

# Analytical Paper

## A Systemic Reading of Violence in Our Society

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Violent incidents occur on a daily basis in Arab towns and villages, causing concern among those who care about the future of our society. We hear of gunfire, hand grenades, stabbings, and arson attacks on organizations, homes and cars, and of school students using violence against teachers and other students. The violence often assumes a clan-based, sectarian and/or political character, and sometimes turns into bloody attacks and feuds.

Most theories of violence are single-factor theories (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006; Barak, 2003; Oliver, 1994; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and resemble – to a large extent – certain analyses that are voiced in our society, which attribute violence to one factor or another: the decline in the authority of parents and teachers; the culture of violence that comes from violent films, poverty, unemployment and deteriorating social conditions; inaction on the part of the police; and other such single factors. However, I believe that it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of violence in a reductionist manner, or to attribute it to a single factor without comprehending the interaction among all of these factors within a continuous, systemic dynamic. This dynamic encompasses the prevailing political, social, cultural and psychological climate within our society, the state, and the world at large. It also includes the discrimination and national oppression that is practiced against Arab citizens in Israel, on the one hand (Heidar, 2009), and the cultural and moral heritage that has been dominant (and still is) within Arab society, on the other. This dynamic further comprises patterns of upbringing within the family and the school; the roles of political and social leadership and of the media; conflicts waged among various groups; patterns of thinking and behavior; and social modes of confronting the frustration experienced by individuals and various groups within our society (Dwairy, 1997; 1998). From this systemic perspective, we must ask: What is *new* in relation to violence?

### **A new landscape of violence: The decline in traditional authority and the rise of a state of lawlessness**

New forms of violence are arising frequently and with undue ease. However, I do not believe that what is happening can be accurately described as an “increase in violence,” since we concurrently observe a fall in many forms of violence that were prevalent and legitimated in the past, both before and after the establishment of the state. These include physical violence against women and the use of beating as a “disciplinary” measure by parents and teachers (Dwairy,

1997). True, these forms of violence are still perpetrated today, but in the past they occurred on a daily, routine basis and were not opposed by anyone. Similarly, murder on the basis of so-called “family honor” has decreased, and today, unlike in the past, attracts widespread condemnation. The same can be said of clan-based clashes and bloody cycles of vengeance; while they continue to occur, I believe that these kinds of clashes were more prevalent in the past, and perhaps also bloodier. Sexual assaults on children and incest are not new to our society; what is new is the reduction in secrecy and denial (which were widespread in past decades) and rising levels of awareness (and hence deterrence) of such assaults.

This decrease in the aforementioned forms of violence is due to several factors, including awareness-raising campaigns and the struggle that has been and continues to be waged by social and political forces opposed to violence -- with the assistance of civil legislation that safeguards the rights of the individual and the citizen -- and liberal sources of authority that have entered the dialogue within our community. So what, then, is new?

All of the receding forms of violence referred to above are violence perpetrated by social or educational authorities (the authority of parents, teachers or the clan) against vulnerable groups, in particular children and women, or against another authority (another clan). None of them posed a threat to the traditional authority, but rather derived their legitimacy from this authority, which has a tribal as well as a patriarchal, male character. As long as they were part of this (traditional) source of authority and their victims were from vulnerable groups, these phenomena roused concern among only some of the more enlightened sections of society. Other social institutions and leaders were able to live in peace with them, and indeed considered them to be legitimate customs.

Today, traditional authority is in decline, but it has not receded altogether and continues to be active. Thus a story about a group of students attacking the school principal’s office – for example – is headline news in our newspapers, and inflames our society more so than the daily reprimand that teachers would give their students for allegedly failing to complete an assignment did in the past (or does today). Similarly, the assault of the head of a local council stirs up our society today more so than the murder of a woman on the basis of so-called “family honor.” Likewise, news of groups of delinquents opening fire on one another is considered an anomaly, and incites our social institutions and political leadership. It invites them to reevaluate the state of our society in order to prevent a recurrence of this violence. Conversely, leaders are content to affect a “reconciliation” when bloody clashes between clans occur, and do not attempt to engender radical social change. Thus it appears that the mobilization of our society against violence is related – essentially – to the magnitude of the threat that violence presents to the tribal-patriarchal regime and the extent of the resulting lawlessness, and is not related to the number of victims as long as they are from vulnerable groups.

