

CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN ARAB SOCIETY: RECENT SPIKE AND EMERGING RESPONSES

BRIEFING PAPER

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Photo: Tel Aviv Crime Demonstration, August 2023. Credit: Bokra.net

Table of Contents

Homicide Rates in Arab Society 2012-2023	3
Sources of Criminal Activity	4
Contributing Factors	5
Government Resolutions	7
Community Policing	9
Emergency Headquarters and Funding Initiative	9
Emerging Initiatives	10
In Closing	12
Acknowledgments	12

Crime and Violence in Arab Society

The year 2023 has been marked by an alarming surge in crime and violence in Israel's Arab society. As of September 2023, the toll on Arab lives has exceeded 160 individuals, and many more have been injured or impacted in some way. A small and interconnected community, this reality is casting a shadow of fear and insecurity over Arab citizens, and more recently, across all Israel. In Arab communities today, people are reluctant to venture into public spaces, shop at local businesses, and parents are keeping their children at home to shield them from potential harm.

Homicide Rates in Arab Society 2012-2023

Disproportionate and rising violent crime in Arab society has been at crisis levels for much of the last decade. Between 2018 and 2022, for example, there was a total of 690 homicides across Israel, resulting in 731 victims. 70% of these victims were Arab citizens. Only around one third of the cases in Arab society led to indictments, compared to approximately a 70% indictment rate in cases involving Jewish victims¹ (Figure 2).

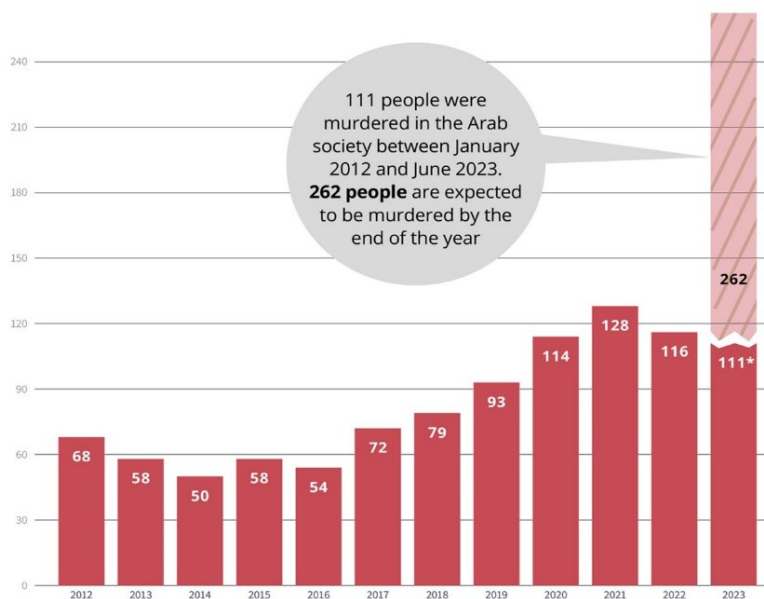


Figure 1: Number of Victims in Arab Community, 2012 - 2023²

In 2021, the government approved GR-549, an NIS 2 billion government plan to address and prevent violent crime in Arab society. Though only in the beginning of plan implementation, the number of homicides plateaued in 2022 for the first time since 2016. Hopes of a turnaround were shattered before mid-2023, however, as homicide rates shot up to unprecedented levels, surpassing previous records.

This paper summarizes key issues related to violent crime and crime prevention in Arab society, the status of recent government plans, and points to current and emerging activities by non-government actors in response to the crisis and to support Arab communities caught in the crossfire.

