



Give My Regards to Osama

**Moderate
Israeli Arabs
are siding with
America's
enemies,
widening the
gap with Israeli
Jews.**

ORI NIR

QNE MONTH AFTER the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., thousands of Israeli Arabs gathered in the Galilee town of Tamra to voice support for Afghanistan and opposition to U.S. strikes against the Taliban.

One of the speakers at the demonstration, organized by Israel's Islamic Movement—a fundamentalist political-religious organization—was Muhammad Kan'an, an Arab member of Israel's parliament. Standing on a makeshift podium, surrounded by Islamic leaders, Kan'an said: "I would like to send from here, from the town of Tamra, regards to Osama bin Laden. Allah is the greatest. We send our regards to everyone on the front lines, to all the fighters in Afghanistan. To them we say: 'May Allah give you strength and grant you victory over the Americans and their allies.'"

The crowd of several thousand cheered, chanting: "Bush—you terrorist leader, your law is the law of the jungle; Be patient, oh Afghanis, Allah will shatter the Americans," and other anti-American slogans.

Kan'an is not an Islamic militant. In fact, he's not considered a militant at all, but rather one of the moderates among the 12 Arab Knesset members who represent Israel's more than 1 million Arabs. More than a year ago, some of his colleagues even demanded to politically excommunicate him, after he met with the northern commander of Israel's Police, Alik Ron, whose troops had killed 13 Arab civilians in the Galilee in the riots of October 2000—an event that for many Arabs was a turning point in their relationship with Israel.

Speaking to a reporter after his speech in Tamra, Kan'an was unapologetic. "I was expressing my strong protest against the American attack against Afghanistan," he said. "It is an attack against Islam and against the Afghani people. As for Osama bin Laden—I don't know if he's a terrorist or not ... what is clear to me is that

I was expressing the sentiment of my voters."

Kan'an is right. His Arab-Israeli constituents may not be enthusiastic bin Laden supporters, but he credibly reflected their resentment of the United States and its policy in the Middle East.

Initially, following the Sept. 11 attacks on



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America, the Arab-Israeli response was somewhat muted—and even sympathetic toward the United States. But as the U.S. war against Afghanistan continued in November, Israeli Arabs ratcheted up their rhetoric. They turned out for anti-U.S. protest rallies, wrote anti-American opinion pieces in Arabic language newspapers, and avidly followed the coverage of the war on the satellite Arabic news channel al-Jazeera.

Indeed, over time the war united Israel's Arab minority—roughly 20 percent of Israel's population of 6 million, many of whom refer to themselves as Israel's "Palestinian minority"—in hostility toward the United States. A recent poll by the Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies at Tel Aviv University shows that only 3 percent of Israeli Arabs—compared to 52 percent of Israeli Jews—support the U.S. attack on Afghanistan.

Israeli Arabs demonstrate holding posters of some of the 13 Israeli Arabs killed during the October 2000 riots. The riots were a turning point in relations between Israeli Jews and Israel's Arab minority.

And while that may seem like a small percentage of Jews supporting the war, the poll found that Jews who oppose the war had very different reasons for their opposition than Arabs. Some 35 percent of Jews objected to the attacks because they thought they would be ineffective. Most Arabs (52 percent) oppose the attacks on moral grounds (they don't want the bombing to cause casualties among Afghani civilians); only 13 percent of Jews oppose the war for that reason.

This criticism of the U.S. administration and the support some Israeli Arabs express for bin Laden concerns the Israeli political and security establishment, already alarmed by the growing radicalization among Israel's Arab citizens. "Our concern is not so much that Israeli Arabs will join the ranks of Al-Qaeda," said a senior Israeli security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, referring to bin Laden's now infamous terrorist organization. "What worries us is what their positions indicate ... the ease with which they accept terrorism as a means of struggle."

ISRAELI ARABS ARE THE ARABS (AND THEIR descendants) who did not leave the new state of Israel during the 1948 war of independence. Most of them live in the north (where they are gradually becoming the majority), in a cluster of communi-

ties in the center, in mixed cities (including Haifa, Jaffa, Ramle, Lod, and Acre), and in the southern Negev desert. East Jerusalem's Arabs are not considered "Israeli Arabs" because they are designated "permanent residents." They carry Israeli ID's which entitle them to the social benefits of Israelis, but since they are not citizens, they cannot travel on an Israeli passport.

