

Neglecting the Struggle Against Crime in Arab Society Is a Threat to Israel's National Security

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The rise in the number of homicide victims in Arab society since the current government was inaugurated in early 2023 continues unabated. The number of people murdered in the first half of 2024—more than 100—is similar to the same period last year and is double the number during the first six months of 2022. The impression is that the entire issue of crime in Arab society is absent from the agenda of both the government and law-enforcement bodies, as well as from media coverage and the public discourse. Crime organizations have large quantities of various kinds of arms and ammunition, with which they attack Arab citizens of Israel, severely impinging on their personal and physical security. At the same time, these arms and ammunition are a threat to Israeli society in general—as well as to national security. This situation, for which Arab society itself and its leaders also carry responsibility, obliges the relevant ministries and law-enforcement bodies to come together urgently to fully implement the five-year-plan for tackling violence and crime (Government Resolution 549) and the five-year-plan for dealing with the economic and societal issues that feed the phenomenon (Government Resolution 550). To do so, there must be complete cooperation between government ministries, local authorities, and the Arab leadership.

This article focuses on the ramifications of the policies of the current government, which, in its second year, continues to neglect the phenomenon, and warns of the dangers this poses.

While the three months following the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip from October to December 2023 saw a sharp drop in the number of homicides in Arab society in Israel, the number of murder victims in the first six months of this year (January to June) has already passed the 100 mark—the same number as in the corresponding period of 2023 and more than double the number compared to 2022. It seems that the upward trend in the number of murders in Arab society that started soon after the current government was inaugurated in early 2023 is becoming deeply entrenched; there is reasonable concern that by the end of this year, the number of murder victims will reach the same record level as in 2023, when 233 people were killed.

To illustrate the rise in the [number of murders](#), it is worth remembering that the total number of murders in Arab society for 2022 was 106, 16% less than in 2021. Indeed, this was the first time that there had been an annual drop compared to the previous year, after several consecutive years during which the number increased: 74 murders in 2018, 94 in 2019, 100 in 2020, and 115 in 2021.

As has been the case in the past, homicides are usually linked to struggles between organized crime organizations that operate, among other nefarious activities, protection rackets and black-market loans. These organizations have not been deterred, and they are barely concerned about interference from law-enforcement authorities. They have identified the vacuum in internal security that the war has created and are taking full advantage of it to wipe out other criminal organizations and take control of more territory for their operations. It is safe to assume that the worsening economic situation in Israel's Arab society, in part due to the war and the steep rise in unemployment, has forced more Arab citizens to look to the black market in times of financial hardship. It is likely that when these organizations demand that their clients repay their loans, they will use violence to ensure compliance and could even revert to murder. There are also cases of homicide due to arguments between neighbors and within the family.

Most of the murders committed in the first half of 2024 were carried out using firearms; some were stabbings, and others used explosive devices. Thus far, a tiny minority of the cases—around 12%—have been solved. In just one single case, residents of one Arab village apprehended four gunmen and handed them over to the police. At the same time, the methods used to carry out these homicides have become even more extreme: [a LAW \(light anti-tank weapon\) missile](#) was used in an attempted assassination; kidnapping and murdering of victims and publishing announcements about their murders [even before the bodies had been found](#); abducting and murdering by decapitation, mutilating the bodies, and disposing of body parts in various locations; and firing shots at a mourners' tent. Among the factors contributing to the worsening violence and crime and the spike in the number of homicides, it is worth noting the wide variety of arms and ammunition that these crime organizations have in their possession. That includes [mass-casualty weapons](#), including automatic firearms, explosive drones, fragmentation grenades, explosives, rockets and grenade launchers. Due to the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip and on the Israel–Lebanon border, there has been a rash of [thefts from IDF bases](#) with criminal organizations getting their hands on machine guns, LAW missiles, explosives and even anti-personnel mines. The underworld of crime is now inundated with these weapons, which has driven down prices. There were even reports recently that criminal organizations are hiding their weapons in cemeteries. Criminals and the organizations they belong to trade these weapons between themselves and mainly use them as part of their criminal activity, but their very existence is a threat to Israel's national security and to Israeli society as whole.

The Government, the Police, and Law-Enforcement Bodies: Actions and Failings

The increase in homicides in Arab society and the danger that this poses to Israeli society and national security are an accurate reflection of the carelessness with which government ministries, the police, and law-enforcement bodies have handled the problems facing Arab society in general and crime families and armed criminals in particular.

