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The Current Wave of Violence and the Arabs in Israel

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The wave of violence that emerged from the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and spread elsewhere, in Israel and the territories, has likewise affected Israel's Arab minority. Many Arab communities, including those that have long been considered strongholds of Jewish-Arab coexistence, like Jaffa, saw demonstrations, some of which became violent. There have also been isolated cases of stabbings by Arab citizens. These events have spurred fear and anger among Jews, in turn sometimes prompting extreme responses, and thereby increasing anxiety among the Arabs about acts of revenge and exacerbating the tension between Arabs and Jews.

The spread of violence to the Arab sector in Israel, following deterioration of the security situation in the territories and East Jerusalem, is not a new phenomenon. Past episodes of this sort occurred during the first intifada and early in the second intifada, with the riots of October 2000. These latter events, which occurred exactly 15 years ago, ended with 13 Israeli Arabs dead and dozens wounded in severe clashes with the police. The result was a deep rift between Jews and Arabs. Similar phenomena, albeit with a much lower profile, took place more recently during IDF operations in the Gaza Strip. The repeated extension of violence from the Israeli-Palestinian arena to the intra-Israel scene indicates that Israel has not managed to eliminate the feeling of a common national identity among the Palestinians both within and outside of Israel. Indeed, events have shown repeatedly that notwithstanding the respective developments of the different Palestinian sectors, a strong affinity between them remains, based on their history, sense of identity, and family connections. Taken together, these elements generate a sense of solidarity that surfaces in situations involving a perceived threat to the lives of the Palestinians or their national and religious symbols.

For the Palestinians – including Israeli citizens – the al-Aqsa mosque is a religious and national symbol of the highest magnitude. A shared belief – as that which arose recently – that the mosque is threatened, tends to unite the population behind the symbol and prompt them to take action to “save” it. This, however, is only part of the picture. There is another important component that concerns the sensitive relations that have developed

in recent years between the Arab minority and the Israeli establishment and Jewish public: many Arabs in Israel feel that the underlying reason for these challenging relations is deliberate and systematic action to exclude them from the cultural and political sphere in a country increasingly heralded as a “Jewish democratic state.” The most recent expression of this was anti-Arab legislation in the Knesset in a process that peaked during the 2015 election campaign, and not only among the right wing. The very title of the faction led by the Labor Party, the “Zionist Union,” was perceived as part of this trend. A common opinion among Arabs holds that especially since the publication of the “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” documents in late 2006-early 2007, Israeli governments have taken action to implement the principle of exclusion in tandem with the policy of economic integration, which is motivated by economic considerations and the need to increase labor productivity. The Arab population also understands that this policy presumes that economic integration will contribute to stability and induce the Arabs to focus on their personal wellbeing.

It appears that the recent protests among the Arab population, even if they do not escalate, represent not only the importance of the political identity dimension – Palestinian and Muslim-religious – but also the fragility of the economic integration model. This model is also challenged by the lack of balance between the political and cultural exclusion, which is perceived by the Arabs to be especially poignant, and the concept of economic integration, which for many Israeli Arabs is too slow and too limited in scope. The significant presence of young people at the demonstrations and the prominence of the *al-khiraq al-shababi* virtual youth movement indicate that large groups do not regard themselves as benefiting from the policy of economic integration, and are therefore motivated by senses of alienation and frustration. These feelings are highlighted by the social media, which feed radical Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim messages powerfully and rapidly, while greatly limiting the influence of the traditional leadership on popular opinion, especially among the younger people. This also accounts for the relative weakness of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement, reflected six months ago in the high percentage of those voting in the Knesset elections (the Northern Branch in principle opposes participation in elections). In both the recent events and those during the protest over the issue of Bedouin land in the Negev, the Northern Branch played a rather marginal role. In face of this weakness, the movement of Raed Salah, who is also known as Sheikh al-Aqsa, is pushing the explosive issue of Jerusalem for the purpose of strengthening its support among the Arab public.

In contrast is the rather responsible role played in the recent events by the Arab local and national political leaderships. In accordance with the line of Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas for “Palestinians inside” to refrain from violence and to restrain their responses, members of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee for Arab citizens of Israel have so far displayed relative moderation. The planned visit to the

Temple Mount by Knesset members of the Joint List – a visit that could have ignited an explosive wave of violence – has been postponed several times, even if the politicians have not refrained from public expressions of solidarity with their fellow Arabs in the territories. Against this background, a national strike (October 13) was declared, which, like the main solidarity demonstration in Sakhnin, passed quietly. In these circumstances, the moderate attitude of the Joint List leader Ayman Udeh stands out and should be commended. He has so far succeeded in imposing his pragmatic approach on the more radical politicians and groups among the Arab leadership, while at the same time managing to maintain its unity, despite the profound differences of opinion among its various elements.

In this complex situation, what policy should the Israeli government adopt toward the Arab minority?

- a. In the short term, the main challenge is to maintain order on the Arab scene, and isolate the events within it from those taking place in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The efforts at dialogue with the Arab leadership by the police and the government are of supreme importance. The Arab leaders should not be excluded or portrayed as a radicalizing factor. The moderate elements in them should be strengthened and their ability to calm public opinion, particularly young people, should be enhanced, even if the extent of their influence is unclear. The behavior of the police among the Arab population has a clear effect on the overall atmosphere. Thus far, it appears that the police have learned the lessons of the October 2000 riots. It is important to contain the security events with determination and sensitivity, in a way that will allow protest but prevent its escalation into violence and terror. Another challenge facing the police is the urgent need to prevent violence by Jews against Arabs, which is liable to escalate tension.
- b. The government's primary effort should be made immediately after the riots end. The government should review its overall policy toward the Arab minority in Israel, and should expedite and greatly expand the implementation of processes begun for the purpose of enhancing the economic integration of the Arab population. These matters were already discussed at a meeting on May 21, 2015 between Prime Minister Netanyahu and the leader of the Joint List, as a basis for implementing those programs already authorized and ready for operation. This is the time to cultivate dialogue with the Arab minority's national leadership, while accelerating implementation of the existing programs in employment, education, and infrastructure. It is also important to help reduce the nationalistic anti-Arab discourse in the political system in Israel and – no less so – in the Israeli public at large.