



The May 2021 Riots and Their Implications

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The May riots raise essential questions about the fate of the paradigm that formed the basis of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel over the past decade.

The Jewish public and political discourse in Israel has viewed the riots that occurred in May through a starkly dichotomous prism. Right-wingers saw Israeli Arabs' attacks on their Jewish compatriots in terms of "the 1948 discourse"—that is, a further example of the irresolvable struggle between Arabs and Jews in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Left-wingers, for their part, preferred to see the eruption of violence as acts of extremist groups from both sides that need not disrupt Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel.

Though both explanations contain some elements of truth, neither is fully correct. What happened in the mixed cities in May 2021 must be understood in terms of the deep processes that have transpired in recent years in the Arab sector in general and in its relations with the Jewish state in particular. What is noteworthy about the violent events is that they in fact occurred after a prolonged period in the state's relations with its Arab citizens that could be described as very promising.

Over the past decade, the Israeli Arabs' relations with the Israeli state were marked by two macro-processes. One was a widespread trend of Israeli Arab integration in the Israeli economy. This was reflected both practically and symbolically in Government Resolution 922 of December 2015, which allocated billions to address urgent socioeconomic issues in Arab society and defined the Arab minority's integration in the Israeli economy as a national objective and a significant growth factor.

The second process involved Israeli Arabs' turn toward political pragmatism alongside a diminished focus on national issues. In parallel, the Arab political elite agreed to cooperate with the rightwing government in promoting economic integration despite their diametrically opposed perceptions of the national status of Israel's Arab minority. The pragmatic trend stemmed from a variety of factors, among them the government's commitment to economic integration, the weakening of the political agenda in the Palestinian context, and the relative security stability that was achieved in the West Bank over the past decade.

During the COVID-19 crisis, cooperation between the state and the Arab minority increased even further. For the first time since the days of the military administration, the IDF returned to the Arab communities—but this time in a different role. Soldiers from Home Front Command were stationed in Kfar Qasim, Taibe, Jaljulia, and other Arab settlements to help provide information on the COVID-19 pandemic as well as aid to the elderly and the poor.

This formed the background for the emergence of Mansour Abbas, who signified a new stage of cooperation with Zionist parties. Abbas sought to turn Arab pragmatism, and Arab politicians' tacit cooperation with the right-wing government, into an openly declared ideology. This ideology gained public legitimacy when, in the March 2021 elections, the Ra'am Party was able to obtain four mandates after splitting off from the Joint List.

The trends of economic integration and political pragmatism in Israel's relations with its Arab citizens went hand in hand with similar trends in the Middle East. The Abraham Accords and the push for normalization between Israel and the Arab world created a new regional paradigm based on a utilitarian-pragmatic preference for economic progress involving both living standards and quality of life, instead of the identity-politics paradigm of past decades.

What, then, caused the May riots?

Unlike those of October 2000, the May riots did not occur in the Galilee, where most of the Arab population is concentrated. True, there were violent incidents at certain geographic locales in the north of the country, but the major riots were in the mixed cities. It appears that, alongside criminal elements, the violence was perpetrated by a weak population that did not manage to join the process of economic integration between the state and the Arab middle class. In this regard, the May riots are reminiscent of the "Arab Spring" that began in Egypt and North Africa and was spurred by the

disgruntlement of young people who were left behind by the economic growth those countries had undergone.

In addition, the Israeli Arab leadership's ability to keep cooperating with the integration model turned out to be limited.

The Israeli Arab political world is divided into two opposing camps: the veteran political hegemony, which forms the basis of the Joint List; and the new leadership of Abbas that challenged it. In lieu of the national-identity politics of the Arab minority that the veteran hegemony has promoted since the 1970s, Abbas introduced a political outlook that is subversive in historical terms and prioritizes economic and social interests over the vision of national equality. In recent months the veteran Arab leadership has been striving to return the Arab sector's discourse to that of national-identity politics, and the violent events in Jerusalem, centering on the "al-Aqsa is in danger" lie, provided a convenient platform from which to abandon the socioeconomic discourse for the national one.

Another factor behind the outbreak of the riots was the overall political context. The COVID-19 crisis strengthened the impression of the weakness of the state and its mechanisms; a profound political crisis produced not only four election campaigns over the past two years but a decline in the political status of Netanyahu, who had played a pivotal role in the new order that emerged in the Middle East over the past decade; and identity politics made a comeback with the advent of the new US administration, which turned its back on the previous administration's economic-utilitarian agenda.

What happened in Israel's mixed cities was, then, a triple counter-reaction—sociological, political, and systemic—to the pragmatic-utilitarian approach that had guided the state's relations with the Arab minority over the past decade. This approach was challenged from above by the veteran Arab elite, acting in the framework of national-identity politics, and from below by the Arab underclass in the mixed cities and the Negev, all in a framework of wider contexts.

What, then, is in store? The riots raise essential questions not only about the notions that have been cast into doubt—"coexistence" on the one hand and "built-in conflict" on the other—but particularly about the fate of the paradigm that has undergirded Jewish-Arab relations over the past decade. In this regard, there is no doubt that the riots breached the equilibrium point of the relationship between the Israeli Arabs and the state, not unlike the 1976 Land Day events and the October 2000 riots. The May riots were, however, exceptional in terms of the extent of the Israeli Arab public's participation and

the severity of the violence, and also for having occurred within a country that was at the time in the midst of a round of warfare with Hamas.

Throughout the riots, the government signaled its intention to quell them even with means that are more commonly used in a context of nationalist terror. The Israel Security Service was employed to identify those involved in the violence and to preempt attacks, Border Guard forces that operate mainly in the West Bank were deployed in the mixed cities, and the government even signaled a readiness to use military force against the violent disturbances.

Will there be a return to the model that combines economic cooperation with political pragmatism, or will the balance in Israeli Arabs' relations with the state change—and if so, in what way? It is naturally very hard to give clear answers to such questions. One can, however, note factors that could help sustain the integration model and others that could lead to its unraveling.

One factor that could favor the integration model is Ra'am's participation in the Bennett-Lapid coalition (if it indeed takes shape). A political success by Abbas would reinforce the validity of his pragmatic approach. The economic interests of all sides could also promote the integration model.

Among the factors that could lead to its unraveling are the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis, which will eventually result in reduced government spending and cuts—thereby jeopardizing the continued implementation of the economic five-year plan for the Arab sector (not to mention the vast economic promises made by the Bennett-Lapid coalition). In addition, the heterogeneous composition of a Bennett-Lapid government could encourage the national-equality discourse—which probably would also get a tailwind from the Joint List's leadership, who will want to challenge Abbas's approach. A change in the intensity of the conflict with Hamas could also negatively affect Jewish-Arab relations within Israel and make it difficult to return to the equilibrium that existed before the May riots. Under these circumstances, only time will tell how relations between Arabs, Jews, and the State of Israel will change.

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