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## Report From Israel: The Coming Intifada?

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Last Monday's headline in Israel's biggest daily newspaper Yediot Aharonot was decidedly ominous. It read "The Sukkot Riots" over the photo of a stone-throwing Palestinian on the Temple Mount. Occasioned by a rumor that religious Jews were coming to pray on the site in Jerusalem's Old City that contains the Al-Aksa Mosque, another in long series of violent outbreaks has gripped the city as Palestinians clash with the Israel Police. At the head of the riots is apparently the northern branch of Israel's Islamic Movement, the extreme faction of a homegrown version of the parties of God which have become painfully familiar throughout the Middle East. The branch's leader, Raed Salah, was recently arrested and then just as quickly released, probably out of the fear he would become a focal point for further violence. [Haaretz](#) reports that Salah has made his position eminently clear, "Al-Quds [the Arabic name for Jerusalem] is ours and was, and is, sacred ground for Muslims. That is our position. We will not concede even if we die for this position. We will continue with these measures for as long as Al-Aqsa is under threat."

For the moment, things seem to be calming down, and violence on the Temple Mount is by no means unprecedented in any case. As early as the 1920s, Arab riots were already breaking out on the site, often occasioned by various rumors of Jewish malfeasance, mostly untrue, but nonetheless highly effective at whipping a crowd into a frenzy. In this particular case, however, the involvement of the Islamic Movement has added a new twist to the phenomenon. This is because the Islamic Movement is not a Palestinian organization. It is an Israeli-Arab movement, and many of its members and leaders, like Salah, are Israeli citizens. They carry Israeli identity cards and passports, and live within the "green line," which demarcates Israel's pre-1967 border.

While some Israeli officials have mentioned the possibility of a third intifada, often to dismiss it, the real worry has gone largely unspoken. An Islamic Movement spokesman put his finger on it when he told Haaretz, "The Islamic Movement gets its legitimacy from its many supporters within the Green Line, and not from the Israeli establishment" [emphasis mine].

Israel's Minister of Internal Affairs, Eli Yishai of the religious party Shas, acknowledged as much, saying, "The anti-Jewish incitement coming from within Israel's borders and abroad cannot loosen the tie between the people of Israel and its capital and the need to secure and strengthen it" [emphasis mine]. There is now, in other words, a tacit acknowledgment on both sides that the real fear and the real threat behind these latest riots is not of another round of Palestinian violence - which is certainly possible - but of an Israeli-Arab intifada.

For Americans, and many others abroad, it is easy to forget that Israeli Arabs exist, so pervasive is the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, out of a population of roughly six million, approximately a million Israelis are Arabs, and their place - or lack of one - in Israeli society has never been more controversial. Indeed, when Palestinians and their supporters talk about Israel as an "apartheid" state, it is as much the Israeli-Arabs (or Israeli-Palestinians, as many refer to them) they are discussing as it is the population of the occupied territories.

Coincidentally, David Newman, a professor of political science at Ben-Gurion University, addressed precisely this issue in a Jerusalem Post column on October 5. "One doesn't have to be a radical left-wing activist," he wrote,

to pay a visit to any Arab town or village in the country and see how undeveloped these places are in comparison to their Jewish neighbors. The roads, the infrastructure systems and the school facilities are always below par, and it is easy to understand why there is growing resentment among the country's Arab population.

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The essential question, according to Newman, is "How... can a state define itself as being both Jewish (exclusive) and democratic (inclusive) at the same time?"

This dilemma is not new, and it must be said that no honest person can dismiss it out of hand. There is no doubt that, in many ways, Israel's Arab citizens are in an almost impossible position. Viewed as potential traitors by their Jewish fellow citizens and as collaborators by much of the Arab world, they are constantly required to prove their loyalties to both sides, as task that would be well beyond anyone's capacities. I once asked an Arab co-worker why Azmi Bishara, a prominent Israeli-Arab politician and former member of the Knesset, defected to Syria rather than face espionage charges. I had seen Bishara speak at university, and while I found his ideology odious his brilliance could not be questioned. To my mind, Bishara was simply too smart to have done something so obviously stupid. My co-worker simply smiled and said, "Its because he's an Israeli Arab." Bishara, he was saying, had felt the need to prove himself to the rest of the Arab world, and ended up destroying his life and career as a result. It must be admitted that, to a certain degree, this makes sense. The situation of the Israeli Arabs is, in some ways, almost

Kafkaesque, and the push-pull of their various identities and loyalties must eventually become simply maddening.

