

## **Transcript: TASK FORCE SHORTS interview with Dr. Samir Mahamid**

You are listening to Task force shorts.

In this new episode, our executive director, Liron Shoham, interviewed the Mayor of Umm al-Fahm, Dr. Samir Mahamid, on the burning issue of crime and violence in the Arab societies in Israel. This interview was translated to English and edited for length and clarity.

**Q1:** Hello Dr. Mahamid, how are you today?

**R:** Shalom

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to speak with us, I know it has been a very, very busy number of days. In fact, you were on an emergency flight back to Umm al-Fahm from a visit in New York where we just met.

Before we get into why you flew back to Umm al-Fahm, could you say a few words about why you became mayor after long and happy years as an educator and principal?

R: To be honest, if you had asked me three and a half years ago whether I would be the mayor, or whether I would work in politics - I never thought I would be a politician. Even today, when someone calls me a politician, I don't like this term. I am here to serve the people; I am here to serve my residents.

I became a mayor for three reasons:

First, there was an urge from leadership to help the community in the difficult situation we're in.

I came to the municipality, and there was no organizational culture - a municipality with a financial deficit of almost 100 million NIS - so I wanted to help the community.

On the other hand, there was pressure from my students from all generations and from residents who pressured me to pursue this position.

And the third thing that is also connected to the first one, is that I wanted to provide a service.

The mayors throughout the years have been focused on politics, and I came and said I want to serve the residents, period.

This was my desire to become mayor.

I have to say that it was a matter of six months of pressure which led me to run for the position, and I won the election against the incumbent mayor.

I won against him in the second round.

I want to add briefly that, today, I am the mayor of Umm al-Fahm, but when I was a kid, my mother, may she rest in peace, was the cleaning lady of the municipality, she cleaned the municipality building.

And today I am the mayor of the same municipality which I helped clean as a little kid. This is me.

**Q2:** Tell us a little bit, for those who don't know what type of city Umm al-Fahm is, or have never been to Umm al-Fahm, give us a few words about the city, your connection to it and your vision for its potential.

**R:** Umm al-Fahm is a city of 58,000 residents, I would say there are at least 65,000 residents. I brought the Central Bureau of Statistics to the city, and they promised to do a census, but Covid 19 delayed it all. On the other hand, Umm al-Fahm is a very, very young city.

If I said it was a city of 58,000 residents, 43 percent are under the age of 19. The city is very, very young.

It is a double-edged sword, on the one hand it is something that can create a positive horizon for the city, on the other hand I have to deal with the problems with youth.

The city is classified as a 2 out of 10 in the Socio-economic index, meaning we are a very poor city. There are only 17 localities in the State of Israel that are poorer than Umm al-Fahm.

At the same time, I can say that the unemployment rate is very very high. We are, unfortunately, the number one city in unemployment in the whole country with a 24.7 percent unemployment rate.

I can also talk about unemployed young people from the age of 18-21, we have almost 24 percent unemployment.

Youth at risk - If I was talking about a young city, then according to the criteria of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Welfare, 40 percent of the youth in Umm al-Fahm are youth at risk, while I can only address and give solutions to 500 children.

Meaning that there are about 3500-4000 children for whom I do not have the means to give options.

This is how disturbing the data is.

Still, we are not complaining. I think we have a lot of potential to lift the community and we try to give hope to our youth that there is something for them to do in our community.

**Q3:** So you spoke about inactive youth, and what you mean by that is young adults after high school, who are not in any form of education, training or employment. You spoke about youth at risk, you spoke about the difficulty of unemployment and poverty, and now I want to ask you about the crisis that is a priority for Arab society as a whole, which is the issue of violence and violent crime within Arab society. I began the conversation by saying you just ran back from a tour of the US to your city. There were two murders in the course of 24 hours in your city, and the entire city went on general strike demanding a solution. But these solutions are very hard to find and it's also a very controversial issue. Can you please speak a little bit about - what is the demand from the citizens? What is the cause of crime? And, what is your vision for proposing solutions?

**R:** There are two types of violence in Arab society. And these types vary by locality.

In Umm al-Fahm, 90 percent of the problems are conflicts within families - between families

And only 10 percent are linked to crime.

When in other localities, the majority is crime, and a smaller part is conflicts between families.

