

Israeli Arabs to launch strike against discriminatory policies

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Israel's 1.4 million Arab citizens are to stage a one-day general strike on October 1 to oppose the openly racist and discriminatory policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Jafar Farah, director of the Mossawa Center, the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, cited "ongoing police violence, cuts in the state budget that will detrimentally affect local Arab councils, the deepening of social and economic discrimination, the huge amount of bills introduced which would increase legal discrimination against the Arab community, political incitement against both the Arab community and its leaders and the atmosphere since the election of the new government."

"Somebody has to say stop it, that's it, it's enough," he warned. "Otherwise it could lead to civil war."

The strike takes place on the anniversary of a general strike, or Intifada, in northern Israel in 2000, two days after Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and in response to the killing of six Arabs in the mosque in Jerusalem. The Israeli police responded with gunfire, killing 13 Arab demonstrators, some at point blank range, and injuring hundreds more. It was the first time that the security forces had turned their firepower on Palestinians living within Israel.

Ministers in the ruling Labour coalition and the media denounced the demonstrations and strikes as an "uprising" and a "revolt." This helped inflame the situation, leading to more killings and numerous attacks by Jewish zealots on Arab shops, homes and individuals, with little attempt on the part of the Israeli authorities to defend the Arab minority.

More than 1,000 Arab Israelis were arrested in the first few months of the Intifada. Israel's Arab citizens were denounced as the "enemy within" and as a fifth column and Arab Knesset members as arch traitors. Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon described Israeli Arabs as a "cancerous manifestation."

Since then, 27 Israeli Arab citizens have been killed by the police. There has been only one conviction with a token 15-month sentence handed out for the shooting of Mahmoud Ghanaïm in the head at point blank range.

Under pressure, the government set up the Orr Commission to examine the events of October 1, 2000. It confirmed that the security forces had used live ammunition without warning and

that this had been specifically authorised by the commander of Israel's northern district.

The Orr Commission criticised the Israeli police for using excessive force. However, no one faced legal charges or even internal discipline. The commission exonerated the politicians who played a central role in creating the crisis, while blaming Arab leaders for inciting the protests. Internal Security Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, who was responsible for the police, later became foreign minister.

The Orr Commission did, however, officially admit for the first time that Arab Israelis are treated as second-class citizens. It concluded, "Government handling of the Arab sector has been primarily neglectful and discriminatory." It criticised the government for failing to give fair and equal attention to the needs of Arabs, and concluded that frustration with their discriminatory treatment had led to the demonstrations.

Israeli Arabs are the descendents of those Palestinians who remained after the founding of Israel in 1948, when more than 750,000 Palestinians were driven out or fled. They have faced decades of discrimination and oppression under successive governments and lived under military rule until 1966. The land and homes of those who had left were confiscated. The state dispossessed those who remained, with the result that the Arab share of the land fell from nine percent to about three percent.

The 250,000 Arab residents of occupied East Jerusalem, illegally annexed to Israel after the 1967 war, do not have Israeli citizenship.

It has proved impossible for Israeli Arabs to lease land, as 93 percent of it is now owned by the state or quasi-state bodies that refuse to sell or lease it to Arabs. Driven off the land, they were forced to become labourers in Israeli industrial and agricultural enterprises at rates of pay well below their Jewish counterparts.

For years, Arab towns received half the subsidies and government grants of Jewish municipalities. Neither planning permission nor finance was ever sanctioned for new towns, although the population has grown sevenfold. New Jewish towns and facilities have been built around the Arab towns and villages in the Galilee, the Triangle and the Negev, blocking their development. A further 160,000 Bedu live in the Negev in

southern Israel, more than half of them in “unrecognised settlements” lacking the most basic amenities. Public services are grossly inferior to those of even the most disadvantaged Jewish Israelis of Middle East and North African origin.

One out of every two Arab children in Israel lives below the poverty line. Half of all children living in poverty are Arabs, even though they represent 20 percent of the population. The gap between their conditions and those of Jewish Israelis is growing.

Excluded from compulsory military service, few Arabs are employed in the civil service and state industries. Discrimination is rife across all services and employment sectors. Arab Israelis also face overt political discrimination. One of the most egregious pieces of legislation is the 2003 Citizenship Law, which prevents Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza who marry an Israeli Arab from moving to Israel to live with their spouses.

The strike planned for October 1 is the first since 2005 and has been provoked in no small part by the measures proposed by Netanyahu’s coalition partner, Israel Beiteinu, a party that promotes the transfer of its Arab Israeli population.

In the last few months, Israel Beiteinu has attempted to introduce a raft of discriminatory and racist measures: a ban on demonstrations or commemorations of the “Nakba,” or catastrophe, the word used by Palestinians for their dispossession in 1948; the requirement to swear an oath of loyalty to Israel; and the outlawing of political demands for ending Israel’s status as a Jewish state.

The proposals were dropped or watered down after widespread protests. But now Education Minister Gideon Saar plans to drop the word “Nakba” from Arab textbooks, while introducing classes on Jewish heritage and Zionism. Future budgets for schools will be linked to the percentage of students going on to perform military service. This would adversely affect Arab schools. As it is, Jewish schools currently receive nine times more funding per child than Arab schools.

Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister and leader of Israel Beiteinu, announced that training for the diplomatic service would only be open to those who had completed military service. The housing minister, Ariel Atias, has demanded segregation between Jews and Arabs and has launched a drive to “Judaicize” the Galilee where most Arabs live, to prevent any land swap in a peace deal with the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Interior Minister Eli Yishai has approved a wave of house demolitions in Arab towns.

Transport Minister Israel Katz has demanded that road signs, which currently show place names in Hebrew, Arabic and English, should be in Hebrew alone.

Government ministers have made provocative verbal attacks on Arab Knesset members, suggesting that they would be legitimate targets for political assassination. Lieberman said, “Our central problems is not the Palestinians, but Ahmed Tibi

[an Arab MK] and his ilk—they are more dangerous than Hamas or the [Islamic] Jihad combined.”

The worsening pogromist atmosphere and demands for ethnic cleansing are ultimately the product of the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, based upon the continuing dispossession and oppression of the country’s original inhabitants.

So long as the Arabs were a distinct, oppressed minority, they could be tolerated by the ruling elite. But today they are perceived as a demographic threat to Israel’s existence. The birth rate is higher among the Palestinians than it is among Israeli Jews. Whereas in 2000, there were 8.2 million people in Israel and the Occupied Territories, 40 percent of whom were Palestinians, by 2015 this will rise to 50 percent. At the same time, Israel’s Arab citizens will comprise 25 percent of the country’s population.

Under conditions where Jewish Israelis will soon be a minority in Israel/Palestine, as far as the ruling class is concerned it is becoming untenable to maintain any distinction between the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and Israeli Arabs.

Insofar as a two-state solution was ever acceptable to Israel’s financial elite, this was because it would provide a solution to the “demographic problem.” Implicit in the “land for peace” proposals of the Oslo Accords advanced by the Labour Party was the eventual “transfer” of Israel’s Arab citizens. This is now not only the explicit policy of the Netanyahu’s far right coalition partners, but finds its echo across the official political spectrum.

In last year’s election campaign, opposition Kadima leader Tzipi Livni declared publicly that a Palestinian state would provide “a national solution” for Israel’s Arabs. She was forced to deny any intention of “forcing them to leave” the “Jewish and democratic state” of Israel.



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