

A dangerous anger

By [Akiva Eldar](#)

When renowned Middle East specialist Prof. Shimon Shamir looks at the Muslim immigrants who are rioting in Europe, he thinks with concern about the Arab citizens of Israel. A member of the Or Commission – which investigated the deaths of 13 of those citizens five years ago – when he listens to the reactions of the French politicians today, Shamir sadly ponders the reaction of Israel's ministers and Knesset members to his commission's grave report. As he watches the pictures of Parisian policemen dealing with serious violence without killing anyone, he recalls Israel Police's sharpshooters during the riots of October, 2000.

MK Dr. Jamal Zahalka of Balad and Dr. Danny Gera, who serves as a special adviser to the Knesset Interior and Environment Committee on the implementation of the Or Commission report, share Shamir's view. All three of them warn that if the Israeli establishment continues to ignore the situation of the Arab minority, when the flames ignite again they will flare up even higher than those in the Paris suburbs.

Shamir points to the marked similarity between the profile of the youngsters who started the riots in France in October, 2005, and that of the rioters in October, 2000, in the villages of the Galilee and the Triangle. Both here and there, these were young men of 12-25, belonging to an oppressed Muslim minority; there, they are the second and third generation of immigrants; here, a second and third generation of Arabs living under Jewish rule. Both here and there poverty and distress have led to crime and drugs, and the police avoid the "free trade zones" in drugs both in the poor neighborhoods of Paris and in the neglected Arab villages of Israel.

What characterizes the behavior of these youngsters, explains Shamir, is that unlike their parents, whose main efforts have been devoted to supporting their families, this generation is "raising their heads up" in anger against the society that is pushing them to the margins. They are exempt from the inhibitions of their parents, who accepted their fate and kept their heads down.

However, Shamir notes that, while apart from the extremists among them, most of the second generation of Muslim extremists in Europe aspire to integrate into society, the October 2000, riots here revealed a sharper and more threatening contrast between the Jewish majority and the relatively large Arab minority (18 percent of the population of Israel, as compared to France's Muslims, who constitute only 10 percent of the population?).

"Here the minority's struggle also has a national dimension," notes Shamir. "The flying of the Palestinian flag in the 2000 disturbances was an expression of an alternative identity and the desire to distinguish itself from the majority. Moreover, while the Muslims in Europe see themselves as guests who owe a measure of gratitude to their European hosts, the Arabs of Israel see themselves as an 'indigenous minority,' whose land has been stolen and whose rights have been denied by uninvited guests: Jews from Europe. The protest here is both social and political, and therefore the Arabs' anger is deeper and the danger is greater."

He notes that while during the early days of protest, the young French rioters burned cars only in their own neighborhoods, and damaged only vehicles, the rioters in the Arab villages blocked main traffic arteries and also harmed people. To this explosive material Shamir adds the behavior of the Israeli Arab leadership, which unlike the Muslim leaders in Europe made no effort to calm things down. And this "is in the best case," he says.

However, Shamir is very incensed at local politicians. Unlike the French, who after the riots of 1968 hastened to implement reforms at the universities, it was necessary to force Israeli politicians to appoint a commission of inquiry and they were content with that. Instead of aiming for a dialogue with the leadership of the country's Arab citizens and formulating a constitution that would offer a solution to their problem of identity, the politicians prefer to ignore a far more acute situation and for more than two years have been evading the implementation of the commission's recommendations. "The most self-righteous," of them, he adds, "do not hesitate to say that the Arabs enjoy excessive privileges."

Learning from the French

MK Jamal Zahalka suggests that the media and his Jewish colleagues learn a chapter from the French on relations with young people, whom chronic oppression has brought out into the streets.

"Look at how there the public and the press are showing sympathy for the minorities' distress and criticizing the government's long-standing policy of discrimination," says Zahalka. "In this country, when there are problems, they settle accounts with us and ignore the way we are discriminated against and pushed to the margins." He adds that, as if 58 years of discrimination were not enough, now the government is preparing plans for developing the Galilee. This, as he sees it, is a euphemism for "Judaizing" the main residential areas inhabited by Arabs in Israel. He compares this to the Arabization plan for Kurdistan in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The increase in the number of Arab students (today they constitute 9 percent of students at the universities and colleges?), the only place where an improvement in their situation is evident, actually keeps Zahalka awake at night: He expects an inundation of unemployed academics who will return to their villages eaten up by frustration and anger, and who in the best case will find blue-collar jobs.