At first glance, one might think that conflicts within families are easy to resolve, it is easier than crime.

Now what happens in my hometown... I did return early from the United States where I was supposed to be until November 1st.

I came back because of three murders in 10 days. 2 murders within 24 hours.

Now, the writing was on the wall, it's conflicts within families that were known for four to five years, six years.

And so, we told the police, we also said to ourselves, we should have done more here to solve those problems.

Now, it's the whole Arab society. We are talking about a guy who was murdered two hours ago in Jaffa, right in a crowded area, right on the promenade of Tel Aviv-Yafo.

the solution needs to be a holistic solution to all these problems.

Arab society needs to do more in schools, on the streets, in mosques, in churches.

Everywhere, we need to invest more in youth.

We need to give more leisure activities to our children, we need to give them professional guidance, academic guidance. not everything is related to financial resources, we can do a lot of things with a minimum of resources. This is our side of things.

On the other hand, there is the police. Unfortunately, crimes are not being solved, and the deterrent power of the police is trending to zero in Arab society. This is what I said yesterday, to the Minister of Interior Defense, to both his deputy and to his chief of staff.

With eight murders within less than a year in Umm al-Fahm and zero indictments, it means that the next killer, the next criminal - it is safe for him because knows he won't get caught. Therefore, the police should do more in terms of deterrence, they should do more to enter the Arab cities. As the heads of

the municipalities, we are the first to support the massive activity of the police to eradicate violence, because it kills our children.

The third factor is the government. The government has to inject money into lots of activities. Now they are talking about a NIS 900 million plan promoted by Deputy Minister Sigalovitch, and they have already contacted me after the meeting I had with the minister and his deputy, to promote things for spot treatment in my city, I assume in other cities as well.

There are NIS 900 million that are going to deal with issues like youth at risk, like leisure time, welfare. Incidentally, the number of families in need of welfare assistance is increasing.

Today in Umm al-Fahm I have almost 5000 cases in need of assistance, and more and more people are in need of help.

If we do not help these children, they will get into crime.

The issue of housing is also a very serious problem. I am trying to solve this in my city through a project called a "Roof Agreement", which is going to give horizons to young people with the construction of almost 5000 housing units and also regulate almost 7000 housing units, there is nothing even remotely similar to that in Arab localities, and it can promote our society, our localities.

And I hope there will be more such agreements in other localities as well.

There is a lot to do. There needs to be a holistic effort as an Arab society, of police and also of the government, and also of the civil sector that needs to pay more and more attention to these issues.

**Q4:** There are many things you spoke about that I want to touch on, but I am going to do them one by one. Let's start with the police. Policing is a controversial and difficult issue. Can you explain why you think the police don't do enough. And, you said you will give the law enforcement forces your full

support as mayor. Is that difficult, as a mayor, to bring the community behind you to support policing?  
Or is the community very much interested, and is it all the same kind of policing?

**R:** I'll put it this way - for me there is no other police - we have one police. There is one police force and it's the Israeli Police, for better or worse, and I try to leverage that for the better.

I was beaten by the police, but I am willing to have a conversation with the police, because at the end of the day I want to prevent the next murder. I want to prevent the next act of violence; I want to deter the violence that is happening within our cities.

For me I want a strong police force, a strong police force that assures personal security to my children, my grandchildren, and me too.

So, for us, I speak on behalf of all the heads of municipalities, our feeling is that the police do not use enough of the tools that they have, and it may be lack of resources on their end too, I do not want to go to conspiracy theories that we hear a lot in Arab society - people who believe that this is all happening on purpose. I say that this is not on purpose, but things are the way they are because not enough resources are invested in the police. The government needs to invest in the police in order for the police to do their job well.

**Q5:** You spoke about the fact that in Umm al-Fahm most of the violence is from families, inter family conflicts. Can you connect the dots? We hear a lot about crime organizations in Arab society, and how they might attract young people who are not in education, who have no horizon - they might find a home and a future for themselves in crime organizations. Can you explain how that works with crime in families? What is the connection between young people who feel like there is no employment for them, who are not getting an education, and family conflicts?

**R:** I will say, when there is a conflict between families, the conflict between families can be between older people and unfortunately I have to say, about irrational things, about simple things, about a trash can that is on someone's property, or about half a meter of land or a balcony.

