

An Effective State Mechanism to Combat Racism: A National Resilience Imperative

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The Israeli government acknowledged the existence of institutional racism in 2017 when it established the Government Unit to Coordinate the Combat Against Racism (hereafter: the Unit). Originally created to fight institutional racism against Israelis of Ethiopian descent, it now works with all groups that have experienced institutional racism. While the establishment of the Unit was a correct, ethical, and practical move, the failure to codify its authority and responsibility in law and the lack of a proper budget for its operation have impeded its work. There is also concern that the failure to renew the Emergency Order (expired in 2021) that provides free legal aid to victims of racism and statements by elected officials criticizing the Unit's activities and a recent decision to dismiss the Unit's head all reflect an intent to diminish the centrality of the struggle against institutional racism. This could cause additional harm to groups that are vulnerable to racism, while also widening the rift in society, harming Israel's image in the international arena, and depriving the country of an important tool for deflecting broad accusations of racism. The Unit should therefore be strengthened, its powers codified in law, and adequate resources allocated.

Institutional racism is a nefarious problem; some of its features have even been [defined](#) as crimes against humanity. Racism, by its nature, motivates social exclusion, violates human dignity, and incites violence that can result in physical harm and death. Racism cuts across social classes and is unaffected by socioeconomic status, education, or political views. It occurs in all public places, including the legislature, government offices, schools, [soccer fields](#), universities, and elsewhere.

This article is based in part on conversations with the retired Justice Professor Elyakim Rubinstein, former Deputy President of the Supreme Court, who until recently served as Chairman of the Unit's Advisory Council.

In Israel, some forms of racism – such as "persecution, degradation, humiliation, expressions of hostility, and violence" – are considered crimes, while other manifestations are considered civil wrongdoing. According to court decisions, discrimination based on race is a serious blow to human dignity since it demeans people's worth, undermines their autonomy, and deprives them of fundamental liberties.

The Arab community and Israelis of Ethiopian origin are the two groups most frequently targeted by racist incidents in Israel, but no group is immune. It also affects [immigrants from the former Soviet Union](#) and [ultra-Orthodox \(haredi\) Jews](#). According to a survey conducted in 2022 by the Government Unit to Coordinate the Fight Against Racism (hereafter: the Unit), over 83 percent of the Arab population has encountered institutional racism. Another survey (2023) revealed that [90 percent of Israelis of Ethiopian origin](#) have encountered such racism. According to a survey by the Israeli Congress, 74 percent of Israelis believe that [Ethiopian Israelis experience racism](#).

The State Comptroller's 2013 [special report](#) that revealed major failures in various government departments to promote the integration of Ethiopian Israelis as a result of the lack of a clear government strategy served as the impetus for the creation of the Unit. In response to the report, the government mandated ([Resolution 300](#)) the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption to develop an appropriate policy for the best possible integration of Ethiopian Israelis in collaboration with other ministries, together with the community (hereafter: the inter-ministerial team). While the team was at work, [a video clip \(2015\)](#) that revealed an Ethiopian Israeli soldier being harassed by police officers sparked [angry protests](#), joined by thousands, against institutional racism and discrimination, particularly against police brutality. It reinforced calls to the government to act and hastened the team's work. The government implemented the team's recommendations through Resolution 324¹ of July 2015, which stated, "The strength of a society is measured by its ability to cope with manifestations of racism, and to enhance tolerance and social cohesiveness." Israeli society must actively eradicate all overt and covert manifestations of racism and discrimination. "A comprehensive strategy and coping techniques are required to deal with the situation."

In February 2016, the government decided ([Resolution 1107](#)) to establish a team headed by the then-Director General of the Ministry of Justice "to design an action plan to deal with the phenomenon of racism against Ethiopian Israelis." The team (the Palmor Report) proposed to establish a designated mechanism to manage complaints and to ensure that issues are handled in a competent manner. Another [State Comptroller's report \(2016\)](#) found that the Ministry of Education had difficulties promoting education for coexistence and against racism, partly because there were neither organizational infrastructure nor resources for this issue. In July 2016, the government adopted all the Palmor Report's recommendations ([Resolution 1958](#)),

¹ Itzik Itzhak Dessie, co-author of this article, was one of the public representatives who worked with the inter-ministerial team, formulating the building blocks and recommendations approved in this decision.

which included the establishment of the Government Unit to Coordinate the Fight Against Racism in the Ministry of Justice. The Unit was formed in 2017, headed by Adv. Awake Zana. A Public Advisory Council for the Unit was established, chaired by retired Justice Elyakim Rubinstein, a former Deputy President of the Supreme Court.