Nor are Israel's critics entirely wrong about racism and discrimination in Israeli society. Israelis, for obvious reasons, tend to be reflexively anti-racist; but fear and anger can have an extraordinarily deleterious effect on a human being, and no one who has lived in Israel for any amount of time can honestly deny that racism is a serious problem in Israel, and since the start of the second intifada it has gotten steadily worse. A simple walk through Jerusalem can become chilling when one begins to read the local graffiti, which often includes the phrase "Kahane was right! Expel the Arabs!" a reference to Meir Kahane, an American-born extremist rabbi who was banned from the Knesset in the 1980s for, among other things, advocating "transfer," a euphemism for expelling Israel's Arab population. There is also no doubt that Israel's Arabs are, on the whole, poorer, less educated, more geographically marginalized, and tend to be employed in menial professions in greater numbers than their Jewish counterparts. It is not wholly unusual to find out that the man mopping the floors at the bank has an MA in education. While discrimination is not the only reason for this situation, it is certainly one of them.

Newman also has a point about the conflict between exclusive and inclusive aspects of Israeli society. While Israel is certainly a democracy, almost every aspect of its national life, and certainly its national symbolism, are expressions of Jewish identity to one degree or another. To give a few examples, the flag contains the Star of David, the national seal has a menorah on it, and the national anthem speaks of the "Jewish soul" yearning to return to Zion. The only exceptions to this are street signs and some forms of official documentation, which must also be printed in Arabic, since it is one of Israel's official languages. Perhaps the most controversial aspects of this are the Law of Return and Israel's land laws. The first allows all Jews anywhere in the world to claim Israeli citizenship; the second reserves most of the land in Israel for future Jewish settlement. While these policies do not officially exclude the Arabs, but rather all non-Jews; there is no doubt that the burden of exclusion falls overwhelmingly on Israel's largest ethnic minority. This raises another, equally troubling dilemma: What is considered most precious and, in fact, miraculous by the Jews - the resurrection in modern times of a living Jewish polity - is precisely what alienates and often offends Israel's Arab minority.

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This being said, the situation is - like all things in the Middle East - more complicated than it is often portrayed. While Israel certainly has its problems with racism and discrimination, it is not a racist state, and certainly not an apartheid state. Racism and racial incitement are illegal; racist parties are not permitted to sit in the Knesset; and nothing like the apartheid system, with its rigid tiers of racial hierarchy based entirely on skin color, exists in Israel. Moreover, in order to make judgments on an entire society, it is not enough to point out specific instances of discrimination. Nations are not the sum total of their individual sins. The truth is that all countries with large ethnic minorities have similar problems. Even in countries like Canada, where the most prominent majority-minority division is based solely on language, there have been serious upheavals of violence and social unrest. Seen in this context, Israel is not unusual, and its treatment of its largest minority holds up fairly well; especially when one considers that the minority in question specifically (and, it should be noted, mostly peacefully) identifies with a hostile regional majority.

There is also no question that many of the claims made by Israel's defenders are true: Arabs in Israel have higher life expectancies than elsewhere in the Arab world, and they have been steadily rising since the founding of the state. Their economic situation has also been steadily improving, though it still lags behind that of the Jewish population. They enjoy political rights, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, which they do not anywhere else in the Middle East. They sit in the Knesset and serve in government, even when they explicitly advocate Israel's dissolution as a Jewish state. There is also no question that, when faced with the possibility of becoming part of a future Palestinian state, most Israeli Arabs are vociferous in their desire to remain Israelis.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that it is not always clear exactly who the Israeli Arabs actually are; and the term Israeli-Arab (and Israeli-Palestinian) often seems woefully inadequate to describe a population that is as divided and complex as its Jewish counterpart. The Arabs of the Galilee region do not necessarily see themselves as part of the same community as the Bedouin tribes of the south; and the same goes for the Arabs of Jaffa and its environs. The Arab residents of Jerusalem are not Israeli citizens, but do have freedom of movement within the country. Then there are the Druze, a non-Muslim community residing mostly in the hills of the north, who are sometimes Arab and sometimes not, depending on who they're talking to. There are divisions between Muslims and Christians, between different tribes, families, and local groups; and perhaps most prominently, a division over the measure of loyalty and service rendered to the Israeli state. Most Israeli Arabs are not subject to the draft and do not serve in the military. The Druze and the Bedouins, however, do serve, often with distinction, and as a result, other Arabs often see them as traitors. At the same time, the Bedouins have their own conflicts with the Israeli government - mostly over land policy - and have become more attached to the Palestinian cause in recent years. The Druze on the other hand, who have suffered a long history of persecution at the hands of Islam, remain resolutely loyal to the Jewish state, so long as it continues to respect their communal autonomy. This barely scratches the surface of the complex divisions and subcultures that make up Israel's Arab population. Ironically, perhaps, one of the few things that solidifies these various groups and gives them a coherent identity is their sense of marginalization and grievance toward Israel and its Jewish majority.

Nor is it at all clear that the various social and economic problems that beset the Arab sector are entirely the fault of systemic discrimination. Large family size, the under-education of women, and the tendency to place religious over secular education (a problem that besets Israel's religious Jews as well) are all contributors to the problem. It must also be noted that the failure to fully integrate Israel's Arab minority into mainstream society and its economic benefits is not entirely an issue of exclusion. There are many aspects of Israeli society that its Arab citizens want no part of. Equality between the sexes, tolerance of homosexuality, the permissiveness of modern society and media are, along with many other aspects of Israeli society, seen as a threat; and even among the less religious sectors of the Arab population, highly traditional mores prevail that are not compatible with the Israeli mainstream. There are also aspects of Israeli society which its Arab citizens often rightly dislike.