What is new in the arena of violence is not only the quantity, but also, and indeed primarily, the type of violence being used. It can be argued – with some generalization – that the situation today is one of lawlessness: violence by the social and educational authorities has decreased, while violence by groups that are frustrated and have lost their way has risen, particularly youth violence. Today's youth reject and resist the reprimands of parents and teachers, and women today are more willing to defend themselves against violence and resort to the law and women's support organizations. The second factor that distinguishes the violence of today is that it is displaced or "reckless" violence that misses the target; it is a form of "venting" against "scapegoats" that may have no connection to the real source of frustration. A research study I carried out with a number of colleagues several years ago revealed that some of the violence committed by teachers against students was not justified by the behavior of the students, but was connected to the teachers' frustration with their professional or personal lives (Dwairy, 1997). In the context of the family, a father who is economically and socially frustrated "vents" against his wife and children, a woman who is frustrated by her husband "vents" against her sons and daughters, youths who are frustrated with their parents or teachers "vent" against weaker youths, and so on. What is new, then, is on the one hand the erosion of traditional authority and the emergence of a state of lawlessness, and on the other the growing prevalence of "displaced" violence.

### **Faltering among several sources of authority**

Our society has undergone systematic changes – social, cultural, political and economic – through which violence has assumed a new form and character. Today our society is faltering among different and sometimes conflicting sources of authority. Thus there is the traditional source of authority that the members of our people have conformed to over the decades and which, as discussed above, has begun to break down. Then there is the religious authority (in particular the Muslim authority, which has grown with the spread of political Islam); the Israeli authority, whose cultural and moral climate influences us (as citizens in Israel); and the individualist, liberal authority brought over from the West by the media and various other communication channels. Each of these sources of authority imposes values and taboos that condemn certain types of violence and endorse others. The traditional authority prescribes respect for adults for children, and at the same time sanctions violence by adults against children, and by men against women. The religious authority urges both adults and children to respect religion and its symbols, sometimes calling for tolerance, while at other times encouraging – directly or indirectly – intolerance and violence against other religious groups. The Israeli and liberal authorities condemn violence against children and women, but at the same time promote the logic of power, practice arrogance, and violate the rights of the Palestinian people and other peoples. We are living in a state of social and political frustration in which we are stumbling among contradictory sources of authority. Each of us selects that which suits us in a particular circumstance, only to change our mind and adopt other sources of

authority in other circumstances, based on interest and without adhering to a given moral principle or authority.

The state of violence does not exist in isolation from the surrounding political, economic and social situation. As a result of continuing poverty and discrimination on the basis of national belonging (Heidar, 2009), life for Arabs in this state is fraught with frustration and anger, which provides fertile ground for violence and deviancy. Furthermore, we are influenced by the values of power, arrogance and violation of rights that prevail in Israel; we exude these principles in our confrontations with Israeli society, and also within our own society. The state's energies and budget are directed towards continuing the occupation and settlement, at the expense of social welfare. The police are reluctant to combat violence and drugs, and certain sections are benefitting from the state of lawlessness (drug dealers and organized gangs, for example) by profiting from thievery and collecting "protection money."