This neglect is not accidental. It is, in part, a practical manifestation of the deliberate decision to implement [across-the-board cuts](#) to the government's five-year-plans (Government Resolutions 549 and 550), which sought to develop Arab society and tackle crime and violence, as well as the government's refusal to transfer the balancing grants owed to Arab local authorities. Moreover, a long-term national emergency plan known as "Safe Path," which successfully addressed crime and violence in Arab society in 2022, was halted by the National Security Ministry and only resumed operating in late 2023. Similarly, the plan to close the emergency information center for the Arab population, which opened in Kafr Qassem when the war broke out, reflects the general approach of government ministries.

Roi Kahlon, the attorney appointed in August 2023 as head of the team in the Prime Minister's Office tasked with coordinating the fight against crime in the Arab society, published a detailed proposal earlier this year on how to address the murders and violence in that sector. He presented his proposal to the General Security Services (GSS), the Israel Police, the National Security Council, and other bodies. His plan, which was made public, calls for the state to redefine possession of an illegal firearm as a security offense, based on the risk posed by a weapon that presents a special danger (such as mass-casualty weapons) and with specific criteria that would define possession of such weapons as a security risk. This would allow authorities to take appropriate legal action and enforcement measures against criminal organizations and individuals. Until now, these measures [had been reserved for](#) terrorist organizations: GSS involvement in investigations, extensive use of the power to hold a suspect without bail, harsher sentences, economic sanctions, and treatment of those arrested in connection with illegal weapons similar to that of security prisoners.

However, the proposal by the government's point person on crime in the Arab sector has not yet been turned into a practical policy. In keeping with its overall conduct since it was established, the government has not yet formulated a coherent strategy for tackling the prevalence of illegal weapons in Arab society and the ever-proliferating incidents of violence and murder. Funds that were earmarked for the five-year plans to tackle violence and crime were frozen by the finance minister and have still not been restored; no arrangements have been made for the GSS to help the police tackle serious crime, locate weapons, and conduct investigations; officials from other law-enforcement bodies, such as the Israel Tax Authority, are too afraid to use their

authority when it comes to individuals identified with organized crime, since they are fearful of being terrorized; and the National Security Ministry and law-enforcement bodies are still not cooperating effectively with local authorities, which is vital in the struggle against crime and violence. One of the reasons for this is that the local authority leaders have no faith in the minister in charge of the police, given his publicly expressed hostility toward Israel's Arab citizens.

The number of homicides in Arab society, which has been steadily increasing for the past 18 months or so and is expected to rise, has a psychological-social impact: Arab citizens experience a lack of personal and physical security, which affects their daily lives and also harms their faith in the state and its institutions. They are frustrated and interpret the state's indifference to their fate and the inaction in tackling crime and murder as a deliberate government policy dictated by the far-right ministers in government.

Given this reality, the Arab public and their national and local leaders are protesting and are highly critical of the government's policies and the police's ineptitude. They are demanding that the state take immediate and determined action to rein in the crime organizations that have taken control of most areas of their lives, disrupting everyday life and spreading despair and fear among Arab citizens.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Roi Kahlon, the head of the team in the Prime Minister's Office coordinating the fight against crime in the Arab society, summed up the current situation in the Arab sector by saying that "the State of [Israel has lost governance](#)." He went on to explain that criminal organizations have taken control of Arab society and "have become the legal and enforcement authority when it comes to dealing with arbitration; they operate protection and extortion rackets."

Arab society in Israel is a law-abiding minority that wishes to become more deeply integrated into Israeli society and the state. However, the rampant crime and plethora of murders in Arab society serve to substantially weaken them both societally and financially. The ongoing failure by the state to tackle crime, especially in the past year and a half, has created a severe crisis of faith between the state and its Arab citizens. This crisis could strengthen the position of radical elements within Arab society, who oppose the State of Israel, and could encourage ideological and practical support for these extremists.

This reality, alongside the prevalence of a wide variety of arms and ammunition in the hands of criminal organizations and individuals, is a threat to Israeli society as a whole and to its national security. It could erupt into violence that extends beyond Arab society; it could undermine stability and internal security. These dangers demand a

total and immediate change in direction. The government and the law-enforcement bodies must recognize the strategic threat to security. It must be treated as a national priority, even as the war in Gaza rages on, by implementing the existing five-year plans for tackling crime (Government Resolutions 549 and 550) and bolstering the capabilities of the police—including the technological and legal surveillance tools required to collect evidence and conduct successful criminal investigations.

A full overhaul of the system is urgently required.

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