"The educated young people are aware of the discrimination and they will not stand for the insult," the MK warns. "They know where to find the [Central Bureau of Statistics'] statistical yearbook and they are familiar, for example, with the shocking figure that the actual budget for an Arab student in the school system is NIS 865 a year as compared to NIS 4,635 for a Jewish student."

Arab academics, he adds, will not hold back over the discrimination against their children. In Israel, as in France, Zahalka predicts, the trouble will come from unemployed young people.

"We are screwed twice," he says. "Once because we are poor, so we pay for the economic policy. And again because we are Arabs, so we pay for the policy of oppression."

First in poverty

Dr. Danny Gera, who for years has been researching the situation of the Arab citizens of Israel, argues that the tension between them and the establishment springs from the daily discrimination against them relative to the Jewish citizens of the country, and not from their national and cultural affiliations. Unlike in France, where the minorities live in French cities, most of the Arab citizens of Israel, more than 90 percent, live in Arab locales.

An Arab, says Gera, wakes up in the morning and goes to sleep at night in his village or town with a deep sense of discrimination. Apart from Nazareth, there is no urban Arab "locale" in the socioeconomic sense of the term. The relevant authorities have not planned and have not developed any existing Arab locale into a proper city.

An Arab wants to work? The average unemployment rate among the Arabs of Israel is nearly twice the national average. The Arab locales are at the top of the unemployment table and they contribute much more than their share in the population to the poverty figures. The traditional industries, like the textile industry, which had employed tens of thousands of Arabs, have been bowing in recent years to knowledge-intensive industries. The new industrial plants are located for the most part in the center of the country, far from the periphery where the Arabs live. In none of the aggregates of Arab locales, in which 40,000 to 100,000 people live, is there a developed and modern employment zone that can attract investors.

An Arab is interested in a government job? The government itself is not implementing the decision to open the gates of its ministries to the Arab citizens. Only 5 percent of their employees are Arabs, and this is without taking into account the defense establishment. Without taking into consideration the health system, which employs mainly Arab cleaning and nursing workers, their proportion is not more than 3 percent – even though, according to the Civil Service Administration, the qualifications of Arab candidates applying for high-ranking posts are often higher than those of their Jewish competitors.

An Arab who goes to a nearby Jewish community will immediately notice the difference between it and his village: Only 5 percent of the national development budget is allocated to the sector that constitutes nearly 18 percent of Israel's population. "The NIS 4 billion plan" that was initiated by former prime minister Ehud Barak's government, and aimed to double the rate of development in the Arab locales, has been greatly cut down.

In the absence of employment zones (for industry, etc.), the Arab local councils' income from property taxes do not enable them to build public parks and pave sidewalks, and the municipal jurisdictions of most Arab locales are smaller than those of Jewish locales of a similar character. "Without ignoring the national characteristics," Gera sums up, "the everyday distress in Arab locales is more oppressive, and without a satisfactory solution for narrowing the gaps and allocating resources – the state, with its own hands, is helping the seeds of instability and unrest to sprout."

In comparing the current Paris riots with the events of 2000, the three speakers recall the 13 young Arab men who were killed by Israeli policemen's bullets.

Shamir says that following the commission's recommendations, the police have indeed acquired new, non-fatal means of dispersing demonstrations, but from his observation of the demonstrations in Paris, as well as in Turkey and South Korea, he has learned that there is still considerable room for improvement. "The fact is that even though the French police force has a tough image, and despite the provocations, in all of the disturbances thus far no one has been shot and killed by the police," he says.

Zahalka relates that since the October 2000 riots, no fewer than 17 Israeli Arabs have been killed by police bullets – among them a woman who paid with her life for overtaking a security force's vehicle in her car. Gera notes that to this day, none of the individuals responsible for these acts of killing have been brought to justice.