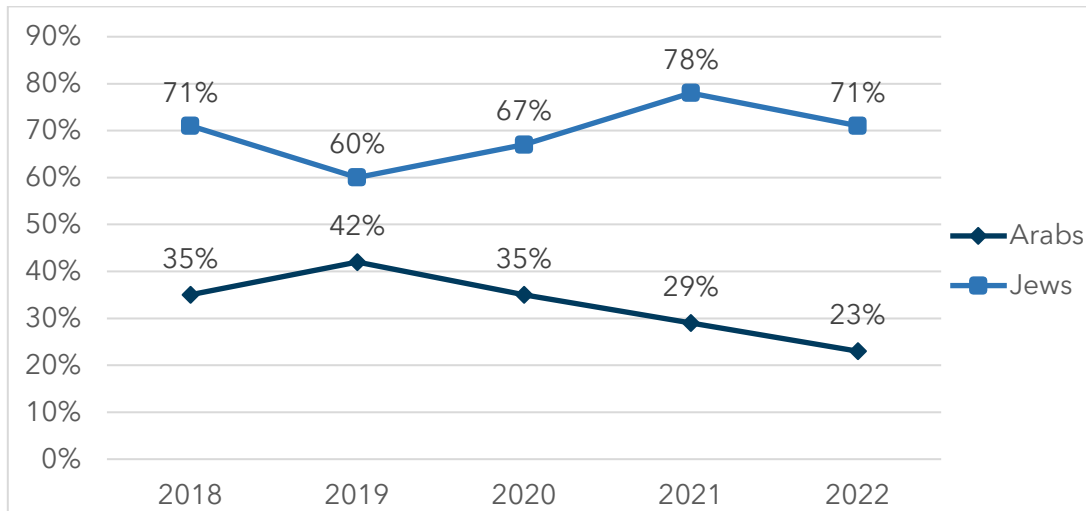


Figure 2: Percentage of Homicide Indictments by Population Groups, 2018 - 2022^{3, 4}.

Sources of Criminal Activity

While the issue is commonly referred to as a “crime and violence” crisis, it is important to differentiate between types of criminal activity. According to a review of all homicide data since 2017 the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) shows that the percentage of murders resulting from criminal organization, clan, and gang activity has “increased over time and is the exclusive cause for the increase in the number of murders in Arab society.”⁵ More than half of the cases over this time, some 391 homicides, are a result of this type of criminal activity. In contrast, personal conflicts, usually arising from spontaneous disputes, and domestic violence account for a mere 9% of these murders.

Background	Number of murders (percentage of total cases)
Violence between clans	145 (20%)
Criminal organizations	136 (19%)
Street brawls	52 (7%)
Collateral damage	58 (8%)
Total cases of violence by clans, criminal organizations, and gangs (including collateral damage)	391 (55%)
Domestic violence	53 (7%)
Criminals murdered in the course of a crime	42 (6%)
Personal conflict	16 (2%)
Unknown	211 (30%)
Total	713 (100%)

Figure 3: Background to murders from 2017 to June 2023⁶.

There are various schools of thought about the causes for the increase in organized crime in Arab society beyond the socio-economic conditions that make it fertile ground. One is that after police cracked down on organized crime in Jewish society⁷, the Arab foot soldiers who had learned the trade filled the vacuum and found the lack of police activity and intervention in Arab communities favorable⁸. Another is the claim that at least some organized crime is headed by Palestinian collaborators who were placed in Arab communities by the Shin Bet and given immunity⁹. The former is used to suggest that police enforcement can be effective against organized crime, while the latter raises more complications.

Contributing Factors

In 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu established a committee of directors-general to address the pressing issue of crime and violence within Arab society. This committee, comprised of government ministries' CEOs, compiled recommendations for the government with input from representatives of the National Committee of Arab Mayors¹⁰. Their comprehensive examination scrutinized the nature of crime, its root causes, and potential solutions. Below is a summary of the primary factors contributing to crime and violence within Arab society, as highlighted by the committee:

1. **Challenges in Police-Minority Relations:** A history marked by strained relationships between the police and Arab society has fostered a profound lack of trust. This skepticism stems from a dual challenge: inadequate policing, leaving Arab citizens feeling unprotected, and over-policing, which subjects them to unwarranted suspicion and punitive enforcement practices. This combination discourages collaboration with law enforcement and perpetuates a cycle of unsolved crimes, further eroding trust.
2. **Criminal Organizations:** The proliferation of criminal organizations, which have amassed power and wealth through activities such as arms and drug trafficking, illicit loans, and extortion, has left a lasting impact. These groups entice young individuals with promises of quick money and elevated status. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include the widespread availability of illegal weapons, lack of available credit and financial instruments that fuels grey and black-market lending, lack of deterrence, and the ability of criminal organizations to interfere with municipal activities¹.
3. **NEET - Not in Employment or Training:** Around 40% of Arabs age 18-24 are neither employed nor engaged in any formal education or training. Their disproportionate involvement in delinquency underscores the

