

MIDDLE EAST: THE FAULTLINE

'We are still the enemy'

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"The murderous price that we Arab citizens of Israel have paid for showing our solidarity with our brothers in the occupied territories has once again made it clear that the Israeli establishment and part of the Jewish population of the country - which is also our country - still do not see us as full citizens, but as foreigners and, worse still, enemies. The repression of these days has been even more ferocious than that of 30 March 1976, known as Land Day. After this dreadful experience, each one of us can again say 'My country is killing my people, my state is killing me'" (1).

This is how Muhammad Hamzeh Ghanayem - who is a Palestinian poet, an Israeli citizen and a resident of the Arab town of Baka al-Gharbiéh in Israel's northern Triangle - describes the violent events of the first week of October. They cost the lives of 12 Israeli Arabs, hit by bullets (plastic and metal, according to the medical reports) fired by Israeli security forces, and also by Jewish thugs who carried out a pogrom in Nazareth on 8 October on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement.

It all started on 28 September with Likud leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Aqsa precinct (the Haram al-Sharif) in Jerusalem. The clashes there between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli soldiers caused injuries but no deaths. But the next day seven Palestinians were killed. And on 30 September the Higher Arab Committee in Israel called on the country's Arab population to observe a general strike on Sunday 1 October. It also called for demonstrations to show the Israeli Arabs' solidarity with the Palestinians of the territories, their anger about the killings and their determination to preserve the Arab character of East Jerusalem and the sacred nature of the Haram.

The strike was near total and the demonstrations spirited. But there were no incidents except where the Israeli security forces intervened. Where they really cracked down - in particular in the towns and villages under the command of Arik Ron, head of Israel's northern police - it led to rioting and victims. Immediately, the Higher Arab Committee called for the strike and demonstrations to continue - even during the funerals of the first victims. From 1-3 October there were ten deaths and hundreds of injuries.

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The Barak government - in particular the "doves", ministers Shlomo Ben Ami (internal security) and Haim Ramon (interior) - covered up for the behaviour of the security forces saying that, at certain points, the demonstrators had blocked main roads. The two ministers, and Barak himself, then joined in a real anti-Arab media campaign, which lost them all credibility in the eyes of Israel's Arab population - but also of a number of Jews.

Hanna Sweid, a member of the Higher Arab Committee and mayor of Eilabun (in the Galilee), says: "The government of Israel has declared war on us. This murderous harvest is proof that the Barak government no longer distinguishes between the Palestinian populations on either side of the Green Line. The government alone is responsible for the escalation. After all, the reaction of Israel's Arab citizens is natural. We wanted to show our Palestinian identity; we can't remain indifferent to the killings of our brothers or fail to react to the attempts to touch the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. But the strike and demonstrations also showed our own accumulated frustrations and our disappointment with the Barak government. We voted for it, but it's done nothing, neither for peace, nor for equality for us here in [Israel] - just look at our unemployment figures."

Dr Sweid is a Christian and, on many issues, would not agree with Sheikh Raed Salah, who is head of the radical wing of the Islamic Movement and mayor of Um al-Fahm, which has a strong Islamist following. But Salah, too, criticises the authorities. "By sending such huge forces in, they wanted to frighten us and threaten the lives of our sons and daughters," he says. "Their message was clear: 'as long as you only ask for schools and roads no problem; but if you start asking for respect to be shown to the Aqsa mosque or the rights of the Arabs of Jerusalem's Old City, then you're extremists and you're putting Israel's security in danger'."

Abed Anabtawi, spokesman for the Higher Arab Committee, adds: "We have expressed our total rejection of Israeli government policies, but our protest was not directed at Israeli Jews." Azmi Bishara, a member of Knesset and leader of the National and Democratic Union, calls these clashes an intifada: "It is an uprising against all the attempts to 'Israelise' the Palestinian Arab population living in Israel, in order to safeguard their national identity. Increasingly, they want to be recognised as a national minority inside the state of Israel" (2). Bishara thinks the policies of the Barak government "are leading straight to an apartheid regime".

From 4 October the situation in the Arab townships in Israel began gradually to calm down. But one of the lessons of these events is that no Arab political force was able to impose its authority, in particular over the young. And some young thugs had indeed infiltrated the demonstrations, using the general anger as a cover for vandalising buildings. In Nazareth, for example, they set fire to a bank, destroyed a big restaurant and looted a pharmacy - acts that were condemned both by the

spokesman for the municipality and by the radical wing of the Islamic Movement (3).

