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## THE ARABS IN ISRAEL: A SURGING NEW IDENTITY

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**From an Ethno-Religious to a National Minority / Equal But Not Fully Equal / "Israeli" Identity / "Palestinian" Identity / Arab Identity / Islamic Identity**

Most of the focus on Arab-Israeli relations over the last two decades has centered on the situation of the Arabs in the administered territories, to the neglect of the Arabs in Israel. Yet the intifada has triggered scattered acts of violence by Israel's Arabs as well, mandating a new look at this community.

It would be wonderful to believe that the future of Arab-Jewish relations within Israel will follow the lead of the many Israeli-Arab friendship associations which have been at work for decades to foster greater understanding between the two peoples. Their work stems from a perspective which holds that basically people are good and therefore all we have to do is create an atmosphere of brotherhood in which we can embrace each other, talk to each other, understand each other, and then everything will fall into place. Unfortunately, I believe this is an exercise in futility and is not the way to approach the

problem. The problem is soluble, but only via a political solution.

### **From an Ethno-Religious to a National Minority**

After forty years of such attempts, relations between Arabs and Jews in Israel have not seriously improved. If anything, they have grown worse from the Israeli point of view. It can be plainly observed that the Arabs in Israel no longer talk about being merely a religious, cultural, ethnic or linguistic minority, as we used to hear. Today they speak about themselves as a national minority, with all that involves.

### **Equal But Not Fully Equal**

At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel, Israeli Arabs numbered about 110,000, living under the administration of a military government and numbering 11 percent of the total Israeli population. There were times

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when this percentage rose and fell, depending upon the rate of Jewish immigration to Israel. In the 1950s and 1960s when there was mass aliya to Israel, it dwindled to as low as 10 percent. There were times when it went up to 15 or 16 percent. Now, partly because Israel annexed East Jerusalem and the Arabs of East Jerusalem are considered Israeli residents, the total number of Israeli Arabs is rapidly approaching 750,000, nearly 18 percent of the total Israeli population, and in about twenty years or less will reach one million, a number which cannot be dismissed as insignificant.

There have been countless declarations about how the Arab citizens of Israel are equal members of Israeli society. It is undeniable that Israel has absorbed the Arabs into many facets of its society -- into a democratic political system with a plurality of political parties which does not exist anywhere else in the Arab world. Israeli Arabs have a higher degree of education, a higher degree of medical care, a higher standard of living than Arabs anywhere else. The life expectancy of the Arabs in Israel has grown over the past forty years from about 52 years to over 70 years and is just slightly below that of the Jewish population.

Yet they cannot be fully equal, not only because Israel is in a state of war with the Arab world but because they are increasingly identifying themselves as a national minority. For example, to the Arabs of Israel, the symbols of the state mean little or nothing. On Independence Day, the most important date in the Israeli calendar, Jews dance in the streets of Jerusalem. For the Arabs it is a day of mourning. It is the date they call Naqba, meaning the holocaust or disaster. That is the day they lost their land, from their point of view. At best they will sit in their villages and mourn their own fate. At worst they will burn the Israeli flag or other things of this sort. So the cleavage is there and it runs very deep. If Jews cannot even share their national holiday with their Arab fellow-citizens, then what do they have in common?

Therefore it is becoming more and

more difficult for them to be fully equal because the basic beliefs, values, norms and aspirations of Jews and Arabs are simply contradictory. They are on a collision course. So all the thinking about the Arabs in Israel becoming good Israelis no longer holds true, especially since 1967. It is becoming more and more of a contradiction in terms to say "Israeli" Arabs; they may have an Israeli passport but they hardly identify with the State of Israel.

Perhaps paradoxically, precisely because they have reached this material standard, a new set of needs has come to the fore. One Israeli Arab member of the Knesset put it very poignantly when he said, "precisely because our stomachs are full, it is now time for us to satisfy our spiritual needs." This is the contradiction of the "Israeli" identity of the Arabs in Israel. Yet we have never confronted it or attempted to resolve it. We have opted to plaster it over and pretend it is not there.

#### **"Israeli" Identity**

The Arabs living in Israel today have a mix of four identities -- Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, and Moslem. The surging new identity of the Arabs in Israel may be viewed in terms of four concentric circles. They are concentric because many of these identities cut across, coincide, and often overlap with each other, and therefore they are inseparable.