¹ Arraf, Suha. "How Did Arab Local Authorities Become a Golden Goose for Criminal Organizations" Siha Mekomit. January 14, 2020. She counts nearly 20 attempted attacks on senior members of local authorities in a year and a half (2019-2020).

connection between inactivity and crime¹¹. High dropout rates from public education and a scarcity of informal educational activities contribute to the high number of NEETs leaving young people without constructive outlets. Furthermore, language barriers, lack of role models, limited interaction with positive adult influences, and little sense of horizon enable criminal organizations to exploit this void. The committee stressed that no single authority oversees the NEET issue.

4. **Poverty, Unemployment, and Housing Shortages:** Persistent socio-economic gaps underly the vulnerability of the Arab population and the difficulty of local authorities to deter and prevent criminal activity. Whereas there is a growing Arab middle class, most Arab families still suffer from poverty and unemployment and most local authorities lack resources and capacities to provide adequate services. In addition, housing shortages and inadequate land regulation hampers profitable real estate market, contributing to competition for land, housing, and related credit.

A study by the Abraham Initiatives has also identified social cohesion as a differentiating factor between localities with low and high murder rates. Crime tends to thrive in communities marked by internal conflicts. Conversely, higher education and engagement in cultural, community, and social activities correlate with lower crime rates. When positive avenues for engagement are lacking, youth often resort to criminal activities. The presence of positive academic role models broadens horizons and reduces the propensity for criminal behavior¹¹.

In general, young people in Arab society grapple with identity conflict. Schools do not teach them about their national identity, leaving them with a sense of detachment from the country. This along with the internal struggle over identity significantly shape their outlook on the future. Additionally, this factor contributes to the appeal of criminal organizations, which provide these youths with a sense of belonging.

The committee of CEOs recommended¹² a multi-faceted approach, prioritizing both violence reduction and socio-economic development across all aspects of life that address underlying causes. The primary directions of action outlined by the committee include:

1. **Enhanced Enforcement:** Strengthening law enforcement efforts to combat crime.
2. **Financial Inclusion:** Addressing financial disparities through inclusive measures.

¹¹ According to the report, approximately one-third of the individuals charged with criminal offenses in the Arab community are between the ages of 18-24.

3. **Focus on Young Adults:** Concentrating on two age groups: 14-18-year-olds (high school) and 18-24-year-olds (with emphasis on males).

These recommendations became the foundation for subsequent government resolutions, budgets, and programs.

Government Resolutions

The provision of personal security is considered the duty of the nation-state, requiring deployment of measures such as policing, prevention, investigation, enforcement, adjudication, and penalties. In recent years, most non-governmental efforts focused on crime prevention and reduction in Arab society have worked to advocate for more effective policing and government initiatives and develop the requisite knowledgebase and capacities.

In May 2021, widespread escalations and clashes between Jewish and Arab citizens in mixed cities and Arab communities drew attention to the high percentage of unengaged young adults in Arab society, the impact of crime on their lives, and concerns about inadequate policing. By the end of 2021, a new government had taken office, following a campaign prominently featuring internal security concerns. Public Security Minister Omer Bar Lev unveiled the National Plan to Counter Crime and Violence within Arab Society, the most comprehensive plan to date which included Government Resolution 549, its most well-known component¹³. The program is built around four core pillars:

1. **Enhanced Operational Enforcement:** A commitment to intensify police operations in areas known for criminal activity, targeting the seizure of illegal weapons and bolstering intelligence efforts.
2. **Operation "Safe Track"¹³:** A coordinated initiative involving various state agencies, including the police, money laundering authority, tax authority, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection. This operation, led by Deputy Minister Segalovich, entailed weekly tasks assigned to all participating authorities.
3. **GR-549: Multi-Year Force Building Plan¹⁴:** Launched in October 2021 with an investment of NIS 2.5 billion, this multi-year initiative introduced substantial enhancements to police capabilities. Key measures included strengthening SEF¹⁵, a dedicated unit for policing in Arab society, the establishment of community policing systems within Arab localities, the deployment of surveillance cameras, the implementation of a "safe city" model in mixed cities, and local-level interventions ("Stop the Bleeding").

