

## Between ISIS and Arab Citizens of Israel

Yoram Schweitzer, Ephraim Lavie, and Meir Elran | No. 1591 | April 14, 2022

**Two of the attacks in the current wave of terror were carried out by three Arab citizens of Israel who identified with ISIS / Islamic State. However, the organization has not gained a grip on the Arab public in Israel, and while predictably it took credit for the attacks, it was not involved beyond providing inspiration. The assessment is that these trends are not expected to change. Noteworthy is the comprehensive public condemnation by Israel's Arab citizens of the recent attacks, and above all, the condemnation of the attacks carried out by Arabs who support ISIS. This reaction reflects the concern among Arabs in Israel over possible damage to their achievements in the fields of social and economic integration and political cooperation, as well as their traditionally pragmatic approach to the country and its Jewish citizens. At the same time, there are also radical groups who reject this approach and seek to undermine it; some members of this small minority turn to terror. Israel's task is to strengthen the pragmatic majority and act decisively to stop the extremists.**

The terror attacks in Beersheba (March 22, 2022) and Hadera (March 27), the opening salvo of the current wave of terror that has so far claimed 14 lives, were identified as ISIS-related due to the backgrounds of the perpetrators and their links to the organization and its ideology. These fatal attacks re-opened questions about the nature and severity of the threat posed to Israel by ISIS and by those among Israel's Arab citizens who identify with its vision, as well as the extent of support for terror in general among this population.

Although the attacks in Beersheba and Hadera were carried out by terrorists who identified with ISIS / Islamic State, and some had even served prison terms for their affiliation with it, there are differences between them. The Beersheba attack was the work of a lone terrorist, armed with a vehicle and a knife, apparently acting without help from anyone else and without prior warning. The assailant, Muhammad Abu al-Qi'an, a Bedouin from Hura, was able to act for several minutes and kill four people before he was neutralized by passers-by. Since 2016 he had served four years in prison for his attempts to join the ranks of Islamic State, like others from the al-Qi'an clan, which numbers over 8,000 and has already produced a number

of active Islamic State fighters or supporters. The Hadera attack was carried out by two Arab citizens of Israel, cousins from the Ighbariah family, residents of Umm al-Fahm. One was previously imprisoned for his attempt to cross into Syria and join the Islamic State fighters. Unlike the previous attack, this one was organized and planned, and made use of firearms with large quantities of ammunition, and even involved the use of weapons taken from two Border Police officers who were killed in the attack. The swift response of the security forces prevented further killing.

Thus far it is not known if there was any connection between the incidents, apart from the possible influence of the Beersheba attack on the Hadera terrorists, who had no links with external elements, including ISIS, or guidance from them. ISIS took credit for the two attacks only after the Hadera incident. As in the case of other terrorist incidents carried out in its name in the West, ISIS apparently used the attacks in Israel for propaganda purposes, although it likely had no prior knowledge of them and played no part in their planning and execution.

An examination of previous involvement of Islamic State activity in Israel shows that the organization has not gained a deep hold among the country's Arab citizens. Since the establishment of the Islamic State in 2014, no more than one hundred Israeli citizens have been imprisoned for allegiance or any connection to the organization, including those who were arrested following the latest attacks. Thus, in spite of attempts by media identified with ISIS, primarily al-Naba, its most important publication, to exploit the "success" of the incidents in order to boast of its extensive activity against Israel, the facts show that apart from toxic rhetoric, the organization has not devoted many resources or much attention to planning terrorism in Israel. This also applies to its past actions and those of its allies in other parts of the world.

Even after the Beersheba and Hadera attacks, there are no signs of a strategic change in ISIS priorities with regard to Israel. In its current media discourse, the organization continues to highlight its extremely negative attitude toward the Palestinian terrorist organizations of Hamas and

Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and toward Hezbollah. This has not changed even though these groups praised recent ISIS-supporting terrorists in Israel, such as the Palestinian from Jenin who carried out the attack in Bnei Brak on March 29. As a rule, ISIS is careful to strongly condemn these organizations as collaborators with the enemies of Islam; it sees them as heretics and accuses them of helping to block its attempted jihad against Israel over the past decade.

