



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

Ramadan, Passover, Wave of Terror, and Government Instability: Recent Months in Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel

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The last few months in Israel have seen a confluence of events raising tensions in the country's Jewish-Arab relations. In the leadup and during the already sensitive time of Ramadan and Passover, terror attacks, instability surrounding Israel's governing coalition, and escalations in East Jerusalem have heightened the sense of uncertainty as well as concerns about renewed intercommunal violence—especially with the approaching anniversary of the May 2021 events.

The fact that none of these events have spiraled out into wider conflict reinforces what journalist Jack Khoury refers to as the '[deterrent](#)' effect of last year's events on both Jews and Arabs. Still, responses to the tensions and provocative events shed light on the complex and competing realities affecting Jewish-Arab relations. Arab citizens' have been pushing for greater civic inclusion, visibility, security, and influence within Israel. At the same time, since last May and prior, growing numbers are expressing concerns about achieving these things at the cost of expressing the Palestinian side of their identity.

With an Arab party in a governing coalition for the first time, national crises that touch issues of inclusion, national identity, and security have become more challenging to navigate. The following update highlights how the recent wave of terror and escalations in East Jerusalem have emphasized these complications, and some of the implications for Arab parties in and outside of the coalition.

BACKGROUND— MOUNTING TENSIONS

This year, the holy month of Ramadan coincided with Passover and Orthodox Easter, meaning that in April thousands of Jewish worshippers sought access to holy sites at the same time as hundreds of thousands of Muslims gathered at some of the most sensitive flashpoints in Jerusalem, the Damascus Gate and the Al Aqsa Mosque situated on the Temple Mount. The surge of people not only heightens tensions over access between Jews and Muslims to holy sites, but also between Israeli police and crowds gathered at the Damascus Gate, leading to frequent clashes. In May 2021, such clashes—widely shared over social media—were some of the main triggers for violence spiraling out into the country and across the borders.

On one hand, once quelled, the May Events were followed by unprecedented inclusion of Arab society in a governing coalition and in [state budgets](#), private sector campaigns [promoting shared living](#), and by indications of the resilience of shared society organizations. On the other hand, the events left significant fears and tensions unresolved. This past year [gun ownership has risen dramatically](#) among Jewish Israelis. At the same time, [illegal weapons and violent crime](#) continues to rise in Arab communities. Home-grown [Jewish citizen security groups have emerged](#), deepening fault lines between Jews and Arabs. Inclusion of

the Islamic Party, Ra'am, in the coalition has provoked significant [criticism from Israel's right-wing](#), as it has [from the Arab community](#).

For Arab citizens, the underlying triggers behind last year's events are far from solved. Despite the increased budget allocations, socio-economic gaps and barriers to mobility remain deep. Moreover, there is growing frustration and desire among Arab citizens to freely express their Palestinian identity and national connection to Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. East Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa Mosque especially is a national focal point for Arabs inside Israel, not only a site of religious significance.

In March, just before Ramadan, Israel hosted the first summit of Abraham Accords countries in the Negev—controversial and criticized within [Arab society for abandoning Palestinian national aspirations](#). This served as the backdrop to the first terror attack in the recent wave, perpetrated in Be'er Sheva. Widely and unequivocally condemned by Arab society, these attacks nonetheless further piqued the tightrope felt by Arab citizens in navigating issues of Palestinian concerns and those of internal inclusion.

"These two trends—greater integration and surging intolerance—might seem at odds," [writes Yair Rosenberg in the Atlantic](#), "but they are intrinsically linked." The governing coalition signals unprecedented levels of Jewish-Arab cooperation and the potential for further integration. Its fragility, though, has proven fertile ground for testing its limits. "The skyrocketing attacks by settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank; the shrill, racist incitement in the Knesset by far-right opposition figures such as Smotrich and Ben-Gvir; and now this string of violent murders by Arab extremists in Israel" Rosenberg argues, "are all part of the same reactionary reflex."

WAVE OF TERROR ATTACKS

Since late March, six terror attacks have killed a total of 18 people, including [Arab and Druze police officers](#). Three Arab citizens of Israel carried out two of these attacks, one from Rahat in the Negev, and one from Um Al-Fahm. In both cases, the perpetrators were associated with ISIS. Arab society has been [overwhelmingly unified in its vocal condemnations of the violence](#). National and local leadership, in Arabic media and social media, as well as in Hebrew in the larger Israeli public sphere, were unequivocal in decrying the acts.