### **Who really takes a stand against violence?**

Voices from all segments of our people and its leadership claim to oppose violence and say that they are prepared to participate in marches and conferences against violence. And yet the violence continues. Thus either someone is being hypocritical, or each side is opposing a certain type of violence while supporting another. Some denounce violence by young people, but sanction the violence of the traditional authorities; others condemn all forms of violence and call for the adoption of liberal mechanisms of dialogue based on the values of human rights. Specific forms of violence highlight the differences among various groups. For example, women's movements are genuinely opposed to violence against women and children. But do political leaders (politicians and heads of local councils) and educational leaders (principals and teachers) actually oppose this form of violence? All political leaders oppose police violence against Arab citizens. But are they committed to shunning violence in local election battles? Similarly, school principals, teachers and parents criticize some forms of violence while sanctioning others.

It is significant that those who wield patriarchal and tribal authority attribute the proliferation of violence among school students and young people to the decline in patriarchal power and the influx of liberal values into our society. They therefore advise parents and teachers to bring back the "cane" to control violence among youth. Of course, those who advocate this approach forget that the waning of patriarchal power did not occur voluntarily, and is not a "mistake" that can be rectified. Rather, it is the result of inexorable social and political changes that have occurred among most of the world's peoples, and have shifted power from social, tribal and patriarchal principles to the "state of its citizens" and its institutions. The state and rule of law have therefore supplanted the authority of the clan or the tribe. In this regard, our fundamental problem as

Arab citizens in Israel<sup>1</sup> is that while there has been a decline in traditional authority, we have yet to find an alternative. The alternative of the “state of its citizens” with institutions that actually address the social issues of citizens essentially does not exist for us, creating a state of lawlessness and an absence of authority. In such a situation, it is not possible to turn back the tide of history and reinstate traditional authority. Instead, we must strive to achieve full citizenship rights for Arab citizens in order to feel – as a national minority in this country – that the state is a state of all its citizens, and that it allocates its budget and institutions to social and cultural issues, and not to occupation and settlement.

### **“A welfare state of all its citizens”, dialogue and pluralism**

There are no angels on Earth, only human beings and communities that are engaged in multiple social, political and religious conflicts, accompanied by violence that has not ceased in any era in man’s history. Nevertheless, one must distinguish between three forms of violence:

1. Violence committed by the strong in order to exploit the weak.
2. Violence committed by oppressed groups struggling for their rights and freedom, i.e. what is sometimes unjustly referred to today as “terrorism.”
3. Reckless violence that misses the target or violence that is “displaced” from the true source of frustration or injustice.

Social and political conflicts endure, and some forms of violence are inevitable. While we cannot expect to eliminate all kinds of violence, it is possible to endeavor to channel the energies of frustration and anger within our society into constructive and meaningful endeavors.

As stated above, the decline in traditional authority should not lead us to a state of lawlessness, lost amid different sources of authority, but should bring with it a new source of authority. Combating violence has to take place within a political and social struggle for a just society. This struggle requires our society – with all its partisan, sectarian and tribal constituents – to rally against the policies of discrimination, occupation, and settlement, on the one hand, and for full citizenship within a welfare state of all its citizens, without discrimination, on the other. The political and social leadership of our society bears a serious responsibility for this undertaking.

On our way towards building a just society, we must – leaders and people alike – imbibe the values of dialogue and pluralism, according to which each party respects the other and in which all groups have a stake in the construction process (Dwairy, 2004). Our society is in dire need of bold dialogue, free from charges of treachery, heresy or exaggeration, to discuss all the traditional,

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<sup>1</sup> Not all Western states are “states of their citizens” concerned with their citizens’ social and cultural affairs. Indeed, most of these states are capitalist states that exploit their citizens, and thus frustration, oppression and poverty are increasing rapidly and violence is spreading within them.

religious and liberal authorities that act within our society, and to develop a source of authority that is acceptable and suited to our situation and future path. We must be aware that the values of pluralism differ from the values of liberal democracy, which grant the individual freedom of choice, and awards the majority decision-making power. The values of pluralism are the values of coexistence, not decision-making, and entail respect for the rights of the other; for social, traditional, and religious constructs; and for the freedom of the individual. They are values that promote dialogue in order to reach solutions that balance rights and needs among all parties, be they individuals or groups. We must persevere in pursuing dialogue and pluralism at various levels. Thus if we demand that the state engage in dialogue with us as a national minority, we must also engage with it. We must pursue dialogue in our schools, in our relations with our sons and daughters, and in relations among political parties, religious denominations, and clans. Social welfare for all citizens of the state and pluralism and respect for the rights of the other are the two main projects that must be at the top of the political, social, cultural, and educational agenda of the leadership of our society.

