

The Transfer of Israeli Arabs

Once again the treatment of Israel's Palestinian citizens has exposed the country's lack of meaningful democracy

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Global Research, November 13, 2014

[Jonathan Cook Blog](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The killing of a 22-year-old Arab youth by Israeli police on November 7, has highlighted tensions that have been building rapidly between the Israeli authorities and the country's 1.5 million-strong Palestinian minority.

Kheir al-Dein Hamdan's shooting in the Galilee town of Kafr Kana, near Nazareth, sparked protests in most Palestinian communities inside Israel, in some incidents turning into violent clashes with the police.

A general strike was widely observed on November 8 and simmering anger is still bringing the youth out onto the streets at night in Kafr Kana and elsewhere.

Hamdan is [one of scores](#) of Palestinian citizens of Israel who were killed by police in unexplained circumstances over the past 14 years. His death, however, has magnified a mood of intense anger and frustration among the Palestinian minority, which comprises a fifth of Israel's population.

The atmosphere was set earlier this year with [a wave of violent attacks](#) carried out by Jewish settlers targeting Palestinians in Israel, rather than Palestinians in the occupied territories, burning mosques, defacing churches and vandalising cars. Police have mostly failed to identify the culprits.

A series of events then followed, including the gruesome killing of 16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir in Jerusalem at the hands of Jewish extremists in early July. Israel's war on Gaza, which left more than 2,100 Palestinians dead, most of them civilians, also incensed the Palestinian minority.

The widespread protests over the summer were marked by frequent clashes with the police reaching a level not seen since the start of the second Intifada in 2000.

Hundreds of arrests

Police responded with [hundreds of arrests](#), including of many children, often in heavy-handed, night-time raids on homes that have become a familiar sight in the occupied territories. Leading human rights lawyers in Israel have described Hamdan's death as a [police "execution"](#).

The intensifying efforts over the past few weeks by government officials and Jewish extremists, backed by the Israeli police, to assert greater control over the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem has added another layer of distress.

Many Palestinians accuse the police of enforcing racist policies that dehumanise all Palestinians, ignore their rights and concerns, and brook no dissent, whether peaceful or violent.

For the minority, this incident was yet another graphic and shocking illustration that they are seen not as citizens but as the enemy.

Over a decade ago, that was precisely the [conclusion of a state commission of inquiry](#) into the police's killing of 13 Palestinian citizens in towns across the Galilee in October 2000, at the start of the second Intifada.

During demonstrations against the Israeli army's assault on Palestinians in the occupied territories, the police fired live ammunition and rubber bullets on unarmed protesters and deployed, for the first time, an anti-terror sniper unit.

The head of the commission, Justice Theodor Or, found that the police viewed Palestinian citizens in similar terms to the army's conception of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza: As an enemy to be crushed with brute force.

Systematic discrimination

Justice Or also identified systematic and institutionalised discrimination against the Palestinian minority over many decades as a major contributing factor in their protests.

Their towns and villages were heavily overcrowded, and homes often declared illegal because of meagre land allocations and oppressive planning restrictions. Their communities were deprived of industrial zones and overlooked in the state budget, leaving their local municipalities penniless. Their schools were massively underfunded, and universities placed obstacles in their way to higher education.

But what Justice Or failed to understand, or perhaps admit, was that the attitudes of the police, government and the Israeli public were shaped – and still are – by a more general political atmosphere that derives from Israel's founding ideology, Zionism.

Israel's Palestinian minority is viewed as the state's Achilles' heel; an opening for Palestinians in the occupied territories to undermine the state's Jewishness.

The threat is seen as two-fold.

Demographically, Palestinian citizens can erode the Jewish majority by reversing the [ethnic cleansing](#) of Palestinian population in 1948 through, for example, winning citizenship for spouses from the occupied territories. Israel closed that door in 2003 with legislation effectively barring such marriages.

And ideologically, Palestinian citizens have risked exposing Israel's lack of meaningful democracy by proving, through their own treatment, that a Jewish state cannot be fair to them.