The Hura Local Council, home of the terrorist in the Be'er Sheva attack, condemned the attack and called upon residents to help stem attempts at escalation. "[This act represents only its perpetrator. Under our responsibility as elected officials, we condemn any violence, especially the murder of souls](#)," said Habis al-Atauna, Hura's mayor. The family of the terrorist condemned the attack as well: "Any act of violence whatsoever is abhorrent."

In the second attack, the two gunmen who opened fire in Hadera were from Umm al-Fahm, a major city in the Haifa district of Israel. The mayor, Samir Mahamid—a former school principal who entered politics to improve the city and relations in the region—immediately condemned the terrorism. "[We've condemned, we still condemn, the crime committed in Hadera](#)," Mahamid told the Israeli TV channel Kan. "It didn't come from us, as far as we're concerned murder is murder." Later, a scandal arose when a condolence message was sent by his office to the family of the attackers. Reinforcing his stance and accountability, Mahamid resigned from his position on live television: "It shouldn't have been sent out,"

he said. "Yes, I announce my resignation. I'm leaving this position with a lot of pain because I came here to contribute." Mahamid reversed his decision following significant pressure to remain.

Condemnations were issued within Arab society, in Hebrew and in Arabic, throughout the wave of attacks. While condemnations are often issued with respect to violent incidents and attacks, during this wave, the fact that the attackers from within Arab society had links to ISIS, and that the organization took credit for the attacks, made condemnations even more unequivocal. "Arab society in Israel, as well as the majority of residents in Palestinian Authority areas, including those who support Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, are fiercely opposed to ISIS ideology and its association with the Palestinian national struggle." In addition, [INSS researchers](#) and others link the urgency to the fear of retribution, additional violence, "and of damaging their return to routine and attempts to rebuild their economic and social situation, especially after the years of the pandemic."

Concerns about Arab citizens and Jewish-Arab Relations

Amid calls for [introspection, tolerance, and a united effort to rout out extremism](#) within the Arab public, there was also concern about the impact these events will have on Arab society at large and on Jewish-Arab relations. "[I]t's been a long time since I've seen such wall-to-wall condemnations from the country's Arab citizens" [writes Hanin Majadli in Haaretz](#), "But the entire community is also terrified of the inevitable labeling, generalizations, collective threats and instant public verdicts that generally follow such events."

"The condemnation of the Arab collective was complicated," [writes Um Al Fahm native Anwar Mahajne](#), "by the fact that two of the victims were Arab citizens." Slain police officer, Amir Khoury, has been [widely acknowledged and mourned](#) in the Israeli public, as was the loss of Druze officer Yazan Fallah. Overall, Mahajne continues, "this drew a line between what the Jewish majority sees as 'good Arabs; and the rest."

"The problem is that when a terror attack occurs, people immediately forget everything else and blame the entire Arab community for the crimes of individuals," concurs [Uzi Baram in an op-ed published by Haaretz](#). "With all my frustration and anger [over the attacks], what truly frightens me is the harm that has been done to the relations between Jews and Arabs. We must not slide down this slope."

Across the country, some public gatherings were organized in support of Jewish and Arab cooperation by shared society organizations, professionals, and the general population. Residents of Israel's south gathered under the slogan "[Arabs and Jews: We are the Negev](#)." School principals in the northern city of Akko, both Jews and Arabs, spontaneously organized to protest the killing of innocent civilians.

FOCUS ON EAST JERUSALEM

Jewish-Arab relations in East Jerusalem are tense throughout the year and escalations around Ramadan and Passover are expected. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims travel to Al Aqsa for prayers, and thousands gather at the Old City's Damascus Gate on Ramadan evenings. Both locations have become hotspots for clashes with Israeli security—events that have become symbols for the struggle over the sites.

For both Arab society and many religious Jews, the Al Aqsa Mosque and Temple Mount are holy sites with significant religious importance as well as symbols of national identity. “Reda Jaber, director of the Aman Center against Violence in the Arab Community, [explains](#), “There’s an underestimation among the Jewish community in Israel of the deep emotional and identificational importance of Al-Aqsa Mosque for Muslims and Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular. This underestimation is very dangerous, since beyond the religious importance that is a significant factor, the Al-Aqsa Mosque has also deep dimensions for their national identity.” [Hanin Majadli explains further in Haaretz](#): “Al-Aqsa [...] is no longer just an ordinary mosque and the connection to it is no longer only religious,” she writes. “[T]he area of Al-Aqsa is the only place that Israel refrains from controlling fully, and that situation is enshrined in law.”

