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# The crisis of violence in the Arab street

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Um al-Fahm's residents live in fear. Every day sees another violent brawl. Just ten days ago, a 16-year-old was stabbed to death. Last October, a father and his two sons were shot, and they were not even involved in the criminal underworld. In February, MK Ahmad Tibi initiated a Knesset debate on violence in the Arab sector. Data presented during the debate were deeply worrying. Some 67% of murders, 70% of murder attempts, and 38% of serious assaults are carried out by Arabs, who make up just 20% of the population.

Testimony from Siham Agbarieh, who lost her husband and two sons in the Um al-Fahm murder, shocked the participants – including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, ministers, senior police officers and Arab leaders. Siham called for urgent action: “As a citizen, I demand to know who murdered my husband and two children in the house four months ago. I haven't been home since. I am scared. I and the children sleep with the neighbors. Do I need to sleep at the police station to feel safe?” (NRG, Feb. 13, 2012)

Tibi brought all those with a connection to law enforcement, education and budget allocation together with Arab MKs, local authority heads and members of the families of victims. According to a report by Megafon correspondent Nurit Kartan (Feb. 23, 2012), Tibi was the main speaker during the meeting. “We aren't passing the buck – we are denouncing the murders in a louder voice, a stronger voice, and bolder voice,” he said. The article continues, “Responsibility for the violence is both Arab society's and the government's,” say Arab leaders. “The Arab leadership calls on you (the government) to take firm, focused action – to go from house to house, to take away weapons.” This call, from their point of view, is directed also at themselves, Arab citizens, to “strengthen mutual support as a society.”

The prime minister, the internal security minister and others declared they intended to act. “There is a window of opportunity, and the hand we are holding out must be grasped,” said Police Inspector General Yohanan Danino. “I say explicitly – we will catch more criminals and provide better police services. The situation is not good, we have a lot to do. I really would like to meet with you occasionally, to show you how we are progressing.” (Megafon)

But the higher ranking the speaker and the more emphatic the promises to act, the more prominent the difference between the speeches and current policies which nobody really believes will change. Netanyahu outdid them all when he responded to Siham, saying, “The things I have heard just strengthen the feeling that we must and can do something. I understand the terrible pain you feel. We express our condolences, but we also greatly desire to change the situation. We have begun to prove this in Lod (a mixed Jewish-Arab city – A.A.). The time has come for us to prove this to all the Arab public.” The prime minister clarified, “The door is open, and there is a real desire not to come as patrons but as people who see integration and equality, the right to live in security free from fear, as elemental rights. This is the state's obligation.”

### **The window of opportunity doesn't exist**

Excuse me, did I hear Bibi talking about integration and equality for Arabs? After all, everyone understands that the severe conditions of Arab towns including poverty, neglect and discrimination have been the lot of Arab citizens for

64 years. Does anyone really believe that the extreme rightwing government of Lieberman and Netanyahu, with its recent wave of racist legislation aimed at Israel's Arab citizens, really intends to do something no previous government has done – change its attitude to the Arab population?

If we take Um al-Fahm as an example of the situation borne by Arab citizens, we find a town groaning under the pressures of overcrowding and lack of resources. Government welfare expenditure for Arab citizens is three times lower than that of Jewish towns. Women sit at home without work; only some 20% find employment in the labor market. Thus, most families have to make do with just one breadwinner and poverty rates are over 50%, compared to the national average of 20%. According to an Adva report from 2011, unemployment in Um al-Fahm is 32.2% (second only to the Bedouin city Rahat), compared to the national rate of 5.5%.

True, this situation is not just Bib's fault. It wasn't created during his watch, but reflects a decades-long policy of discrimination towards the Arab population. Even the findings of the Orr Commission, set up after the October 2000 intifada, noted institutional discrimination and recommended the investment of resources and the correction of injustices which had accumulated for years. But nothing moved Israel's racist and conservative establishment, so why should things change now?

At best, police intervention will be increased in Arab towns, together with firmer action against those accused of shootings and murder, as was the case in Lod, which Bibi noted. Two years ago, after dozens of unsolved murder cases in Lod, particularly the murder of women by family members, police decided to change operational methods and began acting decisively while providing protection to women who submitted claims of violence and assisting those who testified against crime.

