

Alienated Silence

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Haaretz Op-Ed May 14th 2002

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The protest of Arab citizens of Israel in response to the events of Operation Defensive Shield was relatively moderate. There were some demonstrations; organizations and public leaders took part in some of these. But compared to protests in October 2000, these demonstrations were small and restrained.

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In October 2000, protests flared in response to events which at the time were perceived as being highly disturbing (Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, the killing of demonstrators at the site, the death of the boy Mohammed Dura), whose import seems reduced when viewed today. The demonstrations of April 2002, which were staged in protest against much greater levels of suffering and damage, were far more restrained. Despite the hundreds of Palestinians killed in the territories, the devastating blow to infrastructure and homes, the systematic destruction of civil institutions, the curfews, the starvation, the obstruction of emergency services and the disruption of the lives of hundreds of thousands while Defensive Shield was being carried out, the inclination of Arabs in Israel to refrain from violence and stick to a repertoire characteristic of legitimate demonstrations was conspicuous.

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True, Arab demonstrations in spring 2002 were monitored by an Israeli police force which has assimilated some of the lessons of the October 2000 events. The police were careful not to provoke, and they allowed demonstrations to run their course without violence. It is also true that Arab citizens, who are exposed to Israel's media, experience suicide strikes on Israeli soil in a manner unlike that of Palestinians in the territories. Perhaps Arab citizens relate to Israel's responses in a somewhat more complex way than Palestinians.

Yet these are secondary explanations. A deeper reason for the relative quiet of Arab citizens involves the existential fear which has gripped them recently. The moral and political implications of this anxiety must be understood by the Jewish majority.

Fear felt today by Arab citizens of Israel was born in late 2000

in response to a police force that did not refrain from pointing its rifles at Arab citizens. Since the end of 2000, this unease has transformed into grave fear in response to the increasingly frequent allusions of transfer in Israeli discourse. Arab citizens have been troubled recently by an issue that had not been discussed in past decades: does the creeping entry of transfer in Israel's legitimate public domain reflect a genuine danger? It is important to recognize that beyond the fear involved in discussing this question, there is another dimension. Arab citizens have lost the sense that they understand the Jewish majority and are able to readily discern processes which it undergoes. Many view Israeli society as being more extremist, unpredictable and dangerous than ever.

Many among Israel's Jewish majority will be tempted to endorse the paternalist claim that the relative quiet proves that policies of force work. They will claim that actions undertaken by the police in late 2000 made borders of the permissible and the forbidden very clear to Arabs, and thereby restored the deterrence factor. What proponents of this view fail to understand is that the imposition of fear, which appears to be a solution in the short term, is a moral abomination and an inept policy for the middle and long terms. The deterrence approach likens the civil sphere to a battlefield in which the majority and minority are locked in a zero-sum game, and in which the state's role is to develop a strategy that serves the need of the Jewish majority to rule over passive Arab objects. The moral failure of such an approach is two-sided. It entails abandonment of belief that genuine, equal citizenship will provide a basis for joint, cooperative life. And it is also an emphatic endorsement of the anti-democratic principle of the majority's rule over the minority.

Inevitably, a moral failure in the short term guarantees a poisoned political situation in the middle and long terms. Fear harbored by Arab citizens will not dampen their legitimate aspiration for substantive citizenship status and equal rights. The fear might suspend these ambitions, but only for a limited time. The time will come when the pent-up pressure will explode loudly and powerfully. The exposure last week of activity undertaken allegedly by young Arabs to carry out suicide attacks is a sign of things to come. Quiet in the Arab sector is likely to turn out to be an alienated silence that precedes despair regarding the future of relations. In the absence of a prospect of genuine civil improvement and equality, this quiet is liable to

explode in uncontrolled violence.