Arab society puts a high premium on politeness and respect, particularly between parents and children and the young and the old, both of which are in short supply in Israel's notoriously outspoken and egalitarian culture. The crass materialism of much of secular Israel, its cult of the body, its tendency to moral relativism, and many of the other less attractive aspects of the West that Israel has enthusiastically adopted, are as unappealing to Israeli Arabs as they are to Arabs throughout the Middle East and to many other peoples around the world. The question of if and how much Israel's Arabs want to integrate into this society is as much an internal dilemma - faced by many communities in our age of globalization - as it is one of external obstacles.

All of this points toward the major flaw in David Newman's argument: It holds true only in reference to the classic model of liberal democracy. But Israel is not so much a liberal democracy as it is a communitarian democracy, and it has become one out of necessity. All nations and governments recognize communities - ethnic, religious, political, etc. - to one degree or another, even those such as France and the United States that adamantly claim not to; but in Israel, this acknowledgement, while often informal, is nonetheless essential to its stability. While all of its citizens are subject to the same basic set of laws, and the justice system considers everyone equal under those laws; there is no doubt that Israel's various communities and subcultures enjoy an enormous degree of autonomy. Some of the Bedouin tribes in the south, for instance, practice female circumcision, something which would not be tolerated if not for the fear of upsetting the delicate balance of the Israeli social fabric. In the same manner, many Jewish religious communities take their disputes to their own rabbinical courts, bypassing the official legal system entirely. In a classic liberal democracy this would be unacceptable, but in a communitarian democracy it is essential. And to a great extent, the Israeli model has survived by working to strike a constantly shifting balance between its various communities. It is a delicate task. Israeli must avoid both the sectarian balkanization of countries like Lebanon, but also the danger of imposing a form of liberalism that becomes oppressive by demolishing - or, at the very least, criminalizing - the traditional and autonomous ways of life followed by its various groups, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill.

How far to pursue this model, and the various threats it faces, has always been an unspoken dilemma for Israeli society. Even Theodore Herzl, fifty years before the Jewish state he envisioned was founded, grappled with the problem in his utopian novel *Altneuland* ("Old-New Land") in which a fictional Jewish republic is

threatened from within by the extremism of one of its minority groups. Ironically, in Herzl's book this was a group of fanatical Jews. And it is true that Israel's communitarian model is straining under such pressures. The Islamic Movement among the Arab minority has its counterpart in figures like Moshe Feiglin, leader of a religious faction within the Likud Party, whose ideology is nearly indistinguishable from Kahane's. In a certain sense, however, this is not purely an issue of Israeli domestic politics. Radical religious movements have been the driving force behind political developments in much of the Middle East and beyond over the past few decades, and just as Israeli Arabs are no less prone to Islamic radicalism than any other group of Muslims, Israel's Jewish majority is by no means immune to the trend. Several Israeli religious parties openly admire the Iranian model, and it is disturbingly easy to imagine that Israeli democracy could someday succumb to the theocratic temptation, Jewish or Muslim.

Indeed, there is no doubt that the Israeli model, successful as it has been in some ways, comes at a price. The autonomy many of Israel's communities enjoy - Jewish and non-Jewish - also prevents them from enjoying the benefits (and drawbacks) of the Israeli social and economic mainstream. Their distance from the center is safe but also alienating and sometimes oppressive; and many of these groups, Arab and Jewish alike, feel themselves threatened and excluded as a result. Nonetheless, government attempts to draw groups into the mainstream by fiat, such as the attempt to permanently settle the nomadic Bedouin into sedentary communities during the 1950s, have been notable failures, simply leading to further resentment and anger. Behind the noble desire for equality and justice that many liberals feel, the danger of unintended consequences is always lurking; and this holds equally true for the understandable desire of many groups to end their feelings of marginalization, even though that marginalization also safeguards the values they hold sacred.

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What is clear, however, is that the Israeli-Arab intifada Salah and his followers may well desire (and which, I sadly suspect, some extremist Jews desire as well) would be a disaster for Israelis both Jewish and Arab. It would confirm, perhaps permanently, Jewish suspicions that their Arab fellow citizens are a fifth column, and it would demolish forever the possibility of a measured and conservative rapprochement between the Arab minority and the Israeli mainstream. It also has the potential to spark an ethnic war whose consequences would be horrendous for both sides. For Israel to become another Lebanon - or worse, another Yugoslavia - would benefit no one. At the same time, easy shibboleths like "racism" and "apartheid" only serve to conceal a very complex and daunting situation, which can only be changed by slow reform, and not by violence or briefly edifying but futile attempts at the revolutionary gesture.

By Benjamin Kerstein:

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