

A Self-fulfilling Prophecy

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In May 1994, a memo was written by a senior Israel Police officer that, to a large extent, determined the police's attitude toward Israeli Arabs and its assessments toward the Arab sector ever since. The memo, which analyzed process and trends among Israeli Arabs, was written by the inspector general's adviser on Arab affairs, then a police colonel and since promoted to a brigadier.

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The memo had two scenarios from which to choose. According to one, relations between Arab citizens and the state were heading for conflict. According to the other, the trend was for equality and integration. The memo chose the scenario of conflict. The police, it said, should prepare for future events that express extremism, violence and ongoing civil unrest by Israeli Arabs, and appropriately deploy resources in the sector.

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That strategic decision, in particular the vehemence with which it insists on the scenario of conflict and the timing of the document and its decision, raises questions. It was 1994, a good year in relations between Israel and its Arab citizens. For the first - and so far only - time, Arab political parties participated in the government, as part of Yitzhak Rabin's blocking coalition. The public, Jews and Arabs alike, was encouraged by the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan, the historic recognition of the PLO and the chance of advancing a peace agreement with the Palestinians. The Labor-Meretz government's second-year budget heralded significant closings of the gaps in the allocating of resources. The education budget for the Arab sector was skyrocketing. Arab settlements were for the first time included in planning maps for industrial development. There were investments in physical infrastructure and social services. Against such a background, the insistence on a violent scenario seems very strange.

Among the security forces, the senior agency responsible for analyzing and assessing trends among Israeli Arabs is not the police, but the Shin Bet. Starting in 1996, it was headed by

Ami Ayalon, whose views on Israel's Arabs are very different from those expressed in the police's 1994 document. Everything he has said on the subject is based on the recognition that nothing is a priori and permanent, and that much depends on policies adopted by the government. And that is precisely what was missing from the police memo, in which the end was pre-determined. The concept of a deterministic conflict struck deep roots in the police. An unceasing flow of situation assessments and options analyses in the 1990s were based on the conflict scenario, and shaped a quasi-military attitude that regarded the Arab population as an enemy. At the same time, there was a steady downgrading of the police's civilian role in the Arab community. The alienation between the police and the Arab political leadership deepened. On the eve of the riots of October 2000, the police did not maintain a true means of communication with the Arab political leadership, except for local authority heads, whose influence was limited.

That alienation had grave ramifications. And ironically, while since 1994 the police assumed a clash was inevitable, it did not take any steps to prepare a focused response against those violent elements that always appear at the edges of stormy demonstrations, a response that would have required coordination with local leaders. Instead, it prepared like an army in advance of a battle. The Arabs were perceived as a faceless, unified mob. The tactics for preserving the peace grew ever-more dependent on guns. The basic fact, that the ultimate mission of the police is to safeguard human lives, gradually receded from the consciousness of many in its ranks.

A document written at the end of 2000 to summarize how the police dealt with the Arab sector since 1994, notes all relevant decisions made over those six fateful years. The chronicle does not mention anything that would even hint at a process of self-examination and reconsideration of the police concept. Was there not periodical examination of the approach in comparison to alternatives? Didn't anyone ask for an update; was nobody asked to explain once again the reasoning? Were the clear strategic choices of 1994 and their ramifications ever presented to Avigdor Kahalani, Shlomo Ben-Ami or Uzi Landau, who inherited the policy and became responsible for it when they were appointed internal security ministers?

The Israel Police is not a passive spectator at events. It is

a key force shaping them. Those who do not want the dangerous dynamics of October 2000 to repeat themselves, must recognize the possibility that what happened to the police in the seam between assessments, policy-making and operational activity was not successful intelligence work but a self-fulfilling prophecy.