Little by little people went back to normal life, as they mourned their dead and wondered about the future. Safam Habibi, son of the well-known writer and politician Emil Habibi, says: "These bloody events have put us back half a century. The ruling class and part of Israeli society have made us understand that they don't consider us equal citizens; 52 years after the creation of the state of Israel we're still enemies they need to destroy."

Pogrom in Nazareth

Nazareth-Ilit, a recently-built Jewish township, looks down over the old Arab city of Nazareth. From there, on the evening of Saturday 7 October, a large gang of Jewish hoodlums set about the Arab inhabitants of Nazareth' poorest district. The following night - Yom Kippur, the Jews' holiest day when all physical activity is forbidden - hundreds of thugs, again from Nazareth-Ilit, joined by others from Tiberias, came down and set the district on fire. The residents tried to defend themselves, hoping the police would arrive. In vain. According to the mayor, Ramzi Jeraysi, the thugs were protected, at least for a while, by the security forces who fired at the Arab inhabitants, at first using tear gas, then plastic and metal bullets. That night two Arabs were killed and a number of others seriously wounded. Twice, the mayor telephoned Ben Ami, as minister in charge of the police, asking him to order them to stop shooting. But Ben Ami would not admit that his men were using metal bullets. "But the medical reports show that our people were killed with metal bullets," says Jeraysi. "Yet the police used velvet gloves with the Jewish hoodlums."

Because of Yom Kippur, the Israeli media did not report the Nazareth pogrom until the evening of 11 October. The prime minister and his minister for police avoided making any distinction between the Jewish perpetrators and their Arab victims. But the head of the committee of ministers responsible for the Arab population, former general Matan Vilnai, remarked crudely: "Jewish hoodlums attacked Arabs in Nazareth in the same way that antisemites used to attack Jews in Europe." Moshe Negbi, legal columnist for the daily Yediot Aharonot, commented: "This week's pogroms have reinforced the feeling that ours is a racist police force, only concerned with protecting Jews: where the Arab rioters were concerned, it just shot to kill" (4).

The Nazareth pogrom is not an isolated incident. The regional press (5) says that before, during and after Yom Kippur, Jewish rioters attacked Arabs in different towns, burning cars and looting shops. After riots in Bat Yam (a southern suburb of Tel Aviv) in which two Arab passers-by were stabbed and police cars broken into, the local weekly ran the headline "Pogrom" (6). And in Jaffa, after violent clashes between Jews and Arabs, the local press called the situation "explosive" (7).

No-one here believes that these riots were spontaneous.

By treating the Arab towns and villages as a fifth front (8), the leaders of the rightwing parties poured oil on the fire. While officially condemning the pogroms, they nevertheless justified them by saying on TV on 10 and 11 October that they were "understandable reactions by Jews worried by the rioting of the Israeli Arabs, in solidarity with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza". For Ariel Sharon and his friends, the aim was to force Barak's hand so as to get into the government and end the peace process.

With the risk of the conflict turning into a war of religion some have taken advantage of the situation: for instance, Palestinians sacked Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. Two Islamist organisations in Israel condemned it as an act of vandalism, adding that there is also an Muslim sheikh Yussef Dwiqat, buried there. Bishara asked the Palestinian Authority to rebuild the tomb and authorise Jewish rabbis to visit it. Joseph's Tomb, sadly, is not an exception. Other holy places have been looted and burnt - Muslim ones in Israel (at Tiberias and Jaffa) and Jewish ones in the West Bank (at Jericho).

The Nazareth pogrom awakened consciences. Since it took place, the press has published a growing number of petitions condemning the security forces and racist and fascist trends. Singly and in groups, Jews from different parts of Israel have been visiting the families of the 12 Arab victims, the wounded and the municipalities that came under attack. During the Sukkot holiday, which started in mid-October, when religious Jewish families erect huts (sukkot), many Jews put them up in Arab towns as a mark of solidarity - gestures aimed at repairing the social fabric of Jewish-Arab relations, badly damaged by the events of this October.

* *Journalist*, Haaretz, Tel Aviv

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from interviews by the author for *Le Monde diplomatique* or *Haaretz*.
2. *Fasl al-Maqal*, Nazareth, 13 October 2000.
3. *Sawt al-Haq wa al-Hurriyya*, (Voice of Justice and Freedom), Um al-Fahm, 13 October 2000.
4. *Yediot Aharonot*, Tel-Aviv, 13 October 2000.
5. *Hed Haqrayot*, Kiryat-Ata, 13 October 2000.
6. *But Yum*, 13 October 2000.
7. *Tel Aviv*, 13 October 2000.
8. The first four are Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.