Similarly, over the last decade, some right-wing religious nationalist groups began to [encourage Jews to visit and pray](#) at the Temple Mount on both religious and political grounds. Passover is one of the three pilgrimage holidays in which the Torah commanded Jews to travel to the Temple Mount, where Al Aqsa is situated, to offer prayers and sacrifices. Since the 1967 War, the Temple Mount has been administered by Jordan. Under this arrangement, Jews can visit the compound, but not pray there.

This year, along with ongoing [skirmishes between civilians and police](#), an ad promising rewards to Jews attempting to [sacrifice a goat on the Temple Mount](#) provoked strong reactions as it spread in Jewish and Arab media. On April 15, major clashes broke out and Israeli police entered Al Aqsa Mosque, leading to over 150 injuries and 400 arrests.

In many instances, local and national leadership took steps to deescalate the situation. Israel closed the Temple Mount to Jewish visitors through the end of Ramadan, Mansour Abbas talked to leadership, and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid reaffirmed that, “Israel is committed to the status quo on the Temple Mount.” Mansour Abbas [stated](#) that “Ra’am’s position in the coalition, as regards the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, will be based on the results of the joint Israeli-Jordanian-international meetings.” As the Temple Mount crisis continues, however, Abbas [is under increasing pressure](#) from his own ranks to quit the coalition entirely.

With international attention, fears of escalations, and the pressure growing on the fragile governing coalition, tensions remain high but have not thus far spilled over into more widespread violence. Jack Khoury explains, “The clashes have set everyone on edge, but what has actually occurred attests mainly to the desire to avoid a replay of Operation Guardian of the Walls last May.”

PRESSURE ON RA’AM AND THE GOVERNING COALITION

For the governing ‘unity’ coalition, which includes an Islamic party (Abbas’ Ra’am) alongside a right-wing religious party (Bennett’s Yamina), religious and national escalations in East Jerusalem put some of its greatest vulnerabilities to the test. Mansour Abbas’ party, Ra’am, in particular has been between “[a rock and a hard place](#)”: On one hand, right-wing provocations in Jerusalem during Ramadan and Israeli police activity at the Temple Mount is anathema and a red line for Arab society and an Islamic party cannot be seen as complicit and unresponsive. On the other hand, with [other MKs leaving the coalition](#) in recent weeks and an opposition move to put the [dissolution of the Knesset to a vote](#), this coalition’s hold is growing increasingly tenuous. If Ra’am were to leave in protest of events at Al Aqsa (its strongest card),

it would bring down the coalition without securing many of its campaign promises to Arab society and with no guarantee of attaining the same influence in subsequent elections.

In mid-April, Ra'am 'froze' its membership in the coalition in protest. Seen by some in Arab society as "[worthless](#)" and a loophole since the Knesset was on recess regardless, others saw the freeze [as a strategic maneuver to buy time](#) and perhaps gain more of their policy aims from a coalition at risk of collapse. Ra'am reportedly [issued a list of conditions to coalition leaders](#) for returning to the Knesset. While [tense negotiations continue](#), [party members are divided](#) whether to return before these conditions are actually met, or simply to quit the coalition.

The last month also resurfaced divisions between the major Arab parties: Ra'am and the Joint List. Both parties are in agreement that Al Aqsa is a red line for Arab society, but Ra'am was challenged to respond as a member of the coalition while the Joint List from the opposition. While some thought the Joint List might [support the struggling coalition from the outside](#), lending it stability, Joint List Chair Ayman Odeh, instead issued a Ramadan video filmed in front of the Damascus Gate in which [he implored](#) Arab citizens to quit or not to join Israeli security forces, prioritizing the national issue over influence within the system. This is "humiliating our people, humiliating our families and humiliating everyone who comes to pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque" he stated in a move also implying Ra'am's complicity. [He later clarified](#) that he referred specifically to security forces in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, not police within the Green Line.

Mansour Abbas' participation in the coalition is a bid for pragmatic solutions for Arab citizens of Israel, despite being the more conservative and religious party. His ability to navigate this national crisis will have implications for future inclusion of Arab parties. Ayman Odeh, who has encouraged the Arab electorate to seek political participation through 2015, chose to tap into the national sentiments that Arab political participation should not come at a cost of a nationalist agenda.

As of the publication of this update, the Knesset is in its first day back in session.