Marching to Umm al-Fahm

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Provocative marches by extremist groups from majority communities into the towns and neighborhoods of vulnerable minorities are nothing new. They are sometimes triggered by the weaker group's religion, ethnicity, skin color - or even the mere fact of its existence. Whatever the "cause for offense," the goals, rituals and patterns of such marches are all too familiar.

The goals routinely include such lofty purposes as intimidation, incitement and divisive political gain. The use of a powerful set of symbols and chants in ways that threaten and humiliate the "targets" is routine. Once the action begins, provocateurs, marchers, residents, police, media and politicians all get to play their pre-assigned roles.

Likewise, at least in a democracy, the broad parameters of the inevitable legal preamble are well known. These invariably concern discussion of the legitimate limits of free speech and movement, the need for democracy to defend itself and the state's responsibility to maintain public order.

For all these reasons, the prospect of this past Monday’s postponed march by elements of Israel’s extreme right through the Arab city of Umm al-Fahm (the police ultimately decided it presented too grave a threat to public order to take place) was almost as familiar as it was provocative. The apparent goal of the march was to aggravate tensions between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens, thereby compounding and reinforcing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its aim was to assert exclusive Jewish ownership over all Arab-owned land in Israel, and trample the most basic and legitimate human connections, to land, heritage and history.

I find the Jewish identity and expressly "Jewish" purpose of its planners to be the march’s most notable and disturbing characteristic. Needless to say, historically, Jews have far greater experience as victims or counter-protesters than as instigators of the kind of jingoistic "hate fest“ planned for Umm al-Fahm.
This fundamental reversal of Jewish circumstances is as dramatic as it is obvious. It is directly related to some of the most basic developments in the Jewish world over the past 60 years: the establishment of Israel, the acquisition of Jewish sovereignty and the power and confidence of certain majority elements to behave badly toward less-powerful "others." One can only wonder whether the planning of a hate march into an Arab town, by elements of Israel's Jewish majority, represents a greater loss of Jewish memory or of values.

Indeed, one disturbing explanation for this dramatic reversal of Jewish behavior, but one I find completely unacceptable, is that what I had always taken to be fundamental Jewish values were simply Jewish tactics. After all, when faced with the pragmatic demands of self-preservation, a relatively weak minority is entirely dependent on the goodwill and tolerance of the majority. In such circumstances, preaching respect for "others" makes obvious sense.

Nonetheless, however badly certain Jewish Israelis behave, as Jews, to Arab citizens, I am unwilling to concede that their actions are in any way Jewish. Our sources and long tragic experience provide us all with the guidance we require to behave decently when we enjoy the power to behave badly.

Despite ostensibly belonging to powerful religious, ethnic or national majorities in their respective societies, "hatemongers" of the kind one could expect to be attracted to the Umm al-Fahm march probably share certain psychological traits with their apparent marching role models from other dark chapters of Jewish history. On one hand, they generally give the impression of feeling at least as alienated from the majority communities to which they ostensibly belong. On the other hand they are extremely cynical, able to pick and choose from Jewish sources and memory at their whim. Like all such provocateurs, they share or simply exploit the total conviction of their followers in the absolute rightness of their cause and, consequently, the existential danger presented by all who disagree.

While the motives of the planners are relatively clear, the consequences of the march (if and when it takes place) are, happily, far from inevitable for Israeli society. It's not a given that the marchers will succeed in igniting a bloody conflagration and civic tragedy between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens. An impressive range of local and national, Jewish, Arab and cooperative civic groups have worked hard over the past several weeks to plan an entirely different ending and to prevent the violent resistance that is the provocateurs' best-case scenario. If channeled positively, a far greater number of Jewish and Arab counter-demonstrators could be expected to use democratic, lawful and cooperative means to make a powerful statement of civic solidarity. (Indeed, it is not inconceivable that it was the provocateurs' awareness of just such a determined and unified civic response taking shape that made their response to the police ban as muted as it was.)

But certain negative outcomes seem all but inevitable if this or any similarly provocative march takes place: It would certainly provide yet another public relations disaster for the idea of the State of Israel as the "national homeland of the Jewish people." Just as we brace for Durban II and are increasingly isolated internationally,
such a march would be exploited by all those so inclined, to confirm their worst opinions of Israel.

Even worse would be the inevitable sense of alienation, if not repulsion, such a march would evoke among increasing numbers of Jews around the world. In this sense, while the damage caused by any such hate march to Jewish-Arab relations in Israel remains a question, the damage to Israel internationally - and to the concept of it as the Jewish national home - will be all but assured.

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