Equality is subversion

A political campaign by the minority for equality – urging Israel's reform from a Jewish state to a “state for all its citizens” – is officially [classified as “subversion”](#).

Israeli Politicians – from the right and the left – share a common view, often expressed or implied, that Palestinian citizens can never truly belong to a Jewish state. Instead, they are described variously as a “fifth column”, “Trojan horse” and “demographic time bomb”.

Revealingly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exploited Hamdan’s death to issue a series of further warnings that the Palestinian minority was unwanted.

At a cabinet meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu told his interior minister to examine ways to strip of citizenship anyone who “acted against the state” or attacked the police.

The next day, Netanyahu [told demonstrators to leave Israel](#) and “move to the Palestinian Authority or Gaza”.

His comments have consciously blurred the distinction between the legitimate anger unleashed by Hamdan’s killing and the spate of recent attacks by Palestinians from the occupied territories on Israelis in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Tel Aviv. Dangerously, Netanyahu has implied that they are all part of the same “terrorism”.

His two most senior coalition partners have echoed him.

‘Crazed terrorist’

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman praised the officers for acting “resolutely and effectively”. Naftali Bennett, the economy minister, called Hamdan “a crazed Arab terrorist” and [described the police response](#) – killing him when he posed no threat – as “what is expected of our security forces”.

Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein has ordered the justice ministry’s police investigations unit, Mahash, to investigate Hamdan’s killing. But the unit is already deeply distrusted by the Palestinian minority.

A recent report by Adalah, a legal centre for the Arab minority, found that Mahash closed 93 percent of the complaints against the police between 2011 and 2013. More disturbing, [Adalah found cases were closed](#) even when there was strong evidence of police use of excessive force.

That reflected similar failings by Mahash to properly investigate the police officers responsible for the 13 deaths in October 2000. None were ever indicted, Adalah noted.

The current police chief, Yohanan Danino, [pre-empted the current investigation](#) by saying the officers involved not only had his “full backing” but that criticism of them was “unfounded” and “irresponsible”.

However, suggestions that Hamdan’s killing will ignite a new Intifada, this time in Israel, may prove premature.

Much as in the West Bank and Jerusalem, a sense of hopelessness in the face of Israel’s entrenched racism and refusal to make political concessions has built to the point where it has found an outlet in spontaneous protests and outbursts of violence.

But Palestinians are more divided territorially, and their leaders ideologically, than they were at the start of the second Intifada.

Lack of direction

Israel is offering no solutions, which is stoking the anger, but the Palestinian leaderships appear to have no credible answers or plans for how to challenge Israel. That lack of direction is stifling the organised resistance necessary for an Intifada.

Nonetheless, Hamdan's killing and the protests of the past few days mark another milestone in the steadily deteriorating relations between a self-declared Jewish state and its Palestinian citizens.

According to Mohammed Zeidan, director of the Human Rights Association in Nazareth, the emphasis on protecting Israel's Jewishness at all cost is pushing both sides towards ever-greater confrontation.

"That the prime minister [Netanyahu] tells Arab citizens who protest that they should leave for the West Bank sends a message that getting rid of us is a legitimate political option," Zeidan told Al Jazeera.

"Transfer has entered the mainstream, and with it the right to use state violence to solve political problems."

That message has been on prominent display recently in Israel's parliament, the Knesset, where efforts have intensified to eradicate the minority's political parties and representatives.

Earlier this year, the Knesset [raised the electoral threshold](#) sufficiently high that none of the Palestinian parties is likely to reach it.

A leading legislator, Haneen Zoabi, has been [suspended from the Knesset](#), for a record six months, for expressing her opinions and is in danger of being put on trial. And Netanyahu has again compared the main Islamic Movement in Israel to ISIL and [vowed to outlaw it](#).

It is clear to Palestinian citizens, both from incidents like Hamdan's killing and from the contempt for their representatives, that their future in a self-declared Jewish state is growing more tenuous by the day.

For that reason, if no other, the fires burning in Kafr Kana, and other Palestinian communities in Israel, are not likely to die down any time soon.

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