

More Force is Not the Answer

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The events of the last few days have brought to the surface powerful undercurrents that have been flowing through Israel's Arab community for the past two years - far from the eyes of the Israeli Jewish public. These events have demonstrated the weak points of the mechanisms of thinking, decision-making and policy-setting prevalent among the members of the Jewish majority here and among its leaders regarding a fifth of Israel's population. Since the start of the riots, cabinet ministers, high-ranking Israel Police and Israel Defense Force officers and a number of journalists and commentators have been painting a simplistic and misleading picture. They argue that the problem began when the ordinary Israeli Arab citizen was mesmerized by Islamic incitement and it has been kept alive by Arab members of Knesset and mayors who have "irresponsibly let themselves be carried away emotionally" and who have contributed to the deterioration of the situation. This kind of theory depicts Israel's Palestinian community as a mindless mob that can conveniently serve as a passive receptacle for the first inciter who comes along.

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The reality is quite different. Admittedly, there are some Islamic leaders who are personally involved and have vested political interest in the Temple Mount. Furthermore, when the Temple Mount becomes the first item on the political agenda, they already have a long-prepared list of paranoid cliches for the occasion. However, these cliches would never have been translated into the massive waves of rage and protest of the past few days were it not that since the 1999 election campaign, the Israeli Arab community has undergone a profound metamorphosis that has escaped the attention of the Israel Jewish public and its leaders. Israeli Arabs in their early 20s were born in close proximity to Land Day 1976 and grew up politically in the context of two parallel processes: The flourishing of Palestinian nationalism and the civil rights struggle of Israeli Arabs. The first process offered these young Arabs the opportunity to redeem their collective self-esteem and to restore the lost dignity of the

Palestinian people through participation in the Intifada. It also offered them the aura of pan-Palestinian solidarity that developed in the wake of the Gulf War. Finally, it offered them the promise contained in the Oslo agreement - the promise of Palestinian statehood. On the other hand, the domestic struggle for civil rights waged by Arab Israelis offered them the Sisyphean reality of a hopeless campaign for a few crumbs of quasi-equality and quasi-dignity, a campaign that did not provide any clear-cut solution to their collective identity. Like any national project, the Palestinian national struggle promises solidarity that cuts across the borders of social status or religion. The disappointing civil rights struggle in Israel neutralized the grandparents of these young Israeli Arabs and exhausted their parents. This struggle has turned these young people, at a very early age, into extremely tired, irritable individuals. They have no patience for yet more rounds of empty promises from the establishment and their anger in the face of the norms of discrimination and alienation is very real.

The inevitable result of this situation is ever-increasing identification with Palestinian nationalism and ever-diminishing ties with Israel. In the eyes of these young Palestinians, Israel is, at best, the supplier of administrative accessories such as a passport, social services, health services and schooling. Those accessories are simply not adequate and do not offset the price Arabs have paid and are continuing to pay, in emotional terms and in terms of their property, for the establishment of the State of Israel and for its ongoing prosperity and stability.

The general election of 1999 and the dynamics of life on the sidelines of the Barak regime have only served to sharpen the struggle among those Arab political parties which emphasize their Palestinian identity in this or that manner. The current negotiations between Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Ehud Barak have turned the question of the fate of Israel's Arabs into a component of a future peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians. While the disturbances were taking place, Israel's leaders continued to act like foreign rulers and were expecting Arab MKs and mayors to function as sub-contractors who would ensure the maintenance of law and order. There is today an entire generation of scholars specializing in the study of Israel's Arabs who are openly critical of the invisible ideological chains, including Zionism, that are weighing down on a coherent sociopolitical analysis of the situation of the Israeli Arab

community. Such criticism enables an unfettered theoretical approach and a more wide-ranging and more exhaustive discussion of pragmatic political solutions. In fact, this criticism has already produced some fascinating insight into the situation of Israel's Arab citizens, their future and fate. Unfortunately, for the most part, the insight does not filter down to the policy-makers. Instead, one Israeli government after another requests consultation services of a uniform type, perpetuates narrow-minded, anachronistic thinking and replicates an attitude that sees Israel's Arab citizens as a community that threatens the survival of the state and which must constantly be held in check. Thus, someone like Alik Ron, Israel's Northern Police District Commander and a devout disciple of this concept, can claim that he and his colleagues on the force saw the writing on the wall and can demand the use of more force without batting an eyelid, although the use of force has failed a thousand times before when dealing with Israel's Arab community.

Unless there is empathy for the situation of the Israeli Arab minority, there can be no Arab-Jewish coexistence here. The alternative to empathy is the hopeless attempt to perpetuate foreign rule over unwilling subjects