### **The Reaction by Arab Society in Israel**

From the outset, the current wave of attacks was condemned unequivocally by the Arab parties, the national leadership of Arab society (the Supreme Monitoring Committee), the heads of local authorities, and civil society organizations. Radical Arab elements remained silent. The immediate explanation for the near wall-to-wall condemnation is linked to the collective fear among the Arab public of a return to the events of May 2021 – the violence between Jews and Arabs in cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations during Operation Guardian of the Walls – and of damaging their return to routine and attempts to rebuild their economic and social situation, especially after the years of the pandemic. The particularly strong Arab condemnation of the attacks carried out by ISIS supporters, which they defined as “terrorism,” derives from the fact that Arab society in Israel, as well as the majority of residents in Palestinian Authority areas, including those who support Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, are fiercely opposed to ISIS ideology and its association with the Palestinian national struggle.

Arab society in Israel is a moderate and pragmatic ethno-national minority in political and social terms. In spite of Israel’s many years of neglect of its Arab citizens, and in spite of the continuation – with no expectations of a settlement – of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Arab society has in general avoided adopting the approach of violent protest, and there is no indication of a popular armed or terrorist uprising against the state. While there have been breaches of order and sometimes violent protests, they were relatively few. Among them are the events of Land Day in March 1976, the events of October 2000 with the outbreak of the second intifada, the

“intifada of the individuals” that began in September 2015, and most recently, the events of May 2021, following the violence that erupted on the Temple Mount and in East Jerusalem. One of the more significant expressions of the serious breaches of order in May 2021 was the attack on symbols of the state and disruptions on key traffic arteries. These were carried out primarily by youths with no political affiliation, sometimes with criminal connections, who saw the violence as a chance to clear their criminal reputations by joining in activity of a nationalist nature.

The desire by Israel’s Arab society to distance itself from terrorist actions is especially striking in view of the fact that its young men are an attractive target for recruitment by Palestinian terror organizations and Hezbollah, because of their familial, social, and commercial links with Palestinian Authority residents, and their possession of Israeli ID cards, which give them easier access to sites in Israel and familiarity with possible targets. Notwithstanding this potential risk, over the years there have been relatively few incidents of involvement in terror by Arab citizens of Israel.

The largely non-violent nature of the Arab minority in Israel is linked to long term processes of socialization toward coexistence with Jewish society, which binds them to the state and the Jewish public in many respects. The majority of Arab citizens of Israel consider Israel to be their country; they wish to preserve their citizenship and rights, and seek to extend their integration, while retaining their identity as a native minority and members of the Palestinian people. There has apparently never been a period like the present, with current circumstances (the so-called Arab Spring and the Abraham Accords) pushing Arab citizen to strengthen their allegiance to Israel. Ra’am’s membership in the current government coalition, and the willingness of most Jewish parties to cooperate politically with Arab parties, as well as their support for the integrative approach, are clear expressions of the trend toward integration, as also shared by majority of Israel’s Jewish population.

Although most of the Arab public are moderates, there are also extreme radical groups, who reject the trend toward integration and seek to

undermine it. Although they are a small minority, their presence is felt and resonates particularly among the young and on social media. According to a survey by Accord / the Hebrew University (March 2022), 87 percent of Arab respondents stated that Israeli Arab terrorists do not represent them, 8 percent said that they represent them somewhat, and only 5 percent said that they represented them to a large or very large extent. The latter group probably includes some who are prepared to use terror in order to undermine the processes of integration.

It thus appears that only very extreme circumstances and changes that are currently hard to foresee will help radical and violent ideologies, such as those of ISIS and its supporters, gain public traction in Israel's Arab society. That is not the situation today. However, the task facing Israel is to work resolutely to strengthen the pragmatic majority, while taking decisive action to stop the violent extremists in all ways permitted by law.