

The Attitudes of the Arab Minority in Israel Towards the Or Commission of Inquiry

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Abstract

A poll of the public opinion of Palestinians in Israel indicates that the Arab public mistrusts the Or Commission but still hopes that justice will prevail.

The Poll results show that the majority of the Arab public (64%) expresses low to moderate trust in the Or Commission's ability to justly investigate the tragic deaths of 13 Arab demonstrators in October 2000. Only 16 percent of respondents expressed full trust in the Commission. The other 15 percent said that they did not trust the Commission at all.

The Survey, conducted by The Arab Center for Applied Social Research (Mada al-Carmel) in Haifa, interviewed 522 Palestinians in Israel between the 28th and the 31st August 2003. The survey shows that the Or Commission still demands a high level of interest among Palestinians in Israel. Even after almost three years since the events under investigation, the survey shows that 57 percent of the respondents were actively aware of the process of investigation.

The results of the survey show that at 87 per cent of the respondents supported the establishment of the Commission. However, once the Commission was established the support among Palestinians for the Commission fell to 75 per cent and has continued to fall ever since.

In reaction to the question whether the Commission's finding will bring justice any closer, more than half (55 percent) of the respondents didn't believe that the Commission's report would bring justice any closer. Ameen Sa'abneh, Coordinator of Mada al-Carmel's Survey Research Unit, explained the possible reasons for this fall in the confidence of the Or Commission's findings: "One of the possible reasons for the decline of Palestinian citizen's confidence in the Or Commission's report was the growing concerns, especially expressed by the victim's families, that inadequate attempts were being made to discover exactly who killed the 13 Palestinian demonstrators".

Sa'abneh's explanation is supported by further results from the survey. 98 percent of the participants thought the Or Commission's main purpose should be to investigate the particular circumstances that led to the deaths of the 13 demonstrators. Furthermore, 94 percent of the respondents thought that the Commission should investigate the conduct of the police that led to the demonstrators' deaths. Once it was felt that the Commission was not investigating the areas which were important to the Palestinian public, confidence in the Commission started to wane.

The participants of the survey were also asked to apportion a level of responsibility for the clashes between the demonstrators and the police: 28 percent thought the Arab leaders had a high level of responsibility, 25 percent thought the demonstrators had a high level of responsibility; 82 percent thought that the Police force were highly responsible; 78 percent of respondents thought that the former Prime Minister Ehud Barak was highly responsible and 77 per cent apportioned a high level of responsibility to the former Public Security Minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami.

When the respondents were asked to predict what the Commission's conclusions would be, most respondents thought that the report would be most critical of the Arab leaders. 81 per cent of the respondents believed that the Commission would assign a heavy responsibility to the Arab leaders for the tragic events of October 2000. 66 percent of the respondents thought that the Commission would assign the police with a high level of responsibility and 56 percent thought that the government officials (Barak and Shlomo Ben Ami) would be assigned with a high level of responsibility for the deaths of the 13 demonstrators.

The General Director of Mada al-Carmel, Professor Nadim Rouhana, commented on the results and their consequences: "The Arab community in Israel are eagerly awaiting the publishing of the Commission's report even though there are low expectations for justice prevailing. The Palestinians in Israel are concerned that the Commission will assign a high level of responsibility for the demonstrators' deaths to the Arab leaders".

"The majority of the Arabs in Israel *are* interested in investigating the events which led to the killing of Arab civilians, the behavior of the police and the responsibility of the government officials. If the Commission tries to reach a 'balanced' conclusion, with responsibility being assigned relatively equally then the conclusions of the Commission will be perceived by the Arab public as motivated by politics rather than by justice. If the Commission's report is seen by the Arab community as motivated by politics then this will result in deepening the 'confidence crisis' that exists between the Palestinian community and the state. Conversely, recommendations that appear fair could result in reducing the deep divisions that exist between the Palestinian community and the state".