

## **Operation Protective Edge: Implications for Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel**

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The most recent escalation in Jewish-Arab relations and in the public discourse in Israel about the Arab community in Israel began with the kidnapping and murder of three Jewish teenagers in the Gush Etzion area on June 12, 2014. The subsequent kidnapping and murder of an Arab boy in Jerusalem on July 2, 2014 inflamed the Arab community, and was the catalyst for a wave of stormy demonstrations throughout Israel that in several cases developed into violent confrontations with the police. Tension between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel, which intensified as the fighting in Gaza continued over an extended period, brought to the surface feelings that should be addressed as a basis for policy recommendations to help prevent a widening of the gap between the communities.

### **On the Eve of the Conflict**

The Peace Index surveys conducted between 2010 and 2014 by the Israel Democracy Institute, which included questions referring directly or indirectly to relations between Jews and Arabs, do not indicate a trend of radicalization among Jews in their attitude toward Israel's Arab minority. Close analysis of cross section responses, however, shows that the attitude of Jewish youths toward Arabs in Israel harbors more extremism than is estimated to exist among Jewish adults. It is possible that this finding explains the crude behavior of some youths towards Arabs. The incitement against the Arab community in the country is reflected mostly in the social media, a means of communication especially popular among young people. The escalation that began with the murder of the boys in the Gush Etzion area was marked by racism and extreme nationalism directed against Arabs, apparently similar

to the mood on the eve of the events in October 2000 at the start of the second intifada. Thus in the summer of 2014, a looming question facing public figures and law enforcement agencies was whether Israel was on the brink of a third intifada, but this time waged by the Arab citizens of Israel.

Demonstrations and protests occurred throughout Israel. The main national demonstration took place in Kafr Manda in the Galilee on July 6, 2014, organized by the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel. The themes of this demonstration included protest against expressions of racism and hatred toward the Arab community, primarily in the social networks, and against government policy that appeared to tolerate the phenomenon. The demonstrators demanded that the punitive measures stipulated in the law be taken against such expressions, and protested against calls to boycott Arab businesses (which drew only partial support among the Jewish community), anti-Arab incitement, accusations of lack of loyalty, and calls for collective attacks and punishment of the Arab community. In other demonstrations elsewhere in Israel, according to police reports, a total of 108 demonstrators were arrested, of whom 37 were minors. The Arab media covered these events extensively, with the coverage and criticism focusing on the inability of the law and order agencies and the Jewish community in general to cope with the hatred, racism, violence, and incitement led by the extreme right, including “price tag” actions carried out over the past year.

The demonstrations were marked by two principal trends. The leaders of the Arab local authorities usually acted with restraint. Some expressed opposition to the demonstrations, and those who supported the protest and approved the demonstrations tried to maintain a moderate line. Some even initiated a dialogue with the police and called for restrained demonstrations, fearing damage to shared Jewish-Arab concerns, especially economic interests. In contrast, the Arab Knesset members and political parties tried to put forth a tougher line. Most of them took an active part in the demonstrations, although the lead was taken primarily by Arab *al-khiraq al-shababi* groups (youth movements) and students. The Islamic movements were also linked to the protest, and held separate demonstrations in Jaffa and Lod, among other places.

### **The Outbreak of the Military Conflict**

Operation Protective Edge caught the Arab community in the midst of a wave of protests, demonstrations, and arrests. The operation diverted public

attention away from the preceding events, but gave the signal for another wave of protests and demonstrations. The demonstrations that began with the murder of the Arab boy in Jerusalem became protest demonstrations against the war in the Gaza Strip and again were held in various places in Israel. Some of the demonstrations were led by local forces, some by youth groups, and others by the organized Islamic movements. The nature of the demonstrations differed from place to place; some were rallies sponsored jointly by various political and civil forces and movements, while in other cases separate demonstrations were held in the same area. The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel tried to achieve unity and lead a uniform line of protest that would include all the political parties and movements, local authorities, and civil organizations; the latter were prominent partners, and sometimes the main players, in the ongoing protest.

As the war continued and the number of civilian fatalities in the Gaza Strip rose, protest among Israeli Arabs increased. The Higher Follow-Up Committee declared a general strike and a national demonstration in Nazareth on July 22, 2014. The number of participants in this demonstration, which was attended by Arab Knesset members, was estimated at only a few hundred, although the Arab media reported a much higher number. The demonstration sparked open tumult, leading to the arrest of 18 participants. Still, in comparison with previous demonstrations, and judging by the police response, this was a relatively restrained demonstration, and the strike that accompanied it in various areas was limited.