Israeli Arabs lived under a restrictive military government until 1966, when they officially received individual rights in Israel. Many made efforts to forge strong contacts with their Jewish neighbors to become an integral part of Israel's social mosaic. However, over the years, many became increasingly frustrated with the glass ceiling that blocked their way to full integration and more aware of their Palestinian identities.

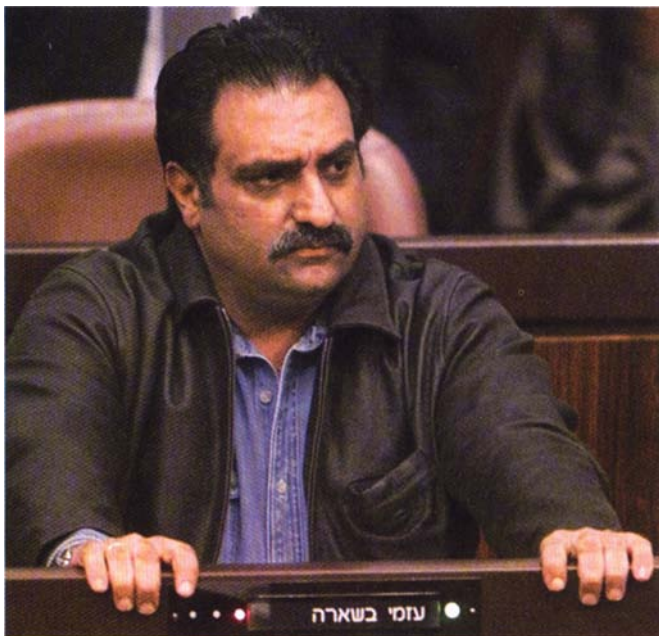
Tensions boiled over on Oct. 1, 2000. The riots followed the pre-arranged visit of then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon to Jerusalem's Temple Mount—a site holy to Jews as the location of the first and second Temples, and to Muslims, who refer to it as Haram al-Sharif. In the severe violence that erupted on the Temple Mount the next day, Israeli police shot and killed seven Palestinian worshippers.

Following the events on the Temple Mount, Israel's Arab minority took to the streets in communities across Israel. Israeli police used live ammunition and rubber-coated metal bullets to quell outbreaks of violence between Oct. 1 and Oct. 8, leaving 13 Arab-Israelis dead. Thus began a new chapter in Jewish-Arab relations, characterized by mutual alienation and bitterness.

In an effort to help rebuild his support from the Arab sector, then prime minister Ehud Barak announced the formation of an official commission of inquiry into the riots and their tragic results. The commission, headed by Supreme Court judge Theodore Orr, began hearing testimony in February 2001. To date, the testimony has painted a picture of a brutal, unorganized, and poorly prepared police response to a violent wave of riots across many Arab communities. A final report has not yet been issued.

The Arab-Israeli protesters were also driven by rage over decades of discrimination and marginalization as Arab citizens in a Jewish state. It is widely acknowledged that Arab citizens are discriminated against in almost every realm of life—from allocation of government budgets for municipal councils and education services to access to land and public hous-

Azmi Bishara, an Arab Knesset member whose parliamentary immunity was removed, now faces charges of supporting a terrorist organization and illegally organizing visits for Israeli Arabs to Syria.



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ing. Since Israel became a state in 1948, the government has built numerous new Jewish towns and settlements—but no new Arab communities. Instead, Israel has expropriated nearly 50 percent of Arab-claimed lands for the establishment of Jewish communities. This, despite the fact that the Arab population has grown sixfold in 53 years.

Israel's discrimination has become an endemic feature of majority-minority relations in the Jewish state. When asked whether Israel was fulfilling its aspiration to be a "democratic" Jewish state, Arab Knesset member Ahmed Tibi said recently: "Israel is a democratic state for the Jews, and a Jewish state for the Arabs."