¹³ The program renamed to "[Green Safe Track](#)."

- 4. Supportive Legislative Package:** This package includes the Protection Law, enacted in July 2023, which broadens the definition of protection money and stipulates a minimum prison sentence of three years.

By the end of 2022, initial signs of the plans' successes were attributed to ongoing dialogue between enforcement agencies, representatives of the Arab public, and local authorities, facilitated by Deputy Minister Segalovich. The coordination among various government ministries and agencies also enhanced trust and hope within Arab Society.

Concerns that the plan might not be continued in the same spirit under the administration elected in late 2022 have indeed materialized. Despite the current government's commitment to crime prevention and response, many of GR-549's major components and budgets have thus far been delayed, paused, or dismantled. For instance, "Stop the Bleeding," the promising 7-town pilot program^{IV} that brings together national and local resources reduce instances of violent crime, will be incorporated into the Ministry of National Security at the end of year casting uncertainty about the continuity of coordination, oversight, and budgets.

Moreover, the police unit for Arab society (SEF), established in 2021, does not have a leader after its commander resigned recently. Other challenges included reduced synchronization between ministries and law enforcement agencies, as well as insufficient dialogue with Arab society representatives¹⁶. The situation is compounded by the government's perceived antagonistic stance toward Arab society, with crime often portrayed as nationally motivated, and suggested use of the Shin Bet and administrative detentions as measures. In August 2023, the Minister of Finance cited crime rates as a justification for withholding budgets designated for Arab local authorities, stating that such funds could end up into the hands of crime organizations.

In addition to more stringent measures, a complementary approach involves the deployment of soft policy tools, encompassing both short- and long-term strategies. These include educational and preventative initiatives, building public trust in institutions, urban planning, and development, fostering financial inclusivity, improving municipal governance, community-based interventions, enhancing to the education system, and strengthening the welfare framework. Local authorities and civil society organizations play a pivotal role in designing and implementing these programs to effectively curb violence, resolve conflicts, and deter involvement in criminal organizations.

^{IV} "Stop the Bleeding" is a program designed to address systemic issues contributing to violence, focusing on enforcement, prevention, and community engagement. It brings together local and national stakeholders with the goal of reducing violent crime through enhanced policing, improved coordination, and increased community services and involvement. This initiative received a budget allocation of NIS 25 million over five years from the GR-549 plan and operates in seven Arab localities. The program is informed by extensive international research and tailored to each locality's specific needs. View IATF call on "Stop the Bleeding", [here](#), and the related PowerPoint, [here](#).^V Out of 257 established municipal units of community policing in Israel, only 81 are functional.

Community Policing

The concept of community or municipal policing is considered a more holistic and effective approach in many countries¹⁷ for improving the effectiveness and relations of police work in minority communities. Through the community policing model in Israel¹⁸, also known as “*Shitur Yroni*”^v (Heb. Municipal Policing), local authorities apply for an RFP to recruit “Municipal Inspectors” that will work with both the community and police. The inspector, using their local knowledge and given powers, intervenes in various offences, supports investigations, and enforces laws, especially quality of life violations, construction and business licensing infractions, incidents of road rage, and the security of municipal events¹⁹. In November 2021, Government Decision 631²⁰ focused on the establishment of 10 municipal enforcement units in local Arab authorities, as well as in Druze and Circassian localities^{vi}. According to the Knesset Research and Information Center, in January 2022, it was decided to establish community policing centers in eight Arab municipalities: Jaljulia, Jsir al-Zarqa, Turan, Kfar Yasif, Kfar Kanna, Kfar Kassem, Arara in the Negev, and Segev Shalom. The status and activity of the centers in all Arab authorities is not clear. However, responses received from some of the Arab authorities and civil society organizations indicate that at least in Jaljulia, Jsir al-Zarqa, Turan, Kfar Yasif²¹, Kfar Kanna, and Kfar Kassem, Qalansawe²² the municipal policing units began their activities during 2023²³.