Beside broad support in the Arab community for the strike and active participation in protest activity, quiet opposition was also evident, especially among business owners, who were anxious about damage to their livelihood – enhanced by continued calls in the Jewish community, including by Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman, for a boycott of Arab businesses. Various groups also attempted to find a balance between protests and peaceful coexistence, mainly in mixed Jewish-Arab cities and business zones catering to a mixed audience. The public protest in the Arab community subsided over the final month of Operation Protective Edge, although heated discussions about Jewish-Arab relations continued on the social networks, along with expressions of protest over the military activity.

### **The Arab Media in Israel and Arab Civil Organizations**

Despite the divergent and at times discordant voices among Arab citizens of Israel, there is a large degree of consensus in the Arab media in Israel concerning the “price tag” attacks and slander directed against the Arab communities in Israel. Media coverage of these actions was extensive, and they were the chief catalyst for the dissatisfaction and protest that began before Operation Protective Edge. Bills promoted by the government relating to the Arab community in Israel were portrayed in the Arab media as discriminatory and unjust. Among the focuses of protest were the program for settling the Bedouins in the Negev (the Prawer Plan), and the proposed housing policy and VAT discount for those finishing military service. Additional issues included the government’s attempt to encourage the enlistment of Christian Arabs in the IDF, perceived as an attempt to divide the Arab population, and the bill for force feeding of hunger striking administrative prisoners in Israel.

The police were accused of using unnecessary force in demonstrations organized by Arabs and the use of different criteria for Jewish demonstrators. Moreover, the confrontations during the demonstrations between extreme right wing activists and Arab demonstrators were interpreted as evidence of the widening gap in Arab-Jewish relations in Israel as a whole. The same was true of the violence and harsh racist statements on the part of extreme right wing groups. Layoffs of Arabs accused of making critical remarks on the social networks, especially manifestation of solidarity with Palestinian suffering in the Gaza Strip and expressions of pleasure by some at the deaths of IDF soldiers in the conflict, were perceived as being designed to exclude the Arab community from the civil and social system in Israel.

In this regard, the Arab media, like other media in Israel and elsewhere, both reflected public opinion and shaped it. At the same time, exposure in the media was manifestly different in the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel. The growing tension between the communities was covered little in the Jewish media, and most public attention was devoted to the war. If events in the Arab community were reported, the coverage was usually limited and focused on radical voices.

Civil organizations and non-profit organizations were also intensively involved in public discourse and protest actions in the Arab community. Indeed, these were the main active element during this period. Particularly noteworthy are the Adala and Musawa organizations, which played a key role in representing those arrested and providing them with legal defense.

Together with the Anjaz Society and the Arab-Jewish organization Abraham Fund Initiatives, these organizations were active in the protest itself. Their activity, which aimed mainly at the internal Israeli arena, included calls for a halt in the arrests and for action against the anti-Arab incitement. Calls were also heard to supply protection and mobile shelters in the Bedouin area in the south, and to open a war crimes investigation.

In the international theater, a petition was filed with the UN Human Rights Council requesting a discussion of “severe human rights violations and suspected war crimes carried out in the course of Operation Protective Edge.” Fourteen civil organizations signed this petition. An attempt by a group of Arab academics to publish a joint opinion by academic, humanities, cultural, and public figures calling for a halt in the operation was only partially successful: seventy people signed the petition, including many Arab lecturers at Israeli institutions of higher learning.

### **The Economic Background to the Arab Protest**

The socioeconomic situation of Arabs in Israel has long lagged behind that of the Jewish community,<sup>1</sup> and the difficult economic background feeds feeling of discrimination and alienation toward the government and society in general. Recent statistics indicate:

- a. On the average, Arab men earn 60 percent of the salary of Jewish men and retire earlier from the labor market. Participation in the labor market among Arab women is especially low: about 22 percent (according to a personnel survey before the change in the survey in 2012).
- b. The employment rate in the 18-22 age bracket, 26 percent, is particularly low.
- c. The incidence of poverty among all persons is 48 percent, compared with 15 percent in the Jewish non-ultra Orthodox sector.
- d. Similar statistics apply for human capital (relating to education and health). For example, 16 percent of those in the Jewish sector have a low level of education (grammar school only), against 37 percent in the Arab sector. A similar trend appears in the figures for higher education: 40 percent in the Jewish sector, versus only 17 percent in the Arab sector.

A 2012 study by Miaari, Zussman, and Zussman found that the events of October 2000 led to an increase in layoffs of Arab workers.<sup>2</sup> The report by the Committee on Poverty published in June 2014 addressed problems of the Arab community, and recommended ways of solving them. In particular, the

program devised by Nitsa Kasir of the Bank of Israel and Eran Yashiv of Tel Aviv University was cited as a basis for a policy program.<sup>3</sup> The government decided to establish a ministerial committee headed by Minister of Science, Technology, and Space Yaakov Peri to deal with the subject, and the above-mentioned program was to be presented at the committee's first meeting in mid-July 2014. The discussion was postponed, however, due to Operation Protective Edge. The question that greatly concerns the Arab community is whether the calls for a boycott heard during the war, and the actual boycott, will have long term economic effects.

