

Israel: The Ugly Truth

Israel offers the Western world a reflection of itself.

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There was that jarring week in December – a protest against Arab-Jewish couples, a south Tel Aviv march and demonstration against migrant workers and African asylum seekers, the arrest of Jewish teenagers accused of beating Palestinians and the expulsion of five Arab men from their home in south Tel Aviv. It left me with the question: What is next?

It is impossible to predict the future. But there are signs that violence, perpetrated by citizens, could be spreading.

In mid-January, dozens of young Jews attacked Muslims at a mosque in Yafo or Jaffa, the historically Arab city just south of Tel Aviv. An Israeli media outlet reports that the youth, who were armed with stones and Israeli flags, shouted “Mohammed is a pig” and “Death to Arabs” just as the Muslims were preparing to pray.

When the police arrived, they did not arrest any of the assailants.

And just a few days before that march in south Tel Aviv, seven Sudanese men were attacked in Ashdod, a coastal city in the south of Israel.

According to Israeli media reports, someone threw a flaming tyre into the apartment the men shared. Five suffered from smoke inhalation, two were hospitalised.

Another alarming act of violence took place in south Tel Aviv that same night. The Hotline for Migrant Workers, an Israeli NGO, reports that three teenage girls – Israeli-born, Hebrew-speaking daughters of African migrant workers – were beaten by a group of Jewish teenagers. The attackers, one of whom was armed with a knife, allegedly called them “dirty niggers”. One of the girls needed medical treatment for her injuries.

“It’s worth noting that the girls had already experienced such violence in the neighbourhood,” Poriya Gal, the spokeswoman for the Hotline for Migrant Workers, says. “But they chose not to report it to the police out of the fear that they would be attacked again.”

Another frightening indicator of the mood here: In south Tel Aviv, on the day of the protest, a number of afterschool programmes closed early so that children could get home safely before the demonstration began. Administrators were worried that the children might otherwise get caught up in the march and attacked by protestors.

Because asylum seekers are often reluctant to ask for help – and they are unlikely to turn to the police – it is hard to determine the precise number of racially motivated attacks.

But the African Refugee Development Committee (ARDC) reports that asylum seekers are increasingly being evicted from their homes, despite the fact that they have paid rent. And the committee has been alerted to another alarming trend. Dara Levy-Bernstein of the ARDC says: “There have been a lot of [asylum seekers] complaining about being stopped by police or soldiers – we’re not entirely sure which – but they’re people in uniform who have been taking their visas and tearing them up.”

Some argue that asylum seekers and Palestinians represent distinct issues that are distinctly complicated. In some ways, they do. But the police or soldiers who tear asylum seekers’ visas are the same people who fail to arrest Jewish citizens for throwing stones at Muslim worshippers. And it boils down to something very simple: How Israel, and some of its citizens, views those it considers ‘others’.

Turning away the other

When I ask Orit Rubin, a psycho-social coordinator at ASSAF Aid Organisation for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, if she has noticed a rise in violence, she asks me to define violence.

While she has not seen an increase in physical attacks, she has recently received reports from Sudanese café and pub owners who say that police have entered their places of business and sprayed tear gas into the air, without any provocation.

The most common problem Rubin sees is African children that are being refused the public education that they are legally entitled to. Right here in Tel Aviv – the supposed bastion of Israeli liberalism – five children from two Eritrean families were recently refused registration.

And for four months, four Eritrean children have been turned away from a school in Bnei Brak, a religious suburb of Tel Aviv, because they are not Jewish. Rubin says she has written to the minister of education about the matter. She is still waiting for a response.

And then there are those who are illegally denied medical care. Rubin remarks: “This morning I got news from [our field worker] in Eilat that a pregnant woman was sitting at a medical clinic and the doctor came out and said ‘I’m not taking care of Sudanese’ and they asked her to leave.”

Rubin adds that the doctor’s refusal of treatment was even more shocking because the woman had insurance, something many asylum seekers lack.

The same day I interview Rubin, I meet an Ethiopian asylum seeker in Ashkelon who tells me that he recently sought medical help after he was attacked on the street by a Jewish Israeli. He was bleeding when he arrived at the hospital. And he was turned away.

Testing the water

It might seem sensationalist to draw conclusions about violence and discrimination from such examples. But it is important to recognise these trends early on and act on them, before they have a chance to lay root.

Yohannes Bayu, the founder and director of the ARDC, points out that the Israeli rabbis’ edict against renting and selling property to Arabs came months after a similar letter was

posted in south Tel Aviv.

“It started there, with the refugees,” Bayu says. “And nobody responded. And then it was, ‘Let’s expand that’ and [the rabbis] came up with [the edict against] the Arabs.”

So if there is not a strong response to what is happening in south Tel Aviv now, Bayu says: “It’s obvious that [things] can go to another level. This is what happened in Germany and many other places.”

When asked if he hopes that the government will step in and help prevent an escalation, Bayu answers: “They’re the ones who started it.”

He points towards the remarks of Eli Yishai, the interior minister, that migrants bring “a profusion” of diseases and drugs to Israel – claims that fly in the face of ministry of health data proving that migrants have low rates of illness.

Other government employees, including a Tel Aviv city council member, have blamed foreigners for increasing crime even though a recent Knesset report proves that asylum seekers are actually much less likely to be involved in criminal activities than Israelis.

And both migrant workers and asylum seekers were targeted by a government campaign of advertisements depicting “real Israelis” (read: paid actors) who did not have work because of “foreigners”.

“First, they [the government] try to create this fear among the public, to create this discrimination, and then the result is always violence,” Bayu says. “That’s my biggest fear.”

Fear of the unknown

Rubin agrees that the problem is rooted in the government. But she also adds that it says something about society.

“I think that some of it is not just Israel. It’s human nature to fear what you don’t know, to fear what is different.”

Rubin pauses.

“Me, personally,” she continues, “I was brought up in a home of Holocaust survivors and I was always taught that Israelis are different ... that they have learned from experience and will be weary before they slide into racism. But, you know, it’s not like that.

“Part of it is that we forgot what happened in the Second World War was human. Humans were doing it – not beasts, not monsters, but humans.”

Reflection of the West

It is too easy to demonise Israel, in part because the government, the army and some of the people do things that make it so easy.

But one of the ugliest truths about Israel – a truth that must be faced in both the US and Europe, where xenophobic and anti-Islamic sentiments are also on the rise – is that Israel offers the Western world a reflection of itself.

Of course, it is an exaggerated, hyperbolic image. But it is a picture of nationalism gone wrong. It is a picture of what can happen when a state believes that its very survival depends on maintaining a certain demographic balance. It is a picture of what happens when any country believes that those who change these numbers are an existential threat.

And it is getting more and more frightening here by the day.

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