What happens is in order for me to protect my family, I go and buy a gun, usually it's someone young in the family. Instead of investing in education and employment, money is invested in buying weapons, and then when there is an argument or when there is conflict, then the weapon is taken out and someone shoots in the air, but the second or third time someone shoots at the legs and on the fourth time maybe you kill a person.

And unfortunately, now I'm talking about cases in my community, one case is about an argument that started at a wedding, after the argument two were murdered and now it has snowballed into many murders. In another case, it was an argument about trash cans that were on a piece of someone's property, and he did not like that, so he went and shot at people.

What I am saying is that young people engage in this because they are unemployed, and they have no prospects and some of them end up becoming members of crime gangs. In my locality, there are people who join those gangs and then they have easy money, they get easy money, they have luxurious cars and then they feel confident in themselves and their family.

**Q6:** How was the participation in the strike? Was there a big community presence?

Did everything shut down? Was this something that was led from the ground up, from the community out?

**R:** Yes. As for the protest, it really transcends parties, transcends opinions, people at the end of the day, the vast majority of Arab society in Israel wants to live in peace. There is no one who does not want peace for his children and grandchildren, his father, his mother.

Everyone wants that peace. So, it transcended party, transcended opinion. Everyone stood up, everyone identified, of course sometimes there were different emphases on different factors.

But at the end of the day all people strive for personal security, personal security gives hope, hope gives action. Action gives an escape to those young people.

**Q7:** In your eyes, what did the strike achieve?

**R:** In Umm al-Fahm I am trying to achieve a lot of things; I am trying to do a lot of things in Umm al-Fahm.

Like I said, we know we have a lack of resources but there are many things we can do.

We entered the first “Roof agreement” with the government, after almost 34 roof agreements in the Jewish society. It gives us NIS 800 million. It gives NIS 225 million for infrastructure development, it lets us develop public institutions, and it lets us develop parks. By the end of the month, I'm going to get a down-payment of NIS 35 million, with which I'm going to develop both a road and a park - people will see that there is hope, that there is a good place to live here in our city and then it might lower the levels of violence. The Roof Agreement is going to provide a solution to the housing problem that our community is in desperate need of.

People share houses with their families, with their uncles, with their cousins. It can also give some space and can relieve the stress in the society. We are making the roads wider, which can also reduce mental distress. Secondly, we are improving organizational excellence and structure of the municipality—the quality of service I give to both the municipal employee and the resident. Because in the end we are trying to serve these young people, these adults, so if they feel there is proper service in this municipality. This may also lower the levels of violence.

We are advancing a strategic plan. To this day, unfortunately, most Arab localities are only putting out fires.

We are trying to create long-term plans. Today I am working with a company from the Jewish sector to build a plan with me for the next twenty years. The plan has three components. The first is a spot treatment for the city of Umm al-Fahm:

We are talking about addressing a wide range of issues: welfare, education, at-risk youth, the unemployed.

Everything you can think of is in this plan.

The second issue is high-tech, we are now building a large hub within the city, 200 square meters.

Within the hub, I am trying to promote high-tech mainly for women, because the unemployment rate among women is very, very high and we try to promote this issue as much as we can.

And the third issue that we also address at the strategic level is the issue of violence. We received a philanthropic investment from Mubadarat And contracted an organization called Inclusion. We structured a strategic plan for dealing with violence for the long term. Some of the elements we can do without any help, we do not need help from anyone, we as a municipality can just do them, but some of the elements we do need help mainly from the government but also from the civil sector.

We are also promoting distributive justice among our neighbors. There is a lot of national infrastructure in our area like "Orot Rabin", the power station in Hedera, like the industrial area in Megiddo, so we try to promote distributive justice vis a vis our neighbors.

We try to do it with understanding, but if not with understanding, then we will also reach out to the geographic committees and we will advance things that way.

We are also trying to grow our commercial zone, this commercial zone today is 100 dunams. Thanks to the same Roof Agreement, we will increase it by another 450 dunams which I think will also give hope to business owners, to young people who will go to work in those businesses. I think that today we are in a

difficult situation, but I believe that in a few years, the picture will change and become better. This is what I want to believe.

