

WHAT IS DRIVING THE INCREASE IN HOMICIDES IN ISRAEL'S ARAB COMMUNITY?


Posted on November 29, 2021 by Leanne Thomas



Israel's Arab sector numbers 1.9 million, approximately accounting for 21 percent of the country's total population (The State of Israel, 2021). However, this sector overall accounts for the vast majority of Israel's homicides. The problem is also reflected in Israel's north, where Arabs make up 50 percent of its 1.3 million population. There, Arabs account for 99% of the murders, in addition to 99% of shootings; 65% of arsons, and 80% of robberies. So what is driving this phenomenon?

Well, homicides have been attributed to instances generally involving family feuds, illegal guns and organised crime gangs (BBC, 2021). Most homicide victims in the sector are young males, but increasingly, victims are coming from other Arab demographics, including women and children (ibid). The young male demographic could be indicative of gang violence. That view though is uncorroborated and is a mere proposition. Arab homicides have been on the increase over the past few years and are now skyrocketing to unseen levels. Taking a look at the statistics, last year 97 Arabs had been

killed overall (BBC, 2021), with a lower figure of 96 also being given (Fabian, 2021). When compared to this year, that figure has been surpassed, having reached 100 victims on 18 October (Khoury, 2021). In addition, a further 2 Israeli Arabs were killed on 20 October. At present, there still remains just over two months in the year, which leaves time for the body count to grow. Thus as it stands, this number will likely increase before the end of the year.

 *Figure 1 Arab localities in Israel. Source: Wikipedia*

At least in part, the epidemic has been attributed to the perceived neglect of Israeli authorities to properly provide adequate security to the Arab population. Back in 2019, Israeli Arab politician, Ayman Odeh, accused the police of being "racist" for what he described as its ongoing lack of action in response to violence in the community (The Times of Israel, 2019). Two years on, the same accusations have been levelled at Israeli Police by members of Israel's Arab sector. This is evident in the recent campaign by Israeli Arab activists under the hashtag "#ArabLivesMatter" (Scharf, 2021). It aims to raise awareness of the spiralling rate of violent crime in Arab communities (ibid). Moreover, unlike the similar hashtag campaign in the United States by the African-American community, Arab activists are calling for more policing – as opposed to less (ibid). With different segments of the Israeli Arab community attributing blame to Israeli Police, this explanation does seem plausible.

Israeli Arabs aside, Israel's Public Security Minister, Omer Barlev, has theorised such violence has been the product of "a long process of crime families taking over due to Israel's neglect of Arab communities and cities" (Fabian, 2021). Similarly Israeli politician and peace activist, Mossi Raz, has attributed the violence to "powerful criminal gangs" and neglect (Ynet News, 2021). Both points of view attribute the violence to criminal gangs who are running segments of Arab society. Whether said gangs are the cause of such violence being on the increase is debateable. Further, it can be argued that said gangs did not appear out of nowhere. Rather, said gangs are more likely a symptom of a greater cause: neglect and a lack of a deterrence from the authorities.

Israeli Police have acknowledged they have "lost control of the streets." Two things can be inferred from this attitude: Israeli Police either believe they cannot win against the criminals, or they believe their forces have not tried hard enough to keep hold of the streets. The former position implies it is the fault of the criminals, i.e. they have grown untouchable. The alternative opinion implies it is the fault of the police, as they have not acted sufficiently to clamp down on, or, at the very least, make sufficient attempts to deter these criminal activities. The police insist that they have acted to address the violence over the years, citing a number of policies employed in the pursuit of doing so.

For example, the police have highlighted larger police budgets for the Arab sector (Scharf, 2021); increased number of arrests and indictments; a jump in solved murder cases; and the seizure of thousands of weapons (The Times of Israel, 2019) to support their claim. Prominently, the head of the Crime Prevention Department for Arab areas, Commander Ygal Ezra, revealed 700 Muslim police officers had been recruited from the Israeli Arab community (BBC, 2021). He also spoke on more police stations having been built in Arab towns (ibid). Notably also, Israeli Police formed a new undercover unit (i.e. the Sinai Unit) for combating crime in the community (The Times of Israel, 2021). Moreover, soon a large number of security cameras will be installed in the mixed Jewish and Arab cities of Lod and Acre (Breiner & Lis, 2021), presumably to help deter crime.

Both measures come as part of a new government-backed effort to tackle crime in the Arab sector. It also comes two

months after Israel's Police Commissioner held an emergency meeting with security officials specifically about the violence in Arab communities (Fabian, 2021). The impact of such actions on violent crime in the sector cannot yet be gleamed. But assuming the police will be successful at mitigating violent crimes, then it would appear that the wave of violence is very much contingent on police action or lack thereof. Should the police be unable to mitigate the wave, then this would indicate a deeper socio-cultural origin point for the violence, perhaps suggesting the problem is at worst endemic, and at best endorsed or accepted by significant segments of the population. The former is of course a controversial viewpoint, but one that should be considered.

References/Works Cited

BBC, 2021. *The murderous crime wave sweeping Israel's Arabs.*

Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-58183954>

Breiner, J. & Lis, J., 2021. *Israeli Police to Boost Number of Security Cameras in Two Mixed Arab-Jewish Cities.*

Available at:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israeli-police-to-boost-number-of-security-cameras-in-two-mixed-arab-jewish-cities-1.10322671>

Fabian, E., 2021. *Northern police chief says area is 'at war' with ongoing Arab communal violence.*

Available at:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-police-officer-says-district-at-war-with-ongoing-arab-communal-violence/>

Fabian, E., 2021. *Police scramble to curb violence after 4 murders in 48 hours in Arab community.*

Available at:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-scramble-to-curb-violence-after-4-murders-in-48-hours-in-arab-community/>

Khoury, J., 2021. *Violence in Israeli Arab Community Reaches Grim Milestone as 100th Victim Shot Dead.*

Available at:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/violence-in-israeli-arab-community-reaches-grim-milestone-as-100th-victim-shot-1.10303357>

Scharf, I., 2021. *#Arab_lives_matter sparks calls for more policing in Israel.*

Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-israel-crime-violent-crime-2e805e7f18c7f531544d5350ada1b151>

The State of Israel, 2021. *Population of Israel on the Eve of 2021 (Media Release).*

Available at: <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/Pages/2020/Population-of-Israel-on-the-Eve-of-2021.aspx>

The Times of Israel, 2019. *As Arab leaders slam police 'neglect,' officers report fear for their own safety.*

Available at:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-arab-leaders-slam-police-neglect-office-report-fear-for-their-own-safety/>

The Times of Israel, 2021. *New undercover police unit formed to clamp down on crime in Arab communities.*

Available at:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/police-unveil-new-undercover-unit-to-clamp-down-on-crime-in-arab-sector/>

Ynet News, 2021. *Tsunami of crime in Israel's Arab sector has people losing faith in police.*

Available at: <https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/bju33n8et>

Featured image: Creator: Basel Awidat | Credit: Flashgo

About the author: *Leanne Thomas is an intern with the IACS. She has Bachelor's in International Relations with Combined Studies from Richmond, The American International University in London, and is currently studying for a Master's in Intelligence Studies from Brunel University, London. She has a background in analysis and has a keen interest in the Middle East.*