

Extremist West Bank settlers help stir Acre violence

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Acre, a mixed city of approximately 52,000 people in northern Israel, recently witnessed four days of violent clashes between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Israeli Jewish residents.

Israeli national leaders, including caretaker prime minister Ehud Olmert, prime minister designate Tzipi Livni, and President Shimon Peres, called for calm and for “both sides” to refrain from violence. They portrayed the events as being local, religious and communal in origin.

Peres visited Acre and convened a meeting of Arab and Jewish civic and religious leaders aimed at restoring peace. Palestinians in Israel view the events as the product of widespread incitement and organized efforts by Jewish extremists to force them out of their homes.

While the facts and meaning of these events have been heavily contested, one of the underreported factors is the extent to which militant Israeli settlers from the West Bank, funded by donors in the United States, have instigated tension in Acre and other cities in an attempt to reduce their Arab populations. The Palestinian residents of Acre are amongst the 1.5 million Palestinians in Israel, who unlike Palestinians under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, have Israeli citizenship, though their rights are severely curtailed. They are the survivors and descendants of the 1948 Nakba during which most Palestinians were expelled from their homeland. These Palestinians are often referred to generically as “Arabs” within Israel both in their own population and by Israeli Jews.

The proximate cause

The disturbances began after a Palestinian resident of Acre drove into the eastern, predominantly Jewish neighborhood around midnight on Wednesday, 9 October, during the observance of the Yom Kippur Jewish holiday.

This prompted a violent reaction from Jewish residents and soon, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported, “Police warded off hundreds of Jewish rioters, chanting 'death to the Arabs,' and trying to storm the city's main road” (Jack Khoury, Nadav Shragai and Yoav Stern, “Acre sees worst violence in years as Jews and Arabs resume clashes,” Haaretz.com, 9 October 2008, update of 21:29). As word spread of the attack on the driver, Arab youths came to the scene.

According to Acre resident Tawfiq Jamal's own account, he drove with his son and a friend, at around 11pm in order to pick up his daughter from the home of relatives where she had been helping prepare baked sweets for a wedding.

When they arrived, according to Jamal, “I asked my son to take the baking dishes out of the car and proceeded to walk [toward the house] when [the Jews] suddenly began hurling stones at us” (Sharon Roffe-Ophir, “Arab motorist: I narrowly escaped lynch in Akko,” Ynet, 9 October 2008).

Jamal described how he and the two young men narrowly escaped a lynching. He strenuously denied accusations he had been drinking and deliberately started the incident by playing loud music. Acre police commander Avraham Edri confirmed much of Jamal's account, telling the Knesset's Internal Affairs Committee that:

“When my officers arrived at the scene, they had to handle 300-400 people who had already lifted the driver's car in the air. Our first mission was to prevent casualties. We released the driver from the mob and helped him into an apartment nearby ... My staff served as a barrier between him and the excited mob; the policemen were hurt but not one civilian was injured” (“Acre driver apologizes for incident,” The Jerusalem Post, 12 October 2008).

Speaking before the Knesset committee on 12 October, Jamal apologized for driving into the Jewish area and said he had “made a mistake.” Despite this, Israeli police arrested Jamal for “harming religious sensitivities, speeding and reckless endangerment,” and remanded him in custody (Jack Khoury, “Police arrest driver who sparked Acre riots for 'harming religious sensitivities,’” Haaretz, 13 October 2008). There were no reports of arrests specifically for the attempted lynching of Jamal and his companions.

Violent clashes between Jewish and Palestinian residents continued for several nights as police intervened with riot control methods including water cannon. According to Israeli police, many Arab Palestinian families had to be evacuated and about a dozen of their homes were set on fire.

In the end, 54 people - Jews and Arabs - were arrested, about 100 cars and several dozen shops were damaged. Several minor injuries were reported. While Jews and Arabs took part in the violence, on 12 October, on the third day of the disturbances, Major-General Shimon Koren, commander of Israel's Northern District police, said the riots had been instigated by Jews (“Police official says instigators of Akko riots Jewish,” Ynet, 12 October 2008), and, “The majority of rioters causing disturbances in [Acre] are Jews” (Sharon Roffe-Ofir, “Northern District police commander: Majority of Akko riots [sic] are Jews,” Ynet, 12 October 2008).

The settler connection

Palestinian citizens of Israel and Israeli Jews live in close proximity in Acre, a UNESCO World Heritage site, as they have done for generations. But in recent years, extremist Jewish groups affiliated with West Bank settlers have moved in with the stated aim of making the city more Jewish.

Palestinians are concentrated in the central old city and near the harbor, while Jews are established in the eastern part and outer rings. The vast majority of the Jewish residents of the city are Mizrahim - working-class Jews whose first generation came as immigrants to Israel from Arab countries. Mizrahim, although Jews, also faced severe discrimination by an Israeli state dominated by European Ashkenazi Jewish elites. Both communities are disadvantaged in different ways. Many Palestinians in the city are the survivors and descendants of those who were forced to leave their homes when Israel was established in 1948. All but 3,000 of the town's 13,000 Palestinian citizens in 1948 were forced out. Today, Palestinians comprise about 27 percent of Acre's population. Like all Palestinian citizens of Israel they have experienced systematic legal, social and economic discrimination and political exclusion. As Joseph Massad points out in *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question*, Mizrahim were often pushed to the edges of Israeli Jewish society and in many cases were housed in the former homes of expelled Palestinians. Culturally marginalized, and much poorer than Ashkenazi Jews, the Mizrahim have become the base constituency for the right-wing Likud party, Shas and other overtly racist anti-Arab parties.