### **The role of the political, social and religious leadership**

The role of the political, social and religious leadership is not confined to rallying the masses in a public battle and channeling the frustration of citizens into a struggle for political and social change to achieve a “welfare state of all its citizens.” This leadership must also assume an educational role, given their status as role models, whose conduct and statements influence citizens. It is not enough for them to merely take part in conferences and marches against violence; they must also provide a personal example of discretion, tolerance, dialogue, pluralism, and respect for others. For when these leaders allow themselves to engage in hostility and violence with their political rivals – in particular in local elections – or to participate directly or indirectly in clan-based or sectarian clashes, this violence encourages young people to adopt such methods with each other. In such cases, any statements they make, and any conference or demonstration they organize against violence will be of little avail.

The political leadership and heads of local councils must put issues of welfare, psychological and pedagogical services, youth clubs, sports and the arts at the top of their list of priorities, for the sake of constructing the human being. Local councils must direct psychologists, counselors and social workers to draw up intervention plans in schools and with parents to guide them in dealing with students, helping them tackle their problems through non-violent means, and in ways that allow them to develop healthily both psychologically and socially.

### **The role of parents and schools**

We must not wait for the realization of a welfare state of its citizens, as there is much to be done today in the home and at school. It is neither necessary nor possible to return to the authoritarian and violent models of upbringing of the

past, and lawlessness is not the only alternative to the traditional authority of parents and teachers. Another alternative is to adopt methods of dialogue in order to define new rules of engagement and formulate agreements between parents and children, and between teachers and students. It is unacceptable and inappropriate for parents and teachers to use violence and humiliation as methods of upbringing, while at the same time expecting their children or students to shun such approaches for resolving conflict. They must realize that children emulate them as role models, and therefore have a greater influence through their conduct than through verbal lecturing.

Today there are a host of books that provide guidance to parents on how to cope with their children's problems. Are parents setting aside time to read these books and learn effective ways to contend with their children's problems? Arab schools are called upon to implement programs to teach students methods of understanding the self and the other, as well as non-violent means for addressing frustrations and resolving conflict. They must also initiate a process for drafting constitutions that set out students' rights and duties and identify ways for dealing with predicaments and conflicts. Such constitutions should not be written by school principals or teachers' committees, but rather come about through an educational process in which students, teachers and parents participate in a series of discussions, sub-committees and referenda held over the course of a year or more. When this process arrives at a constitution that provides answers to issues faced by students and teachers, students and teachers will begin to channel their frustrations into democratic, civilized and constructive channels, as opposed to expressing them in violent and destructive ways. This task must not be delayed.

## **Conclusion**

Arab society is experiencing a new phase, in which the violence of social authority has declined and reckless or displaced violence, particularly among young people, has risen. It is not possible to turn back the tide of history, nor can we accept the prevailing state of lawlessness. Violence can ultimately only be tackled through a political battle for a "welfare state of all its citizens," which transforms energies of frustration into constructive efforts. Furthermore, it is imperative that our society adopt the principles of pluralism, which call for respecting the other, and pursue open dialogue on the various traditional, religious and liberal sources of authority, free from charges of treachery or heresy. A primary responsibility falls on the political and social leadership, which is not limited to channeling frustration towards a constructive struggle, but must lead by personal example through dialogue, respect for the other, and patience. Parents and teachers must also assume responsibility without delay. They must educate their children and students in non-violent modes of thinking, addressing frustrations, and resolving conflict. This is a feasible undertaking that requires psychological service centers, educational consultants and welfare offices to mobilize and support schools and parents in this mission.

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