Preventing Escalation in a Period of Holidays and Tensions

April – May 2022

We are amidst a tense period, a time of concern lest relations between Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel escalate. Periods of tension accompanied by fear and anxiety are test periods for Israeli society, when the ability of society to function and continue to conduct routine life is measured. As a rule, Israeli society is a product of learning from crises, emergency situations, and periods of tensions, and therefore, is also experienced in coping with these challenges. Now, too, as a society, we are called to face the task, understanding that times of crisis have a long-term formative impact on relations between the groups in our society.

In the months ahead, April and May 2022, Arab society and Jewish society will celebrate holidays and mark events of importance to them. The month of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr for Muslims concur with these months, as does Passover for Jews, and Easter for Christians, Ziyarat al-Nabi Shu’ayb for Druze, as well as days of commemoration and national holidays, including Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terror), Jerusalem Day, Israel Independence Day, and Nakba Day. Naturally, each group will want to mark its significant days according to tradition, and sometimes the overlap of the days of importance to different groups can increase and exacerbate sensitivities and tensions.

In addition, al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem becomes the focus of pilgrimages during the month of Ramadan for many Muslims from throughout Israel, and special prayer (al-Tarawih) is held daily in all mosques, including the mosques in mixed cities. Like Muslims, Christians and Jews also visit Jerusalem during this period and make pilgrimages to the city for Passover and Easter. During periods of tension, the encounter between groups is likely to be highly charged. Likewise, each group’s desire to observe its holidays and commemorative days in accordance with its customary traditions and practices can manifest itself in a lack of tolerance for the customs of others in the public space.

Since we all have an interest in maintaining routine daily life throughout Israel, and in mixed cities and regions in particular (and that includes workplaces, campuses, and shared public spaces in general), this issue requires careful consideration and proactive behavior to reduce any possible negative influences.

The overlap of some of the occasions this year is known in advance: Eid al-Fitr will coincide with Yom HaZikaron, from the evening hours of May 3, 2022 through to the evening hours of May 4 2022. While Eid al-Fitr, which occurs at the end of the month of Ramadan and lasts three days, features celebrations and joy and feasts with family and friends, Yom HaZikaron is a national memorial day characterized by sadness and restraint, and marked by public ceremonies and memorial services at cemeteries to memorialize friends and family who lost their lives. The proximity between a national memorial day and a joyful, religious holiday and the conflicting behaviors ensuing from
each of these occasions can potentially lead to clashes in the shared spaces of the two populations.

In addition, the fact that the presence of Arab society in shared public space increases during Eid al-Fitr, as many Arab families go out to enjoy nature, is likely to arouse feelings of fear in a reality absent of discourse and familiarity. This concern is exacerbated under the circumstances of the last wave of violence and generalizations made by the media, in politics, and on social media concerning Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel.

Although this is a challenge not to be downplayed, there absolutely is something we can do. The departure point for coping with the situation is the understanding and acknowledgment that the two populations hold different narratives and different traditions that inform personal experience as well as their interpretation of reality. Acknowledgment of the different narratives, even without identifying with them, is an important condition for creating an environment that respects the feelings of all citizens – Jews and Arabs alike. Such an environment is imperative for these days to pass calmly and peacefully.

In periods of tension between groups, there is a need for leading figures in cities, institutions, and organizations to speak on behalf of each group’s legitimacy in expressing its identity and customs, while making a place for, and respecting, the other group. They must create a safe environment for the entire public in Israel and all of its different communities. Mayors, elected officials, religious leaders, school principals, municipal department directors, community center directors, heads of universities and colleges, heads of businesses and civil society organizations, and others can and must dispatch messages of trust and security to intensify a sense of belonging, fairness, solidarity, and empathy.

Positive statements that draw people closer together coming from Arab and Jewish public figures in the media; providing a place for all religious symbols in public places in mixed local authorities (municipalities and other regional entities of jurisdiction); calling for solidarity on social media; distributing video clips with a message of partnership among professionals (for example, in the fields of education and health); encouraging dialog encounters; municipal preparation for increased security for all residents, done in a sensitive manner; and other such actions will all provide each group a place to express its beliefs and to mark its occasions as it sees fit, and will thereby mitigate feelings of fear and uncertainty, and will assist in moving past the crisis quickly, and even avoiding it. Experience teaches us that proactive actions by leaders favorably influence reality and even prevent escalation. This present chapter requires us to do everything in our power to apply this understanding.