

Nazareth Dispute Cries out for Attention

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Ehud Barak, who so far has not devoted much time to the problems of Israel's Arab population, should start taking the question of Nazareth's disputed Shihab a-Din complex more seriously. This crisis, which could easily deteriorate into bloodshed, has paralyzed the Nazareth municipality for the past eight months. It threatens the delicate internal equilibrium of the Arab sector, clouds relations with the government, blocks closer ties between Israel and the Vatican and hinders the chances of using the millennium as an economic and political booster. A planning dispute is threatening to become a dangerous inter-religious conflagration. In the center of Nazareth, at the corner of the triangular complex bordered by Pope Paul VI and Casa Nova Streets, there is an ancient 135 square meter building belonging to the Moslem Wakf. Local tradition identifies this place as the grave of Shihab a-Din, the nephew of Salah a-Din. The surrounding area of the complex, some 2,000 square meters, has been state-owned land since Ottoman times. A municipal school was located there until 1997, when it was razed by the municipality as part of the Nazareth 2000 project. The plan was to build a big plaza there. Representatives of the Islamic movement did not oppose the plan, but in December 1997, immediately after work started, Islamic activists camped out in the complex claiming the entire area belonged to the Wakf. They halted the work, set up a protest tent, fenced off the area and demanded to be allowed to build a large mosque on the spot. Islamic flags were flown and a loudspeaker system installed at the site, which attracts thousands of worshipers each Friday afternoon. Nazareth's mayor, Ramez Gheraisi, a member of the Arab-Jewish leftist Hadash party, has convincing historical documentation that contradicts the Moslems' claims. History is, however, dwarfed in the meantime by the facts on the ground. The Moslems have been in control of this complex for 20 months and the millennium is rapidly approaching. Gheraisi, who sees the crisis gradually eroding the chances for implementing the Nazareth 2000 plan, tried to get an eviction order,

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but a counter-petition by the Moslems stopped him. A compromise attempt led by chief qadi Ahmed Natur also failed.

As the November 1998 municipal elections approached, the Islamic movement in Nazareth enlisted the Shihab a-Din crisis for political purposes. The relatively moderate list formed by the movement transformed the argument over ownership into an argument over whether or not a mosque would be built in the city. The Moslem population responded enthusiastically at the polls. Although Gheraisi was reelected - by a tiny majority - his Hadash faction won only nine seats in the city council, as opposed to ten for the Islamic list. Since the elections, the Nazareth municipality has been paralyzed. There is no dialogue, no city council meetings, no coalition, no appointments. The 1999 budget was not approved and the Interior Ministry is seriously considering appointing an oversight committee to run the city. In April and June, there were violent clashes. There were no deaths but the violence spurred Arab leaders, led by Kafr Manda council leader Muhamad Zeidan, to seek a compromise. The initial interim agreement signed in April by the municipality and the Moslems lists several principles intended to serve as a basis for a final arrangement. There is a consensus that the dispute is not between Islamic elements in the city and the Nazareth municipality, but rather between Islamic elements and the legal owners of the complex, that is to say, the Israeli government. There is also a commitment of the Nazareth municipality not to block construction of a mosque on the site if this is what the Moslems and the government agree. The Netanyahu government, which feared to get involved too deeply right before national elections, avoided making any public declarations. But it did appoint a ministerial committee to look into the problem. The committee recommended building a modest mosque on the Wakf area and an additional small area, and building the plaza on the remaining area. There is a dispute over the size of the mosque, but it seems solvable. The municipality's willingness to allocate another plot for the construction of a mosque also was helpful. Now the only thing left is to wait for Ehud Barak.

Barak only has to choreograph the negotiations and achieve a formal agreement. It seems all that is needed is for the prime minister and the parties to meet and for Barak to appoint a talented and professional personal representative of his to close the deal. Unlike in other incidents, the Arab parties involved in the dispute will gladly welcome the Israeli government's involvement because of its

formal ownership of the area in dispute.

The question is how long will it take for Barak to have time for Nazareth and how important it really is to him to prevent the city from fighting itself to death. A quick and effective response from Barak will restore a fraction of the credit his Arab constituency gave him during the elections. It will also give him the bonus of doing something that will encourage tourism and facilitate a calm and well-covered papal visit to Israel. If, on the other hand, Barak dallies until blood is shed in Nazareth, he is liable to be responsible for the boiling over of a long-simmering violent conflict that will support various political elements for years to come