, November 2021.

of violent clashes. Thus, the INSS December 2021 survey found that 51 percent of the Jewish public believes the country must do everything possible to ensure that both Arabs and Jews equally feel a sense of belonging, and that 53 percent do not agree that Jews deserve more civil rights than Arabs in Israel. The aChord Center survey showed that a majority of both Arab and Jewish publics do not support boycotting businesses owned by the other group. Since the events of May, a new political situation has emerged, with an Arab party a member of the governing coalition, and with political collaboration in the Knesset between the Joint List and the opposition parties. This is a very significant development, not only because of its novelty, but also because it clearly demonstrates that the trend toward integration in Israeli politics and government is broadening. This cooperation may narrow the gaps between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, limit violence and crime in Arab society, promote relations between the two groups, and perhaps even reduce the threat of future violent clashes.

This sensitive dynamic, severely challenged in May, balances between the forces seeking normalization and integration of Arabs into the social and political fabric and their opponents. The formation of the new government, and the broad determination to take action to reduce violence and crime in Arab society, may help strengthen the positive forces, assuming government actions in law enforcement and social enhancement succeed in reversing the negative vectors.

Conclusion: Framing the Campaign against Arab Crime in Military Terms Threatens the Delicate Balance

We believe it is a mistake to characterize the events of May 2021 as an “intifada within Israel,” implying a popular national uprising of Arab citizens. Nor is it correct to refer to crime in Arab society as “nationalist terror” or to Arab criminal organizations as armed “militias” working against the state for nationalist reasons.

Such framing is not only baseless, but along with the military rhetoric and actions, might boomerang, turning a social-economic challenge and a civilian criminal problem into a national military-security issue. This would destroy long-term government plans to curb crime in Arab society and enhance the sector’s social and economic development as a way to generate substantive positive changes in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. Engaging with criminal organizations in terms of a military effort might also give the law enforcement thrust a nationalist character and taint Arab society with accusations of disloyalty and violent opposition to the state. This outcome might deepen the alienation of Arab society, further erode its already limited trust in the police and law enforcement, and encourage existing

extremist nationalist elements. This approach would also heighten Jewish hostility and fear of the Arab minority, thereby strengthening the opponents of Arab civic integration in Israel – to the detriment of Arabs and Jews alike.