Ehud Barak's term as prime minister deepened the sense of discrimination. Arab citizens expected Barak's left-of-center government to bring about a revolutionary change. Barak received 95 percent of the Arab popular vote in the elections of May 1999, based on his promises of equality and peace with the Palestinian Authority and Syria. Arab Israelis also expected Barak to make peace with them; to promote equality and prosperity.

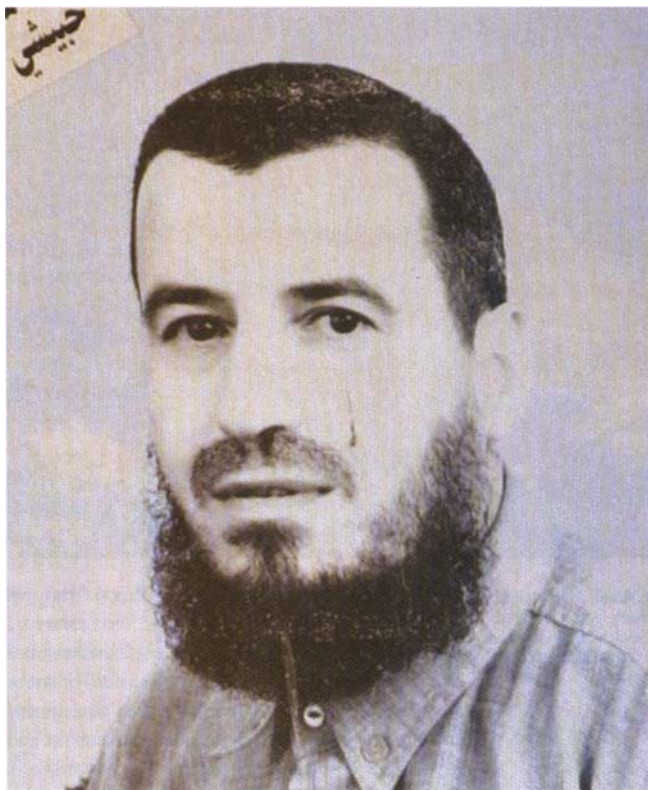
While Barak gave Israeli Arabs a hopeful horizon, he did very little to immediately address their grievances. Only the Ministry of Education, under the supervision of leftist Meretz minister Yossi Sarid, made significant reformist steps toward improving physical conditions in Arab schools.

Barak declined to even meet with Israeli-Arab leaders. Knesset member Hashem Mahamid, the only Arab ever appointed to the Knesset's reputable Security and Foreign Affairs Committee, says that in early 2000, at a Knesset committee meeting, he sent a note to Barak. "For the last 10 months, 10 times, through 10 different people, I attempted to arrange a meeting with you and failed," said the note, according to Mahamid. "Barak gave me an affirmative nod, and asked one of his aids to schedule an appointment, which was never actually made."

The first time Barak actually met with the Higher Monitoring Committee, the Arab sectors' umbrella leadership forum, was Oct. 3, 2000—after eight of the 13 young Arab citizens had already been killed in extended clashes with police.

In the weeks and months that followed the riots, Arab citizens had high hopes that the depths of their anger would finally register among Israeli Jews—and that the Israeli press would finally focus a spotlight on their unequal status. That did not happen.

Instead, the clashes widened the rift between the



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Arab minority and Israel's Jewish majority. To make matters worse, Israeli Jews have all but ceased frequenting Arab businesses—some out of fear, some because they felt betrayed by the Arabs' October uprising—adding a de facto economic boycott to an already developing recession.

In February 2001, Israeli Arabs expressed their fury by boycotting the special prime ministerial elections. In sharp contrast to previous elections, when Arab turnout reached up to 80 percent, this time it plunged to an all-time low: 8 percent.

This contributed to the bitter defeat of Barak, and to the formation of "the most unfriendly government to the Arab citizens in Israel's history," in the words of professor As'ad Ghanem, an Arab professor at Haifa University who studies Israel's Arab minority.

Sharon made a few promises to Arab leaders as he came into office, and then he toughened his government's policy in the West Bank and Gaza—responding with force to Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians. This escalation led to estrangement and fueled resentment among Israeli Arabs. Right-wing government officials publicly insulted Arab citizens.