Given the numbers of people involved in the troubles, long-time Jewish residents were certainly among them. But some Arab residents blamed the worsening tension not on long-time residents, but on an influx of militant youth affiliated with the national religious West Bank settler movement. Indeed, Baruch Marzel, a settler leader from near Hebron in the West Bank, visited Acre during the riots and vowed to help Jews in the city to set up a “defense organization” (Sharon Roffe-Ofir, “Peres visits Akko, urges side to exercise tolerance,” Ynet, 13 October 2008). Barzel was leader of the banned Kach party founded by the late Meir Kahane which supports the expulsion of all Palestinians, and he remains a prominent leader of racist settler groups.

Yeshiva Hesder-Akko, founded in 2001, is a pro-settler national religious school in the midst of a now majority Arab neighborhood called Wolfson. Over the years, many of the area's Jewish residents had become more affluent and moved out, and poorer Arabs moved in. This hesder-yeshiva, a school for Israeli Jewish men who combine military service with religious study, often attracting strict adherents of the militant settler movement, is run by Yossi Stern, a rabbi from the militant West Bank settlement of Elon Moreh. Stern, who is also on the Acre city council, told The Washington Post last year that he and his associates were working on projects designed to “attract Jews to Acre,” including a 350-unit housing complex designated for Jewish military families, and another yeshiva (Scott Wilson, “Israel's Arab Citizens, Isolation and Exclusion,” 20 December 2007). The Washington Post also reported that Palestinian residents and leaders consider these efforts to be part of a systematic assault on their presence in the city using tactics long deployed against Palestinians in the West Bank. Some accuse Acre's Likud mayor of supporting the efforts.

Yeshiva Hesder-Akko's own website states that “[f]rom a luxuriant Jewish neighborhood it [Wolfson] has turned into a decrepit Arab neighborhood.” The school's purpose is “to try to return and strengthen the Jewish character of the city.” Although the city was “almost lost” to Jews, the site states that “The long awaited salvation has begun.” According to the website's “About Us” page, the yeshiva was built with funds from a donor in New York. Volunteers have also raised funds from synagogues in the US, for the “special aim of the yeshiva [which] is to attract more young Jewish families by strengthening and maintaining the Zionist Jewish character of this ancient Jewish city” (Abigail Klein Leichman, “Back from Akko to help hesder yeshiva,” The New Jersey Jewish Standard, 21 June 2006).

Two years ago, similar, but much less serious disturbances occurred in Acre during another Jewish holiday. Arab Knesset member Abbas Zakour had previously written to Israel's public security minister appealing for police protection for the Arab communities against harassment by Jewish extremists, including the stoning of Arab cars during Jewish holidays.

The events in Acre coincide with an upsurge in violence by the radical settler movement against Palestinians across the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and a pipe bomb attack against an Israeli left-wing professor. While those actions have received more attention, the activities of affiliated groups against Palestinian citizens of Israel have been largely ignored beyond that community.

Sheikh Raed Salah, the head of Israel's Islamic movement, accused Israeli political and religious leaders of facilitating the actions of extremists over a long period of time with the goal of heightening tensions so that Palestinians inside Israel could eventually be expelled.

He said Acre's Palestinian population was being targeted for “cleansing,” and that Arabs in other coastal cities including Haifa and Jaffa could be next (Palestinian Information Center (Arabic site), 13 October 2008). Salah added that Palestinians in Israel were aware of the threat and would not be driven out. The

fear that events in Acre were evidence of a concerted effort to expel them was widely echoed by Palestinians citizens of Israel.

An almost identical hesder-yeshiva was recently founded in the Arab Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, also with the goal of increasing the Jewish population of that city (Eli Senyor, "Jaffa: Yeshiva to be built in heart of Arab neighborhood," Ynet, 24 September 2008).

Some of the Israeli politicians who have been most outspoken in calling for the expulsion of Palestinians and supporting radical settlers did their best to confirm such fears, engaging in the kind of incitement that has been escalating in recent years. Knesset member, former cabinet minister, and settler Effie Eitam called the events "an anti-Semitic pogrom at the heart of Israel on the holiest days of the Jewish people." Another member called on the authorities to "respond harshly to the Arab pogrom on Yom Kippur." Esterina Tartman, a Knesset member of former deputy prime minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu party, called for the removal of Palestinians citizens from Israel on the grounds that "the pogrom in [Acre] is yet another confirmation that Arab Israelis are the real danger threatening the state" (Amnon Meranda, "MK Eitam slams 'anti-Semitic pogrom in heart of Israel,'" Ynet, 9 October 2008).

Some Jewish residents of the city circulated calls for Jews to boycott Arab businesses to punish the Palestinian population.

The violent actions of settler groups against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank have gone unchecked by the Israeli army. There is now clear evidence of similar organized, planned violence being directed at Palestinians inside Israel amidst a generalized atmosphere of racist incitement. There is no sign that the Israeli state is prepared to confront this phenomenon any more than it does in the West Bank. Unless this changes, there is a strong likelihood that racist violence may resume and spread.

This may destroy the remaining threads of coexistence inside Israel. Jewish extremists would see that as a great success if their goal is to lay the ground for the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel.

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