Both morally and practically, the governmental resolution to eradicate racism was a wise move. The very fact that institutional racism is acknowledged by the state is significant from a symbolic and educational perspective. Justice Rubinstein contends that a nation that has historically been persecuted and currently faces antisemitism cannot allow racism to exist in its midst. The government is obligated to guarantee that everyone is treated equally and with respect, and it must abstain from acting in a manner that jeopardizes people's lives or degrades their physical safety or sense of dignity.

Eradicating institutional racism also has social benefits. Quoting Proverbs 27:19, “As face answers to face in water, so does one man’s heart to another,” Justice Rubinstein explains that when an individual is treated with respect, this increases the chances of coexistence, breaking barriers, and building trust. This is the most effective strategy for dealing with interaction among individuals, as well as between a state and its people. In other words, respect and equality are essential components for creating a shared existence, preserving the social fabric, and increasing public trust in government institutions. A state mechanism to combat racism also enhances the image of the country and serves as a defense against allegations that Israel is a racist state. For example, when Prime Minister Netanyahu [spoke](#) at the 2018 UN General Assembly, he said that “Israel airlifted Ethiopian Jews to freedom and new life in Israel,” using the operation to deflect accusations that Israel is racist. On the other hand, as former [President Rivlin](#) pointed out, racism not only harms minority groups; it affects society. In a nation where a variety of people from different backgrounds and cultures coexist, tensions and conflicts that exacerbate polarization and rifts are to be expected. Expressions of racism and structural discrimination only serve to exacerbate these tensions and conflicts. As a result, societal cohesion dissolves and national security is weakened.

A study of the Unit's reports shows that “with minimum personnel,” it managed to promote important steps forward. In an emergency provision, the government approved free legal aid to the needy; appointed some 70 anti-racism personnel to serve in government ministries; promoted collaboration with various authorities, including the Israel Police and the Ministry of Education; and set up the Forum of Civil Society Organizations to Combat Racism. Every year, the Unit handles over 400 complaints about institutional racism. A breakdown of complaints in 2022 shows that 32 percent came from the Arab population (1.5 times their percentage in the overall population); 18 percent from immigrants from the former Soviet Union; 17 percent from Ethiopian Israelis (10 times their percentage in the population); and 5 percent each from ultra-Orthodox Jews and Jews of Eastern origin.

The Unit's future and the government's effort to fight against racism are both currently uncertain. Justice Rubinstein has drawn attention to several faults that must be amended. First, there is no current legislation regulating the Unit's powers, and it now operates solely by virtue of a government decision; the necessary resources should be allocated to assist its activities. Second, even though the government's Emergency Provision providing free legal assistance to victims of racism expired in 2021, it has not been renewed; it should be. Third, the director of the Unit's tenure has not been extended; it too should be. A previous decision to end the Unit's direct subordination to the Director General of the Ministry of Justice is now on hold due to the objections of the Unit's director. Once the director is replaced, the Unit's senior stature could be downgraded, which might lead to a lesser standing of the next director. Professional standards would be impacted in this situation, and qualified individuals would be discouraged from applying for the position. These might reflect an effort to downplay the fight against institutional racism.

The government's failure to take seriously Justice Rubinstein's warnings and recommendations might reflect a governmental withdrawal from its initial commitment to combat institutional racism. This is also manifested by the criticism against the Unit by elected officials and journalists. Racist expressions might increase if the government becomes less committed to standing up against them, which would have an adverse effect on the Israeli society's resilience.

Institutional racism must be eliminated, as its eradication serves national interests and should be considered a national goal. The government should adopt suggestions sounded by Justice Rubinstein and other experts to strengthen the Unit's work, including regulating its legal status; giving it the power to investigate complaints, request necessary documents, and conduct independent proceedings, including the power to impose sanctions; and providing it with the necessary resources.

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