



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

Escalations on the Gaza Border and US Embassy Move: Arab Citizen Response and Impact on State-Minority Relations

May 2018

On Friday, May 18th, a [Jewish-Arab protest](#) in Haifa resulted in violent confrontations between protesters and the police, with several protesters wounded and 21 detained.¹ The demonstration was one of a series of joint Jewish-Arab responses in Israel to [military clashes with Palestinians protesters along the Gazan border](#) and resulting Palestinian fatalities, and an extension of Arab protests throughout the country in solidarity with the Palestinians and in protest of the [US Embassy move to Jerusalem](#).

These clashes within Israel, their handling by police, and subsequent heated exchanges between Jewish and Arab national political leadership, are an eruption of tensions in state-minority relations in Israel. These tensions have been building up in recent weeks around the volatile "[Great March of Return](#)," organized by Hamas along the Gaza border, and the US Embassy move that took place on May 14th— the eve of Gregorian calendar date of Israel's 70th anniversary, and eve of the day Arabs mark the "Nakba." The following briefly describes the events and discourse as related to Arab citizens and Jewish-Arab relations within Israel.

Clashes in Haifa

On the evening of May 18th, around 300 Jewish and Arab protesters marched in Haifa against the Israeli conduct in Gaza and over 60 Palestinian fatalities. This demonstration was one of a series [of demonstrations over the week, which had culminated in some arrests of Arab protesters](#). On this evening, 21 demonstrators were detained when the protest turned into violent clashes with the police. One of the detained protesters was Jaffar Farah Director of the Haifa based [Mossawa Center](#), who was [seen in videos from the rally entering the police car on his two legs](#) and later that night was treated for a broken kneecap. Farah claims a police officer broke his leg during his detainment, while the police issued an initial report on Sunday, May 20th that "[no irregularities were found](#)" in the police's conduct. Photos and videos of Farah's arrest and police action during the protests went viral on social media in Israel and received significant mainstream media coverage, as [did a video of MK Ayman Odeh \(Joint Arab List Chairman\), being confronted by and subsequently swearing at police](#) when attempting to visit Farah in the hospital the following day.

¹ Two of whom were minors and released later that day.

Regarding police action at the protest and in the arrest, [Chief of Police Ronni Alsheikh](#) said that the protest "was extremely violent and so naturally force was used", while the Police Investigation Unit (MAHASH) under the Ministry of Justice announced that a [probe into police conduct will be held](#). Minister of Internal Security Gilad Erdan (Likud) said, "[The facts as presented by the police raise serious questions, since Farah's leg was broken](#)," and added, "if there was a police officer or commander who acted violently or who is lying — he certainly has no place in the police." [MK Ayman Odeh](#) issued a statement Friday night saying, "Police forces brutally oppressed the protest without any explanation... Netanyahu's government wants to silence any voice of resistance and dissent coming from here." On Monday the 21st, the [Haifa District Court ordered all 19 protesters to be released](#), despite a police request to keep them in custody for a further five days. When released, Farah claimed this decision was "a slap in the face of the police" and that he [intends to sue the police](#).

In response to MK Odeh's confrontation with police at the hospital, [Public Security Minister Erdan contacted Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit](#) demanding he open a criminal investigation against MK Odeh, and [Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman](#) (Israel Beitenu) tweeted, "Every day Ayman Odeh and his associates go around freely and curse policemen is a failure of the law enforcement authorities. The place of these terrorists is not in the Knesset but in prison." This statement led to a barrage of criticism with [Avi Gabay \(Labor Party Chair\) stating](#), "over the past few days, smelling upcoming elections, Liberman resumes his old trick, pours oil on the fire, incites and attacks Israeli Arabs and their right to hold non-violent demonstrations" and [MK Zipi Livni \(Zionist Camp\)](#) stating at a party meeting, "against external enemies we give the IDF our complete backing, but the Minister of Defense has no right to treat some of Israel's citizens as enemies for a handful of votes, even if the protests angered many, myself included." Some called the statements "[racist incitement](#)" and even [dangerous bloodletting of Arab politicians](#), while some writers criticized all politicians for "riding the wave" of escalations instead of advancing greater calm.²



These recent events and discourse elicited additional protests and criticism from within Arab society and among Jewish and Arab activists. Major Jewish and Jewish-Arab organizations working to build a shared society³ in Israel [published a special ad in Haaretz](#) on Monday, May 21st, in which they wrote, "We condemn the brutal arrest of... Farah. We are appalled by the harsh police brutality that he was subject to following his arrest... We are deeply concerned by the police's conduct towards the protesting Arab citizens... and would like to remind the law authorities that they must allow and protect the right to protest – a basic civil right in a democratic regime." The organizations called for "an independent investigation"

² [Instead of Fighting violence, elected officials are riding \[the waves\] of the demonstrations, Maariv, Lilach Sigan, 5.22.18 \(Hebrew\)](#)

³ AJEEC-NISPED, Givat Haviva, The Coalition Against Racism, The Abraham Fund Initiatives, Sikkuy, Mahapach-Taghir, The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), Sadaka-Reut, Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), Kav Mashve, Tsofen, Shatil, and Neve Shalom.

of the events in Haifa. An officer is currently under investigation for suspicion of the use of force against Farah during arrest.⁴

On the same day, 38 social change and human rights organizations sent a letter to the Attorney General stating, "a reality in which a director of a leading social change organization is arrested during a demonstration, handcuffed and taken into custody, and consequently is hospitalized with a serious injury, should turn on a red light for any citizen who cherishes the basic rights of free speech, [free] organization and [free] protest, and who recognizes the importance of civil society work." Yediot Ahronot criticized Police Chief Alsheikh's statement via a caricature that showed Jaffar Farah with a cast on his leg, and the chief of police saying, "we are investigating the possibility that Mr. Jaffar slipped on a banana peel."



