

October 2000, revisited

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The events of October 2000 included hundreds of incidents spread out over two weeks. They are seared in the collective Israeli memory as a series of conflicts between Arab demonstrators, who in some cases numbered in the thousands, and the police. But there is another aspect to those difficult days that has been erased over the years from the awareness of Israeli Jews: the riots initiated by Jews against mosques, Arab-owned businesses, residences and Arab passersby, in mixed cities and elsewhere. The blurred memory of those incidents is particularly worrisome because of the fact that the Or Commission devoted an entire chapter to those events, describing them in detail.

One incident that stands out ended in the deaths of Omar Akawi and Wissam Yazbek, on the night of October 8, 2000, Yom Kippur eve, in the seam line between Upper Nazareth and Nazareth. The evening before, Jews from Upper Nazareth had attacked Arab-owned homes and businesses in the eastern neighborhood of Nazareth, and ahead of Yom Kippur, the police beefed up its forces in the area. On the afternoon of October 8, the police already knew about plans by some Jews to attack Arabs that evening. The police deployed troops along the seam line but did not prevent hundreds of youths from Upper Nazareth from reaching the Arab area, throwing stones and even going down into the streets of the neighborhood and vandalizing property.

Many of the neighborhood residents went out to protect their property, joined by residents of other neighborhoods as well as high-profile leaders of the Israeli Arab community. There was stone-throwing in both directions and at one point, shots were heard. Akawi and Yazbek, who had been seen earlier trying to push the demonstrators back away from the police and Jewish rioters, were killed by live bullets, from

standard-issue police weapons. In Yazbek's case, the bullet entered the back of his head. Deputy Commander Moshe Waldman, the commander in charge that night, was bitterly criticized by the Or Commission, and his career in the police was harmed. The shooters have never been identified.

Upper Nazareth was not an isolated case. The Or Commission reported that in Tiberias, on October 7 and 9, mosques, Arab passersby and Arab-owned business were all damaged while a gas station at the Golani Junction was torched, and police who tried to stop those attacks were attacked. In Migdal Haemek, Jewish residents on October 9 blocked the main road and threw stones at cars they believed were owned by Arabs. Some of them were arrested but early in the morning, dozens of teens marched on the police station demanding the release of their arrested friends. Some threw rocks at police, and one policeman was wounded and saved from more serious injury only because he was wearing a flak jacket.

In Afula, on October 9, some 700 Jewish demonstrators blocked Route 65 with rocks and boulders, and physically attacked a policeman. About a hundred of them, trying to march into the village of Nin, were stopped by a police force only 50 meters away from the houses of the village. In Acre, hundreds of Jewish rioters on October 9 vandalized shops and cars owned by Arabs, as well as a police car. The next day, 11 Arab businesses inside the Acre old city were vandalized.

On October 9, in Tel Aviv's Hatikva Quarter and in Bat Yam, large numbers of police were needed to rebuff hundreds of demonstrators who tried to attack Jaffa. The attack on the Hassan Bek mosque on the Tel Aviv promenade turned the Arabs worshiping there into hostages for hours and damaged the building - all within the view of dozens of police.

The fact that most of the Jewish rioting took place between October 7-9 is evidence that it was an emotional response by Jews to the events in the territories and along the Green

Line in the preceding days. But nobody in Israel should be allowed to hide behind that circumstantial excuse. Racist incidents, in which an incited mob fired by distorted nationalistic consciousness goes out of control attacking a minority group, are a chilling reminder of the times when Jews were victim of similar incidents, and another sign of the moral decline now gripping Israel. They are also warning signs of the danger of the escalation that could yet develop here, right here at home, in crises yet to come.