**Q8:** I just want to say, for those who are listening and may not be familiar, what you spoke about... not just putting out fires as an Arab city but developing a strategic plan. And for those who may not know, right now we hear a lot about violence as a crisis in Arab society, but after violence, there has been such a long-time housing and infrastructure crisis that, in many Arab cities, young people have nowhere to go. So, now, for several generations, people have nowhere to move, they often live on top of their parents' house, and this creates an economic crisis and frustration... as we talk about the pressure inside of society. So, when you are talking about shifting from putting out fires to developing a strategic plan, this is really to change the sense of the future that young people have?

**R:** Strategic Plans, a strategic plan takes care of what we have and what we want. And the desirable thing is, I want to imagine, and I guess will be able to achieve some of the things, with a minimum of resources, and I can only achieve them if I work according to a plan.

Unfortunately, to this day we have only seen talk, like "let's do this," and "I did that," and so on.

We are going to build a holistic plan, with a clear timeline in every category - then I can move forward with the unemployed. I'll have a clear plan for professional guidance, academic guidance, the whole range of things.

With youth at risk, I'm going to build a long-term program. I want to reach every child.

I know I will not reach every child within a year or two, but it is a process that is both engaging and may affect the atmosphere within the community. The subject of building parks, and I started deliberately talking about people, and then moved on to buildings.

I need to give those young people places to hang out. I need to create these places.

In three years, I have built eight parks for kids in the city - there used to be only one park in Umm al - Fahm.

And just now I came from a visit to one of the parks. I saw children with their families, having a corner to sit and enjoy for a few minutes. That also gives them some hope. I hope that things like that, together with long-term plans, will address these issues, and will address them well.

I am the mayor today, but tomorrow, I want to leave a legacy for the people who will come after me. I want them to have long-term plans, so they won't need to start over or even take a few steps back. I want whoever comes after me to know that there is a plan, structure that he is going to implement regardless of political affiliations. Because at the end of the day we come to serve the people and not ourselves.

**Q9:** How does this affect your relationship with the state? When you go to government ministries, what is that relationship like when you come as the mayor of Umm al-Fahm? Are you finally able to cooperate? Are you getting what you need from the state?

**R:** Listen, today there is no doubt, we feel the change. There is a change in attitude, there is a change in the way they listen.

The dialogue is with the government and with the government ministers and we are trying to promote things. Whether on a personal level or on the level of the whole Arab society. Today, I have to say that I am part of two committees with government ministries regarding the follow-up plans of 922. I feel that there is a different partnership, they are listening, they are willing to hear us, they are willing to do some of the things we are asking for. Now it's all at the level of conversations, but I hope that after the budget is approved, it will also be reflected in the implementation of things.

The feeling is, at least with the program to eradicate violence, which is promoted by Deputy Minister Sigalovich, that the Arab society has a place, that they listen to us - the heads of the localities, they listen to us individually and collectively as a group. This is something that may lead these programs to success. Therefore, the discourse is taking place, we will continue to have those conversations, we will continue to push, even though we see that there is a commitment of this government to Arab society, more than ever before.

**Q10:** Is there anything else you want to make sure you share with our audience? We've already taken nearly half an hour of your time in this very busy time. Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked you about?

**R:** We are also trying to create partnerships with our neighbors from Jewish society. In my area, at least, we created a good relationship with the Menashe Regional Council, with the head of the council there Ilan Saadeh.

I think this partnership is a partnership that also gives hope, both to the Arab community and to the Jewish one, that there is a dialogue of partnership and building something. We are also trying - we are thinking of a program for Arabic lessons in the localities of Menashe Regional Council, and intensive Hebrew learning in the city of Umm al-Fahm.

It's a different kind of partnership, which we also think about, even though the personal ties between Ilan and I are excellent from the first moment I was elected, but our cities have had our differences for years.

**Q11:** This is a great addition. Thank you! This is a very important part.

I want to just stay, on my side, when I speak to your staff or people who are supporting you, the energy and excitement that I hear in their voices about the change... I am not speaking about the strike and the terrible violence this last week... but when we speak with them, we hear the desire for their city to be seen in a different way, and I believe that they credit you and are very grateful for that.

Thank you so much for your time, and keep up the hard work, and we'll see you in person soon

hopefully

**R:** I hope we will make a change; we will make change; we will change the reality.

Thank you.