Several challenges have emerged in the implementation of community policing in Arab communities, including recruitment^{vii} and retainment issues. Background Material for a Discussion on Municipal Policing in Knesset in May 2023 shows that only half of the positions that were approved and funded for Arab communities have actually been filled.²⁴ It is claimed that the difficulties in recruitment occur because the selection process is time-consuming and can last between two to six months. Additionally, some authorities have reported challenges in retaining assistant inspectors for an extended period, primarily due to low wages.

Emergency Headquarters and Funding Initiative

Arab civil society organizations face an array of pressing challenges with respect to addressing rising crime and violence. As of 2021-2022, a clear government strategy to combat crime had emerged and begun to be implemented. In 2023, however, with deterioration of trust and uncertainty about further implementation of government plans, civil sector and community leaders are grappling with what can be done until or in lieu of an effective comprehensive national plan.

^v Out of 257 established municipal units of community policing in Israel, only 81 are functional.

^{vi} This decision altered the threshold condition for including different Arab local authorities, allowing Arab authorities with a population of more than 10,000 residents to join the program. Additionally, changes were made to the Ministry of National Security's funding, stipulating that the ministry would participate in financing the salaries of assistant inspectors in local Arab authorities at a rate of 70% (compared to up to 35% in other authorities).

^{vii} The prerequisites for employment include lack of criminal record, a high school diploma, successful completion of a 5-day inspectors' course, medical fitness confirmation by a licensed physician, Hebrew proficiency, local residency. A valid firearm carry permit and a completion of officers' course - an advantage.

Recognizing the need for urgency, resources, and coordination, a consortium of funders is launching an emergency initiative to establish a headquarters and provide essential support to key organizations and efforts.

The Emergency Funding Initiative will support research activities, campaigns, and community-based initiatives, including:

1. **Emergency Headquarters.** The National Council of Heads of Arab Local Authorities (NCHALA) will establish and run the emergency headquarters based on the model, successfully funded by philanthropy, for the Arab community during Covid. NCHALA, a trusted anchor organization, will collaborate with a network of leading Arab civil society organizations.
2. **Philanthropic Resources.** In the coming months, the consortium aims to coordinate and stream philanthropic resources for the following areas:
 - **Supporting civil society organizations** implementing existing projects and initiating new ones aimed at combating violence in Arab society.
 - **Strengthening community resilience** at the local level, with a focus on developing safe public spaces for communal interaction.
 - **Establishing an anchor organization in Arab society** dedicated to coordinating efforts to address the issue of crime and violence, acting strategically, conducting advocacy, and serving as a data center and a strong voice for the community.
 - **Influencing policy** by strengthening the public campaign to increase government involvement in this area.
 - **Strengthening public awareness and motivation** through a positive campaign in both Hebrew and Arabic media and on social media.
 - **Providing Psychological support for trauma victims.**

As this emergency initiative comes together to provide a framework for coordination and resources, a variety of organizations and leaders are advancing various programs and developing responses on the ground. A few examples reflecting the variety of activities are listed below:

Emerging Initiatives

Advocacy

- **The National Council of Heads of Arab Local Authorities** has appointed a dedicated advisor to combat crime, engaging with directors-general of government ministries. They exert pressure on state authorities, particularly the prime minister, urging the nomination of a special project manager. Additionally, efforts are being made to mobilize Jewish society, especially Jewish mayors, to join this struggle. There are demonstrations, including a

protest tent outside the Prime Minister's Office and rallies across the country. The Council threatened that Arab local authorities would strike and postpone the start of the school year in September 2023. In addition, Arab local authorities mobilized with the Council in protest of budget freeze.