This, however, is just a drop in the ocean which touches on symptoms without attending to cause. During years of neglect, great anger has built up among Arab citizens against the police, because of its discrimination and violence towards the Arab population. The fact that the police fail to solve murder cases and often allow criminals to wander freely and maintain an arsenal of weapons for criminal use, engenders the feeling that as long as the victims are Arabs, the police are willing to turn a blind eye. Some go further and say the state actually is in favor of the development of crime in the Arab sector, so that Arab society will crumble. Even if this is not so, it reflects the bitterness Arab citizens feel towards the state.

### **The Arab leadership is failing**

MK Ahmad Tibi, who managed to raise the issue of violence in the Knesset and even in the media, spoke of the need for Arab leaders to take a good look at themselves and ask how they are responsible for the violence. The question is whether the current Arab leadership is able to do so. It's no secret that even though the same parties are elected time and time again, Arab citizens have long since lost all faith in their leaders. The vast majority of Arab leaders belong to the middle class which has managed to rise above the distress of Arab citizens, and they look down from their luxury houses and lavish cars at the workers and unemployed. The hardships of poverty, unemployment and lack of infrastructure are not addressed at all. After the failure of Oslo, Israel's Arab leadership took a nationalist turn, and leaders competed over who could be more extreme. In the speeches echoing across the Knesset podium, it seemed as if it were the voice of Nasrallah speaking. After all, ardent speeches on the muqawama (resistance) and the nakba are much more exciting than drab debates over unemployment, education and drainage problems.

This was a lost decade, during which attitudes within society regressed. Conservatism took hold everywhere. In schools we see teachers using violence against pupils. In response, pupils adopt a hostile and violent attitude towards the entire system, scorning the authority of teachers and school heads. Local authorities are going bankrupt under charges of corruption and nepotism, which have greatly damaged the functioning of local government. As a result, dozens of local authorities are controlled by an appointed council. Due to the feeling that there is no

accountability, Arab society has sought refuge in religion. But there is a heavy price to pay in the status of women. Conservative pressure leads to the marriage of young girls. Every fourth Arab girl marries before she reaches 18 (Jecky Huri, Ha'aretz, March 5, 2012). This results in leaving school and premature pregnancy, which in turn affects the children. The hamula's almost complete control of the community prevents progress and openness. Public posts are not taken by those most suited, but by those with the right "connections". All this has led to a dangerous crumbling of Arab society in Israel.

Following the murders in Um al-Fahm, the municipality, headed by the Islamic Movement, set up a protest tent outside the city's police building, demanding that the violence be stopped. Harshly criticizing the protestors' focus on police failures alone, the director of Um al-Fahm's Atid College Taysir Salman Mahamid wrote, "The tent set up in front of the police should in fact have been divided into two. Another tent should have been erected in front of the town hall. The current tent points accusingly at the police, and this is only half the truth. The police are certainly not free of blame, but the important question is, why wasn't another tent erected in front of the town hall which has controlled Um al-Fahm for three decades but has failed to use its institutions to bring progress to the city?" (From a local website, Buqja, Feb. 10, 2012)

To cope with the crisis in Arab society, a new social-political leadership must be created which prioritizes the needs of the Arab public. The racist Israeli establishment is not innocent, but even in the existing situation the Arab leadership has extensive freedom for action and initiative.

### **New lessons to learn from Egypt**

There is no point in dragging Um al-Fahm's pained residents to the Knesset to relate their woes to ministers in the expectation that a solution will be found.

Instead of entrenching themselves in the role of victim or, on the other hand, wrapping themselves in highfalutin nationalist slogans, a real leadership must challenge the failures which have characterized its own behavior so far. It must stand firmly against the oppression of women and youth carried out in the name of tradition and religion.

The Arab youth who lead today's popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria show the enormous potential for change. Willingness to sacrifice, belief that change is possible, and the astounding creativity which enabled ostensible laws of nature which had dominated for 40 or 50 years to be changed – all these show that nothing is eternal. This dynamic must bring awakening to Israel's Arab towns too. To prevent the next murder, young men and women who want to change reality and create a new leadership in Arab society must arise. Slogans of freedom, equality and social justice are already prepared. All that is required is people who understand that in light of the nadir reached by society, an opportunity for real change exists.

*Post-scriptum :*

*Translated from the Hebrew by Yonatan Preminger*

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