Amid growing lawlessness in the Arab community, gov’t must take 5 steps

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 26.08.2023

We are in a state of lawlessness. “This is an emergency that requires determined steps by the state to root out crime and violence and to prevent the loss of life”. This statement, made by President Isaac Herzog, perfectly summarizes the state of affairs in Israel in the wake of the deadly crime plaguing the Arab sector.

There is no point in explaining how dire the situation is. An increasing share of the public feels the state no longer performs the basic duties it has toward its citizens: protecting them and their property.

This reality has major ramifications nationally and on an individual level: It creates a feeling of lost personal safety and the inability to lead a normal life, while simultaneously undermining Israel’s image on the world stage, and creates a basis for the claim that it deliberately discriminates and neglects the Arab community. It also has the effect of pushing the young Arabs into crime families, since they are no longer of the view that the state can provide for their security and protection. The declining personal security has also had the effect of changing how families conduct their day-to-day affairs in the Arab sector.

The police are not indifferent to the struggles of the public. It is well aware of what is expected of it in terms of providing immediate ways to address things effectively, and despite the scathing criticism it faces, it still has an important role to play. It has been proactive and has been acting with great efforts, but the challenge has become too great and can no longer be dealt with using the conventional tools at its disposal.

But this reality is not sealed in fate. The state has proved that it knows how to deal with such complex challenges. Here are five decisions that could create a turning point and significantly move the battle against crime forward.

1. Defining the fight against crime as a national mission that is spearheaded by the prime minister: To successfully deal with the challenge, it is vital

that the response be part of a multi-agency process synchronized at the national level through various ministries, municipalities, and other relevant bodies. On top of the national security minister, all related ministries should take part in this effort, including the Prime Minister's Office, the Justice Ministry, the Defense Ministry, the Finance Ministry, and the Interior Minister. Having the prime minister lead this effort is crucial not just because of the message this would send, but also to ensure that all the ministries and authorities are involved on a personal level and to integrate the various bodies and apparatuses that are directly subordinate to the prime minister. It would also help cut inter-agency red tape when it comes to making decisions. A holistic, comprehensive, and methodical approach must be taken, and all those involved may be part of the process. Benchmarks, with clear quantitative measures, would be set, as well as a timetable to have them realized, with ongoing oversight by the prime minister and complete transparency to the public to win back its trust and restore its security.

2. Using the Shin Bet security agency to the fullest extent as allowed under the law. Rather than wasting time on redefining the current definitions, it would be best to see what can be done under the current framework, under the loosest possible interpretation. This practical approach will be acceptable for the Shin Bet as well and will allow it to preserve its resources and capabilities, especially in light of the rising threat of terrorism.
3. Using, in a measured and monitored way, administrative detention to deal with the threats to public safety even when this is not terrorist-related. The criticism over using such tools in a democratic society is valid. As is the fear of a slippery slope. But in the grand scheme of things, this is a necessary evil because there is no available alternative for law enforcement when it comes to neutralizing immediate threats. It would be proper to set processes that would let agencies use this tool on a temporary basis, so long as it is within reason and under oversight.
4. Fighting the black market: Dramatic reduction of cash-only transaction. It would be appropriate to task the Finance Ministry to devise a whole host of measures for the immediate and long term in order to bring about a major reduction in such transactions, financial fraud, and money laundering in order to make life harder for crime gangs.
5. Cracking down on arms trafficking and illegal trade of weapons: To do

this, Israeli intelligence agencies and interrogation units in the Israel Police must be bolstered, even if that comes at the expense of other efforts. Arms-related felonies should potentially be classified as terrorist-related, which would allow the Shin Bet to get involved in such cases and will bolster deterrence in light of the seriousness such crimes get among law enforcement agencies.

Increasing activity along the abovementioned areas will require an adjustment of the resources and capabilities at the State Attorney's Office, the courts, and the Israel Prison Service, otherwise, each one of those changes could turn out to be a bottleneck and slow down the process, thus hindering the arrival at the desired destination.

The state of personal security is at a low point, which makes it impossible to wait until the long-term plan is fully implemented. The leaders of the Arab sector today are not only keen to see this through but also insist on having it implemented and are willing to make significant concessions toward this. The state agencies must act in an emergency mode, to build their force on the go, and to take immediate measures in that direction, however imperfect they may be so that the bleeding is stopped and the sense of personal safety is restored.

Published in Israel Hayom, August 26, 2023.