**Who will stop the settlers' violence?**

**Shaul Arieli, Haaretz, July 30, 2021**

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History does not repeat itself; one can only learn its lessons. However, there are few cases where lessons from a historical event are required to be applied in a period of human life. The need to deal with the violence of some of the settlers against the Palestinians and the security forces is now knocking on the door of the Israeli government. For similarly to Jewish violence against the Arabs in the early days of the state, today also settler violence takes place in an "atmosphere" created by the actions or failures of decision-makers and policymakers.

Media reports and reports from various organizations indicate that in recent years the Israeli government has refrained from dealing with settler violence, mainly against Palestinians, but also against IDF forces in the West Bank: This violence includes physical assault, assault on vehicles traveling on the roads, assault on residents' homes, causing damage to private property, damage to trees and agricultural crops and other agricultural property, and threats, including with weapons. B'Tselem alone documented, only in the first half of 2021, 162 violent incidents. This is a significant and continuous increase compared to 2020, when the organization documented 122 violent incidents. Yaniv Kubowitz reported (Haaretz, 10.1), that "data from the defense establishment show that in 2020 about 370 violent incidents by Israelis in the West Bank were reported, with more than 10% of them - about 42 cases - directed at police and soldiers. According to the data, 206 of the 370 cases of violence were reported as nationalist crimes ...; About 120 cases were reported as physical violence against Palestinians and the rest were classified as attacks on security forces. Today, the IDF announced that a settler attacked the commander of the Golani Regiment in a protest demonstration over the death of Ahuvia Sandak.

"Breaking the Silence" has recently published a petition, signed by 100 combat soldiers in reserve, calling on the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Internal Security to "act now and with determination against the phenomenon of settler violence." The organization also published a pamphlet entitled "Recruits", which contains 36 testimonies of soldiers about settler violence in 2012-2020, including violence against IDF soldiers, as well as descriptions of a sergeant in the Paratroopers' Patrol Regiment and a sergeant in the Civil Administration of incidents that occurred in Yitzhar in 2014 and in 2016.

The Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, was largely silent and did not act to eradicate the phenomenon. Kobowitz reports that even after the defense establishment warned the political echelon that the silence and hesitant condemnation of right-wing leaders over violence could lead to a significant escalation, there was no change in policy. According to a security source, the defense establishment has in the last two years identified dozens of deliberate attempts to attack its forces, after a decade in which their number was much lower. During these two years, the appropriate "atmosphere" for escalation took place. Kobowitz quotes a senior member of the defense establishment as saying that the so-called "Hilltop Youth" are nourished by the "extreme discourse that legitimizes terrorism and violent attacks on security forces".

The policy of the leadership of the Jewish Yishuv and the State of Israel during the War of Independence, which aimed to reduce the number of Arabs in the country, also gave rise to the public "atmosphere", which continued even after the fighting and the signing of the ceasefire agreements. During the first truce, Foreign Minister Moshe Shertok said at a cabinet meeting (June 17, 1948): "The opportunity before us for the present situation to solve once and for all and thoroughly the most troublesome problem of the Jewish state (the Arab majority) goes far beyond what we expected. Even if we do not prevent a certain unrest, we must make the most of the opportunity that history has summoned for us so quickly and unexpectedly".

It is not the time to describe all the deportations that took place, as the Palestinians fled, at the time of the implementation of this unofficial policy. This including many atrocities that were hidden and silenced, and even the acts that were exposed did not end in a deterrent punishment. For example, on November 1, 1948, after taking over the village of Hula on the Lebanese border, soldiers of the Carmeli Brigade concentrated dozens of men and pushed them into one of the houses. They then shot at them and blew up the house. Between 34 and 58 men were killed in the operation. The company commander in charge was prosecuted and sentenced to seven years in prison, but in practice did not serve his sentence.

In the last decade, the deafness policy of the Israeli government is reminiscent of the incompetence of Israeli governments after the establishment of the state. According to the Yesh Din organization, 91% of investigations into nationalist crimes against Palestinians in 2014-2019 were closed without an indictment being filed. 82% of the investigation files for nationalist crime against Palestinians in the years 2005–2019 were closed due to police failures. Of the 1,252 investigative cases handled between 2005 and 2019, only 100 ended with an indictment. 736 cases were closed on the grounds of "unknown criminal" (64% of all closed cases). That is, the police determined that a criminal offense had been committed in these cases, but they failed to locate suspects for the offense. Out of 63 offenses of Israeli citizens in Palestinian localities in the years 2017–2020, complaints were submitted to the police in 60 of the cases. Of these, the police investigated 38 cases. These 38 investigations have not yielded even a single indictment.

The "atmosphere" that was created struck back after the War of Independence in a country that sought to stand on its own two feet. The confrontation between Jews and Arabs did not end with the end of the war. During these years, Israel suffered from the "infiltrators" phenomenon. At first these were refugees who wanted to return to the houses and villages they had left during the war, or to cultivate the lands that belonged to them, and then infiltrators committed robberies and murders (Gidi Weitz, Haaretz, April 2, 2016). Against this background, the murders of Arabs by Jews were frequent.

David Ben-Gurion describes at the cabinet meeting in 1951 the influence of the "atmosphere", the public perception and the government's position: " In general, those who have weapons in their hands use them, especially when we now have both immigrants and people from the country, who think that Jews are people but Arabs are not people, and everything is allowed against them and some people think that it is a mitzvah to kill Arabs, and that everything the authorities claim against the murder of Arabs is not serious and it is just a pretense that it is forbidden to kill Arabs, but in fact there is a blessing that there will be fewer Arabs in the country".

This severe violence against the Arabs - as Ben-Gurion continued: "The situation is appalling in two areas: 1. murders and 2. rapes" - greatly influenced the government's discussions regarding the abolition of the death penalty. Ben-Gurion believed, "As long as a Jewish soldier is not hanged because he is an Arab murderer, the murders will not stop". Then as now, the current Israeli government must act decisively to eradicate violence against Palestinians with all the tools at its disposal, and to that end there is no need to return the death penalty. Defense Minister Bnei Gantz hurriedly replied to the soldiers who signed the "Breaking the Silence" petition: "I believe and am sure that your letter stems from a patriotic view of the love of the people and the homeland". Gantz pledged that "the clear directive for the IDF is to take active action to maintain security and order in Judea and Samaria", and insisted, despite all the evidence, that "disturbances from the Jewish side, even if more unusual, exist and are addressed".

The Israeli government cannot expect forgiveness if it does not address the clear lessons from the short history of the State of Israel. Golda Meir had alluded to an apology in 1951, when she was Minister of Labor, when she admitted "we did not do what we should have done, especially at the point of crimes against Arabs".

The government must act decisively so that we do not arrive at a moment similar to the one described by Ben-Gurion at the same cabinet meeting in 1951 because of a tiny and extreme minority: "Terrible things are being done in the country. The moment will come when we will not be able to bear our faces to the world".