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## **Israel and its Arab Citizens – Taking Stock**

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Seven years have now passed since the harsh confrontations between Arab Israelis and the country's security forces which came to be known as the "October 2000 Events". During the riots in support of the Palestinian intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, 13 Arab civilians, 12 of them citizens of Israel, were killed by Israeli police. The uprising in the Galilee and Triangle regions was extremely traumatic for the Israeli body politic, spawning a State Commission of Inquiry which analyzed Jewish-Arab relations in Israel in an unprecedented fashion and prescribed a gamut of remedies for the abyss which had opened up between the two communities.

What, if anything, has happened during the last 12 months? One can discern no real change in government policy towards Arab Israeli society. To be sure, a number of developments are noteworthy. For example, for the first time ever, an Arab was made a full-fledged government minister, with a regular portfolio. In addition, numerous meetings and discussions were held, promises were made, intentions formulated and declarations were issued: In February 2007, the Prime Minister's Office was said to be planning to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the establishment of a new Arab city; in March, proposed legislation was floated which included Arab communities in a revised map of national priority areas; in April, the government decided to build 3,150 new school classrooms in the Arab sector; in May, the Ministerial Committee for the non-Jewish sector decided on a 95 million shekel budget increase for Arab culture, and in that same month, the Prime Minister declared that "I won't cover up the fact that in Israel, there is discrimination against Arabs;" in July, the government established an authority to address the needs of the Negev Bedouin communities.

Nonetheless, little was done in the way of implementation. The gaps between Jewish and Arab societies remain yawning, for which the government is partially responsible (Arab society is not wholly without blame either). The bottom line, in any event, is that the conclusions and recommendations of the 2003 Or Commission remain conspicuously unimplemented.

Jewish-Arab relations in Israel are not static. They are being buffeted by powerful forces, some emanating from internal developments within Israeli society, and some from external ones related to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Generally speaking, in the seven years since October 2000, tension between Jews and Arabs has risen steadily. Mutual alienation, distancing from one, feelings of fear, apprehension and lack of trust have deepened, a fact expressed in numerous public opinion polls. For example, the “Israel Democracy Index Survey, 2007”, conducted by the Israeli Institute for Democracy, shows that the public believes that the worst fissure in Israeli society is that between Jews and Arabs. 54% of the Arabs polled felt that it was “impossible to trust the Jewish majority.” Against the background of the Palestinian intifada and the “October events”, a substantial proportion of the Jewish public views the Arabs as a hostile minority and “fifth column” linked to the enemy.

The Lebanon War, and the identification of a portion of the Arab public with Hizballah contributed to this deepening mutual lack of trust (Smooha, Coexistence Index, 2006): 68% of Jews fear that Arab Israelis would initiate an intifada; 64 % of Jews believe that Arabs endanger the security of the state because of their high birth rates; 73% of Jews believe that the majority of the Arabs will be more loyal to a Palestinian state than to the State of Israel.

The worsening environment of Arab-Jewish relations also found expression in polarizing stereotypes, which were increasingly racist in character. Hence, 51% of the Arabs polled by the 2007 Democracy Index believed that Jews were racist. Indeed, anti-Arab racist expressions emanating from the Jewish sector were widespread, beginning with soccer playing fields and stadiums, where they were directed at Arab players and fans, and continuing with the Yad Le’Achim organization’s call not to rent apartments to Arabs. Other polling data confirmed the picture: 75% of Jews oppose living in the same apartment buildings as Arabs (Racism Index Survey, 2006); moreover, 55% of Jews surmise that Arabs do not have the ability to reach the same level of cultural development as the Jews (Democracy Index Survey, 2007), and 37% of them view Arab culture as inferior (Racism Index Survey, 2006).

These positions are translated into a growing tendency to support what are perceived as “quick-fix” solutions, e.g: transfer – 50% (Racism Index Survey, 2006); nullifying Arab Israeli citizens’ right to vote – 42% (Racism Index Survey, 2006); and supporting the notion that the government should encourage Arab emigration – 55% (Democracy Index Survey, 2007).

These worrisome positions were not developing in a vacuum. The Lebanon War, as mentioned above, played its part. An especially important factor contributing to the widening of the fissure during the last year was the publication of the series of documents entitled “The Future Vision of the Palestinians in Israel.” These documents constitute a watershed in the history of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. They are foundational in nature, rejecting the paradigm of Jewish-Arab relations which the State formulated in 1948. To be sure, significant portions of the “Vision” documents, which call for the

abolishing of discrimination and the establishment of genuine equality in Israel are acceptable to a large portion of the Jewish public. However, most disturbing to Jewish ears were the parts referring to the national question, which constitute a wholesale adoption of the Palestinian narrative that rejects the legitimacy of the Zionist movement, and the Jewish character of the state of Israeli, i.e., its self-definition as “Jewish and democratic.” The “Vision” documents tendered various alternative models for the State: consociational democracy, a bi-national state, or a democratic bilingual state. With the first wave of reactions having now passed, there is a need to closely study these documents. There is a vital need to formulate a response to the challenge which has been posed, perhaps in the form of a specifically Israeli Jewish reply.

Concurrently, in light of these developments, it should be clear that ongoing governmental neglect of the Arab sector’s socio-economic needs only deepens feelings of frustration and discontent, perhaps even preparing the ground for future outbursts of violence.