The protest among the Arab community, which began before the military campaign in Gaza, is rooted in longstanding feelings of discrimination that were exacerbated in the weeks leading up to the military conflict by measures and statements perceived by the Arab community as reflecting conscious, if not deliberate, exclusion and discrimination at both the senior government level and among the general public. The escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian theater, which touched the national and humanitarian feelings in the Arab community in Israel, sparked the outbreak of protest, based on frustration and rage caused by ongoing discrimination.

## Conclusions

The behavior of the Arab community during Operation Protective Edge was marked by a number of principal features. As a whole, the protest was moderate and restrained. The moderate voices made their voice heard, and played a significant role in public discourse. The recognition that coexistence was more important than the protest was widespread and predominant. Extremist voices were kept in the background, and the general public did not follow them. Furthermore, the Arab politicians and Knesset members did not play a particularly prominent role in public discourse; their place was taken by civil forces, including youth, who made their views known through the social media. The politicians at the national level were confronted by local leaders driven primarily by the welfare of their constituents. They called for restraint and moderation, and they were heeded.

It is not clear whether this general pattern will persist in the future, and there are various forces with opposing agendas in the Arab community. At the same time, these groups all share awareness of the socioeconomic and political distress and discrimination that fed the current protest and are likely to provide a basis for future protest. Indeed, the public debate of the

various consequences of the conflict, including its internal socio-political significance in Israel, is still underway, perhaps particularly among the country's Arab citizens.

The effects of the Gaza conflict on Jewish-Arab relations in Israel and coexistence were shunted aside during the fighting and essentially ignored in public discourse in the Jewish community. Nonetheless, many questions continue to trouble the Arab community, and Israeli society as a whole must be aware of this. The negative phenomena that came into sharp relief during the operation – expressions of lack of tolerance, hatred, and even racism – were mutual between Jews and Arabs, and constitute a threat to coexistence.

The many voices and movements in the Arab community highlight the need for partnership and dialogue within the Arab community itself in order to maintain a reasonable standard of living and the possibility of growth and suitable achievement. They understand the risk of escalation, and are well aware that the first to suffer from it will be the Arabs themselves. It is important to encourage this moderate and pragmatic attitude. In any case, the seriousness of the situation requires understanding and action on the part of both Jewish and Arab leadership. The following measures are therefore recommended:

- a. An official binding declaration that a supreme national goal is the attainment of equal rights and integration of Arab citizens in the daily life of Israel.
- b. Promotion of a policy aimed at equal rights through a budgeted multi-year plan that will make a solution in employment, education, and infrastructure development in the Arab sector a clearly leading priority. Immediate protection for the Arab home front is also required as part of the lessons of the Gaza conflict. Such a policy would certainly help strengthen the moderate element in the Arab community, especially at the municipal level.
- c. A clear attack on anti-Arab racism in the Jewish community. It is best for this to come from the highest levels (the President and the Prime Minister).
- d. A comprehensive program in Jewish and Arab schools to eradicate racism and recognize the “other” as having enjoying equal rights. The focus on youth is essential, and requires systematic thinking and measures with a high priority. Teaching of Arabic in the educational system and preventing damage to the status of Arabs in Israel, mandated since independence was declared, should also be advanced.

There is nothing new about most of these recommendations, and these essentially repeat what was presented in the Orr Commission report following the riots in 2000. Most of these recommendations, which were formally adopted by the government, have not been implemented. It is important now to begin immediate implementation of the recommendations, taking into account the conditions that have changed during the decade that has passed since they were formulated.

## Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive description, see Eran Yashiv and Nitsa Kasir (Kaliner), "Patterns of Labor Force Participation among Israeli Arabs," *Israel Economic Review* 9, no. 1 (2011): 53–101; Eran Yashiv and Nitsa Kasir (Kaliner), "Arab Women in the Israeli Labor Market: Characteristics and Policy Proposals," *Israel Economic Review* 10, no. 2 (2011): 1–41.
- 2 Sami Miaari, Asaf Zussman, and Noam Zussman, "Ethnic Conflict and Job Separations," *Journal of Population Economics* 25, no. 2 (2012): 419–37.
- 3 See Eran Yashiv and Nitsa Kasir (Kaliner), "The Labor Market of Israeli Arabs: Key Features and Policy Solutions," Tel Aviv University, 2013, at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~yashiv/Israeli%20Arabs%20in%20the%20Labor%20Market%20--%20Policy%20Paper.pdf>.