Mohammed Saker Hubeishi, an Arab citizen of Israel, died in a suicide bomb. He exploded himself at the Nahariya train station, killing three other people, as well.



An Israeli Arab walks among Israeli armored vehicles following the October 2000 riots.

Israel's tourism minister, Rehav'am Ze'evi (who was recently assassinated by Palestinian terrorists in a Jerusalem hotel), was elected to the Knesset on a platform championing "voluntary transfer" of Arabs from Israel. Other ministers conditioned government aid to Arab communities on good citizenship and expressions of loyalty to Israel.

Arab Knesset members, in turn, made harsh statements against the Israeli government, and in some instances also expressed support for Israel's enemies—and even for terrorism. One of them, Azmi Bishara of the Arab Nationalist party, Balad, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity in November 2001 after he expressed support for Hezbollah. Bishara is now facing prosecution for backing a terrorist organization.

This rift between Israeli Arabs and Jews is perhaps at its widest since Israel lifted military rule from Arab communities in 1966. It has deepened dramatically during the past 13 months of Palestinian attacks and Israeli responses. It is viewed as a threat to Israel's well-being by the Israeli National Security Council, which advises Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

In early 2001, as the trauma following the October 2000 riots sank into the collective consciousness of the Arab community, Ghanem—together with professor Sammi Samokha, a Jewish colleague from Haifa University—conducted a public opinion poll among Israeli Arabs, asking questions identical to a poll they conducted in 1995.

The findings shocked many Israeli Jews. Only 33

percent of the people polled said that "Israeli" properly describes their identity, compared with 63 percent in 1995. Only 27 percent said they are ready to hoist an Israeli flag on their homes, compared with 43 percent in 1995. Six years ago, half of the Israeli Arabs polled said that they felt closer to Israeli Jews than to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. This year only 35 percent said the same. And while in 1995 only 7 percent denied Israel's right to exist, this year the size of that group more than doubled—to 16 percent.

"The year that passed," says Ghanem, "without a doubt, was the worse year in the history of the Arab community" in Israel.

ARABS IN ISRAEL DIFFER ONLY ON HOW THEY interpret the "American aggression" in Afghanistan. Secularist Arabs view it as yet another expression of America's imperialistic drive for world domination, while Islamists see it as a Crusade-like religious and cultural Western war against Islam. The Arab press has been filled with debates between the two camps since President Bush declared war on international terrorism in September.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, some Arab-Israelis staked out a moderate position. "In the beginning, right after the attacks in New York and Washington, our community was stunned and deeply saddened, just like most reasonable people in the world," says Salem Jubran, an Arab-Israeli author and editor of the small weekly *al-*

Ayn, published in Nazareth, the largest Arab town in Israel. Jubran is known in his community as an outspoken pragmatist; he is widely respected among Israeli Arabs for his public criticism of Arabs and their leaders.

"I am more than 100 percent against bin Laden, his ideology, his deeds and any form of terrorism, particularly terrorism in the name of religion," says Jubran. "I know that most members of my community share that position. You didn't see any of the despicable displays of joy at the calamity [in] America that you may have seen in other places. The aversion and condemnation were unconditional."

The tone was similar when Israel's Islamic Movement, an extra-parliamentary political-religious organization that runs a network of mosques and charitable social institutions, held its annual rally in the northern Arab town of Umm al-Fahm—home to movement leader Sheikh Ra'id Salah. The sheikh, who hours earlier had turned down an Israeli police request to cancel the rally because of security concerns, addressed tens of thousands of supporters crammed into a large soccer field.

The atmosphere was subdued. Leaders of the movement knew that the attacks in Washington, D.C., and New York City put them under the microscope of both Israeli and international media. Sheikh Ra'id denounced "all phenomena of violence and ter-

rorism everywhere" and sent his condolences to the bereaved families in America. He even squeezed some giggles from the audience when he called on President Bush to convert to Islam, so the American president could take part in "building a fair and equal global society," based on the values of Islam.