Translation: "We are investigating the possibility that Mr. Jaffar slipped on a banana peel".

Context: Gaza Protest and US Embassy Move

Over the past few weeks, protests along the Gaza border under the banner "Great March of Return" have led to the most violent clashes with Israel's military since 2014. The march, organized by Hamas, began on ['Land Day', an annual day of commemorating the deaths of six Arab citizens of Israel protesting the expropriation of Arab-owned land in 1976](#), and was designed to last through the week in mid-May that included the move of the American embassy to Jerusalem on May 14th, on the eve of the Gregorian calendar date marking Israel's 70th anniversary (the national celebration was held on April 20th, the anniversary according to the Jewish calendar); and the marking of the Palestinian Nakba – all events that rally Palestinian and Arab emotions. This week also coincided this year with the beginning of the month of Ramadan, adding poignancy to already heightened emotions. The prolonged set of protests on the Gaza border turned especially violent on the day of the embassy opening, with 63 fatalities out of 40,000 Gazans participating and a demonstration in Jerusalem against the move that turned into [a violent clash with the police](#).

Arab Citizen Discourse and Response



Protests outside the inauguration of the US Embassy in Jerusalem, May 14, 2018 (Joint List)

Arab citizens of Israel, who share national, ethnic, and familial ties with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, had already expressed [opposition to the embassy move when it was announced in December](#), out of concern for the rights of the Palestinians and implications for the peace process and expressed their solidarity and support for the plight of the Gaza demonstrators around these latest escalations. On May 14th, the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel responded to the

⁴ Spiegel, Noa and Brenner, Josh "A police officer was questioned on suspicion that he attacked Jafar Farah during arrest" *Haaretz*, 5.22.18 (Hebrew)

fatalities by calling for a general strike, stating [“These activities are carried out in the name of 1.5 million Palestinian Arabs in Israel who stand by their people and say, ‘As long as you are on the front line with the occupation, we are with you.’”](#) Arab MKs, who participated in the strike the following day, condemned the military actions against the protesters. Joint List MK Yousef Jabareen stated that, [“It is our right and even our duty to express identification with our people \[the Palestinians\], whom the army has been slaughtering for the past several weeks on the Gaza border.”](#)

The general strike took place on May 15th, also the annual day selected to commemorate the [Nakba, a term used to refer to the "catastrophe" in which 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes as a result of Israel's war of independence in 1948](#). At the border, around 2,000 Gazans continued to protest and in Israel demonstrations were held in various Arab cities, including Umm al-Fahm and the Negev Bedouin city of Rahat, with protesters displaying signs reading, [“Gaza is a symbol of pride,”](#) [“From Jerusalem to Gaza – let the ground shake,”](#) [“Jerusalem – Arab and Palestinian,”](#) and MK Ayman Odeh saying, [“The Arab population, along with Jewish forces, are fighting the carnage in Gaza. We call for a peace treaty \[based on\] the ‘67 borders.”](#)

Public expressions of solidarity could be found throughout Arab society in Israel. Arab students of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem protested by displaying posters with the names and ages of Palestinians killed in the clashes throughout the school, stating [“we are all Palestinians, we are all one nation and that is our only way to make our voice heard.”](#) Additionally, the holy month of Ramadan, which began on May 17th, brought forth a deeper concern from Muslim Arab citizens of Israel with many [questioning whether they should take part in religious festivities and opting out of celebrations, banding together to raise money and calling for mourning days commemorating Gaza residents.](#)

Some exceptions to the dominant public discourse in Arab society came from the Druze community, [whose veterans came out in favor of the embassy move to Jerusalem](#), and some unique Christian-Arab voices who suggested Arab citizens need to focus on carving a more fruitful and less antagonistic relationship with the state that is [less steeped in ideological politics related to the conflict with the Palestinians and more on pragmatic opportunities for mutual benefit.](#)

Further reading:

[Freedom of Speech and the Palestinization of Israeli Arabs—Tsvi Sadan – *Israel Hayom* – 5.22.18](#)

[The Industry of Lie and Cover-up against Arab Society – *YNET News* – Wadi'a Awwawde, 5.21.18 \(Hebrew\)](#)

[Police Conduct Sends a Message: An Arab Protester Is First and Foremost an Arab – *Haaretz* – Jack Khoury – 5.20.2018](#)

[Israeli Arabs should re-think their direction – *Israel Hayom* – Yousef Hadad – 5.14.2018 \(Hebrew\)](#)