- **The Abraham Initiatives** is monitoring the implementation of GR 549 and advocating for policy changes, mostly in law enforcement. They also launched the "Arabs Lives Matter" campaign. The Safe Communities initiative, developed by the Abraham Initiatives, aims to reduce crime and violence by empowering local communities, promoting equitable policing, and advocating for policy changes within Israeli government ministries. This approach shifts control to the community, enabling Arab citizens to actively participate in enhancing safety and well-being. They collaborate closely with government officials and law enforcement to deliver fair and inclusive services. Additionally, their initiative offers model personal security programs that could be adopted and scaled by the government²⁵.
- **"March of the Dead" Demonstrations**, a grassroots protest movement, drew attention to the grief of the Arab community, inadequate security and law enforcement, and the call for urgent collective action against violence during organized demonstrations in Tel Aviv (Aug 7) and Haifa (Aug 31)²⁶.

Prevention

- **"Mothers for Life"**, an organization uniting over 70 mothers of murder victims, is dedicated to breaking the cycle of violence. Fidaa Shehadeh, the organization's coordinator, asserts that mothers can prevent future murders by relocating their children before vengeance takes hold. These mothers also offer support to the families of victims, preventing their exclusion from the community.
- **Social Entrepreneurship and Training Programs for Youth:** Arab led NGOs like "Influence," "Sanad," "Tishreen," "Citizens Build a Community" "AJEEC-NISPED" and many others foster social entrepreneurship, volunteerism, and training frameworks for NEETs. Together, they propose alternative frameworks for youth, engage with schools, promote positive success models, and create momentum in the fight against crime and violence within the community.

Local Authority Model

- **The Um Al Fahm Model:** In December 2021, the Um al-Fahm municipality partnered with "Inclusion"^{viii} to develop a municipal emergency plan to combat crime and violence in the city. This comprehensive plan aims to build trust among residents, the municipality, and the police. Strategies

^{viii} "Inclusion" - a joint initiative of experts in various fields whose goal is to provide information, guidance, and training in the promotion of social equality in Israel to local authorities, civil society organizations, and community associations.

include reinforcing municipal governance, establishing a municipal policing system, and fostering community-based initiatives such as a resilience forum. Additional measures encompass strengthening community institutions, creating new community centers, initiating a gap year and community year programs for young people, bolstering educational staff in schools, and improving the welfare system. This local example underscores multi-faceted efforts for both short and long-term solutions. It combines in-depth resolutions with enhancing social cohesion, utilizing budgets derived from the five-year plan (550). This localized approach can be adapted as a generic program for other localities.

In Closing

The alarming surge in crime and violence in Israel's Arab society continues to be the most pressing issue for Arab citizens. The recent murders of Arab candidates²⁷ in local elections and local officials²⁸ have underscored the urgency and depth of risk to the community in the short and long term. An unprecedented meeting of mayors with the head of Shin Bet²⁹ and Police, without the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir, highlights the complex inter-governmental and state-minority dynamics at play.

A handful of recent major arrests of heads of crime organizations,³⁰ suggests concerted efforts on part of various security agencies continue. However, the lack of clear national policy and framework leaves open questions about overall efforts to address root causes and improve police-services as a core aspect of state-minority relations.

The urgency of the situation is driving stakeholders to seek immediate action and mobilization of support from within and outside of Arab society. At the same time, all are unequivocal about the importance of medium to longer-term strategies as well³¹ that aim to address poverty, socio-economic disparities, unemployment, and financial inclusion, among others³². Additionally, the long-term goal of fostering coordination, shared vision, and goodwill between national and local levels remains a priority.

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³ Adapted from Crime in the Arab Society: Data and Information on the Implementation of the "Safe Track" Program by J. Almo-Kapital, Dr. N. Yakhimovich Cohen, R. Schwartz, 2023, Knesset Research and Information Center. [\[Hebrew\]](#).

⁴ Data Source: Eden Sason, Senior Office Coordinator, Office of the Minister of National Security, Response to the Inquiry from the Knesset Research and Information Center, May 10, 2023.

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