This conciliatory tone characterized the initial post-Sept. 11 discourse in Israel's Arab community. Israeli Arabs did not gloat, as did some of their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza. But gradually, condemnation of the attacks gave way to alarm over the all-out war the Americans seemed bent on pursuing.

When the attacks in Afghanistan began, and reports of civilian deaths began trickling in, Israeli Arabs joined the angry crowds of Arabs and Muslims worldwide opposing American methods. The Israeli Arab press denounced the U.S. government as a terrorist regime. Arab Israelis held weekly anti-American demonstrations. Arriving for a November meeting with Arab-Israeli businessmen in Nazareth, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Kurtzer was heckled by a crowd of demonstrators—even though Kurtzer was there to talk about U.S. aid to Israeli-Arab businessmen.

And there are other signs of the Arab-Israeli shift. *The Warrior from Mecca*, an admiring biography of

Continued on page 74



Israeli Arabs have been avidly following developments in Afghanistan on the satellite Arab news channel al-Jazeera. Here, staff members work at the station's Qatar headquarters.

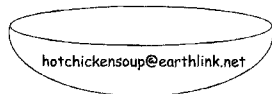
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Israeli Arabs *continued from page 49*

bin Laden written by Saudi journalist Khalid Khalil As'ad, is popping up increasingly for sale at mosques, rallies, and bookstores. Indeed, the biography is a best seller among Israeli Arabs.

THE PAST YEAR ALSO WITNESSED AN increase in the involvement of Arab citizens in terrorism—something that until recently had been an extremely marginal phenomenon in Israeli-Arab society. Terrorist organizations that had avoided recruiting Israeli Arabs—such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Fatah's "Tanzim"—are now actively recruiting.

And for the first time ever, an Arab citizen of Israel became a suicide bomber—exploding himself in the train station in the northern coastal town of Nahariya, not far from his village of Abu Snan. The bomber, Mohammed Saker Hubeishi, 48, killed three people and wounded many others, including several Arab citizens. No Israeli Arab endorsed Hubeishi's action. But some Arab leaders visited his mourning family in Abu Snan.

The escalation further polarized relations between Jewish and Arab citizens. "If a year ago we rose up because we felt marginalized," says Wadi Awawda, an author and journalist who frequently writes on the political and social frustrations of Israeli Arabs in *Kul al-Arab*, a wide-circulation weekly published in Nazareth, "then today this feeling is only intensifying and pushing us away from any common denominator with the Jewish majority."

Anti-American demonstrations therefore also serve as a vent for resentment against the Israeli government. Parallels drawn between U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza have become frequent in Arab political discourse, both inside and outside Israel. This was epitomized on Oct. 26, 2001, when *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Huriyyah*, the Islamic Movement's weekly newspaper, ran the banner headline: "Israeli-American Terrorism Hits Palestine and Afghanistan."

Directors of Israeli-Arab non-governmental organizations, which sprang up in recent years to fill the vacuum created by an unresponsive Israeli government, are now concerned that the anti-American atmosphere in the Arab community will harm their fund-raising efforts in America. These Israeli organizations—which engage in a wide array of activities, from political lobbying and pro-Arab legal activity to the advancement of Palestinian art and culture—are funded primarily

from donations made by American and European individuals and non-governmental foundations.

"We have already seen a decrease in donations" since Sept. 11, said a senior activist in an Israeli-Arab NGO, who requested anonymity.

Eliezer Yaari, executive director of the New Israel Fund (a Jerusalem-based non-profit that funds Jewish- and Arab-Israeli NGOs), says he anticipated a similar reaction during a recent fund-raising trip in the United States. "We went to the States with a deep sense of apprehension that we would be stonewalled as a result of intensive right-wing activity against us," he said.

But Yaari said that's not what happened. He said American backers recognize how important it is to keep in contact with Israeli Arabs, and to continue the dialogue between Arabs and Jews—especially now, as many Israeli Arabs are publicly identifying with bin Laden against America.

"Our supporters have ... a clear understanding," Yaari said, "of how important it is ... to reach out to Israeli Arabs, to see greater efforts to guard civil rights in Israel." ❊

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