

Uproar as Israeli mayor bans Arab workers

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The mayor of a southern Israeli city sparked a national uproar by barring Israeli Arab construction workers from jobs in local preschools, citing security concerns after a rash of attacks by Palestinian assailants elsewhere in the country.

The proposal was condemned as racist by Israeli leaders, but it reflected the tense mood in the country and deepened longstanding divisions between the nation's Jewish majority and Arab minority. An opinion poll showed solid public support for the measure.

Israel has been on edge following a wave of Palestinian attacks that has killed 11 people over the past month, including five this week in a bloody assault on a Jerusalem synagogue. Most of the attacks have occurred in Jerusalem—whose population is roughly one-third Palestinian—with deadly stabbings in Tel Aviv and the West Bank as well.

Responding to the unrest, the mayor of Ashkelon, Itamar Shimoni, announced that Israeli Arab laborers renovating bomb shelters in local kindergartens would be barred from their jobs. He also ordered security stepped up at construction sites where Arab laborers are employed.

He said the order was a response to the synagogue attack November 18, in which Palestinian assailants killed four rabbis and a Druze Arab policeman.

"Anyone who thinks this is illegal can take me to court," Shimoni said. "At this time, I prefer to be taken to court and not, God forbid, to attend the funeral of one of the children from kindergartens."

The workers in Ashkelon are Arab citizens of Israel, in contrast to the Palestinian attackers from the West Bank and east Jerusalem, and it appeared unlikely the order would last for long. Justice Minister Tzipi Livni called it illegal and ordered the

attorney general to take action.

"We must not generalize about an entire public due to a small and violent minority," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said. "The vast majority of Israel's Arab citizens are law abiding and whoever breaks the law—we will take determined and vigorous action against him."

Israeli leaders boast the country is the only democracy in the Middle East, and say they place great importance on protecting the civil rights of the Arab minority, a diverse group that includes Muslims, Christians, Bedouins, and Druze.

But the situation for Israel's Arab citizens is complicated—particularly in the current atmosphere.

Arabs, who make up about 20 percent of Israel's population of 8 million, often complain of being treated as second-class citizens, and suffer from a high poverty rate, job and housing discrimination, and poor public services. Many openly identify with the Palestinians, drawing accusations that they are disloyal.

In recent years, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has called on Israeli Arabs to take a loyalty oath and proposed redrawing Israel's borders under any future peace deal to place large numbers of them on the Palestinian side.

Tziona Koenig-Yair, the equal employment commissioner in Israel's Economy Ministry, said she has seen a jump in claims recently by Arab workers who say they have lost their jobs on racial grounds. She said she planned to fight the mayor of Ashkelon in court if his order is not reversed.

"We have to realize that citizens of this country who want to live here cannot be held accountable for things that are being done by extremists," she said.

In a letter to Shimoni and Interior Minister Gilad Erdan, the Arab civil rights group Adalah called the decision "arbitrary and racist" and urged it be reversed.

"There is no doubt that this decision is aimed at the Arab workers because of who they are and their national affiliation," the letter said.

Erdan has called the order barring Israeli Arab construction workers "unacceptable."

In Ashkelon, dozens of people demonstrated November 20 in support of Shimoni. Channel 10 TV said an opinion poll found that 58 percent of the Jewish public supported the mayor, while only 32 percent opposed him. It said the poll was conducted by the Panels agency, but gave no details on how many people had been questioned or a margin of error.

Liraz Makhoulf, a mother of two young children in Ashkelon, said she supported the mayor's decision "100 percent." She insisted there was no racism behind the move, and that in the current climate of violence, such measures were needed to protect children.

"It's clear that there are good (Arabs) and bad ones, and it's clear there are more good ones than bad ones," she told Channel 10. "But no one can point at them and say who is good and who is bad."

The recent unrest has been focused around Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site—the hilltop compound known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary.

Muslim leaders fear that Israel is encroaching on the site—a charge that Netanyahu denies—and are furious over Israeli security measures that have restricted access for Muslim worshippers.

Most of the violence has been concentrated in Jerusalem, but the unrest has begun to spread beyond the city.

Earlier this month, an Israeli policeman shot and killed an Arab rioter in northern Israel, apparently as he was walking away from the officer, sparking several days of violent demonstrations. Netanyahu later suggested that protesters who denounce Israel should move to the Palestinian territories.

On Sunday, Netanyahu presented a "nationality" law to his Cabinet that he said is meant to solidify Israel's status as the homeland of the Jewish people.

Netanyahu said the law "will enshrine the full equality" of every citizen. [His cabinet approved draft legislation on Sunday, according to *The New York Times*.]

But the legislation has raised fears among Arabs that it will undermine their status.

Jafar Farah, the director of the Mossawa Center, an Arab advocacy group, said the new law would "deepen the discrimination we face, and the Ashkelon mayor's order is part of the incitement against the Arab community led by the prime minister himself."

He urged government leaders "to work toward calming tensions across the country, instead of fanning the flames of fear and mistrust."

In Jerusalem, Israel pressed forward with a pledge to step up the demolitions of homes belonging to families of Palestinian attackers involved in recent violence.

Israeli police handed demolition notices to the families of four attackers in east Jerusalem, including the two assailants who carried out the synagogue attack. Last week, Israel demolished the east Jerusalem home of an attacker who rammed his car into a crowded train station last month, killing a baby girl and a 22-year-old woman.

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities said investigators had concluded a hit-and-run accident that injured three Israeli soldiers in the West Bank on November 5 was an intentional attack. The driver, identified as a 23-year-old Hamas operative, turned himself into police, claiming he lost control of his car. But the Shin Bet security agency said he admitted during questioning to targeting the soldiers.

Late Thursday, the Shin Bet announced it had foiled a Hamas plot to assassinate Lieberman last summer. It said four Palestinian men had staked out the movements of the foreign minister, who lives in a West Bank settlement, and planned to obtain a rocket-propelled grenade to attack his official vehicle. The announcement did not say when the men were arrested.