The first circle of identity is the Israeli circle. During the first twenty years, Israeli Arabs came to consider themselves increasingly as part of Israeli society, not because they liked it but because they were cut off from the rest of the Arab world and felt they had no option but to try to assimilate into the Israeli environment. During those years, in my opinion, successive Israeli governments committed the mistake of maintaining a cleavage between Arab society and Jewish society. For example, there was no integrated system of education. It is true that the Arabs wanted to have their own system of education in Arabic, to put an emphasis on Arab history, Arabic language and Islamic religion, all of which is understandable from their point of view. How-

ever, if they teach their own heritage, their own patrimony, their own culture as separate from the culture of the state in which they live, then they can be expected to acquire a separate identity which is not likely to tie them to the State of Israel as loyal citizens.

### **"Palestinian" Identity**

The second circle of Arab identity is the Palestinian one. After 1967 when the so-called "green line" was erased, the Arabs in Israel discovered that they were part of a much larger and much more politically conscious Palestinian people. With the rise of the PLO in the late 1960s and 1970s, its recognition by the UN, the various acts of what we call terrorism and what they call heroic acts against Israel all contributed to an increase in Palestinian consciousness.

Go to any village in the Galilee and ask the people who they are. In 60-70 percent of the cases they will tell you that first of all they are Palestinian. Then they will add Arab, Israeli, or Moslem. This is to be expected because every nation, every people, want to be identified nationally. The Jewish people in the diaspora, even though few have any intention of coming and settling in Israel, consider themselves not only part of a faith but also part of a people, with some kind of national or pseudo-national focus of identity.

As the difficulties grew for Israel both in the territories and among the Israeli Arabs, the growing links across the "green line" could be seen. For example, Land Day is a primary day for demonstrations by Israeli Arabs, commemorating the first Land Day in 1976, during which four Israeli Arabs were killed when they protested against Israeli expropriation of land in the Galilee. Yet Land Day is also commemorated by Arabs in Judea, Samaria and Gaza in identification with their Palestinian brethren in Israel. When the PLO outside the territories refers to Land Day, it speaks about "the resilience of our oppressed Palestinian people on both sides of the 'green line.'" From their point of view there is no difference between the

Palestinian Arabs in the territories and in Israel.

### **Arab Identity**

The third identity of Israeli Arabs is their Arab identity. The Palestinians claim not only the right to bring about the Palestinian revolution, which will in turn bring about Palestinian self-determination and nationhood, but they also claim to be the vanguard of revolution in the Arab world. Once the Palestinian revolution succeeds, they expect that revolution to be transplanted to other Arab countries to get rid of reactionary monarchies, and it is obvious whom they mean. So the Arabs in Israel not only feel they are Palestinian but also part of that great revolution which is coming about in the Arab world.

In the meantime they train themselves and cultivate their youth to meet that future challenge. The Arab history they learn in school can only strengthen their Arab identity, their feeling of being a part of the greater Arab world around them. They say that as long as the Arabs are in a state of war with Israel and there are no signs of peace between Israel and all the Arab countries, then it is natural that they should be on the Arab side in their hearts. They used to say that "we are torn between our country and our people," their country being Israel. However, today they are less and less torn and increasingly identify with one side of that equation.

### **Islamic Identity**

The fourth circle of identity is the Islamic one. The last twenty years have witnessed an Islamic revival all over the Moslem world from Morocco to Indonesia. (See Rafi Israeli, "The Impact of Islamic Fundamentalism on the Arab-Israeli Conflict," Survey of Arab Affairs, No. 13 [15 August 1988].) As can be seen throughout the Moslem world, in places where conflict is rife, there is always some element which will lean on Islam and use its symbols in order to bring forward its political message.

Now it has come to the fore with the Hamas movement which is making its mark on the Palestinian struggle against Israel

and not necessarily in collaboration or cooperation with the PLO. Not long ago I read the forty-page religious and political manifesto of the Hamas movement. In it they speak unequivocally about an Islamic state in the entire territory of "Palestine." Of course no one knows the exact strength of the Hamas movement, but according to some indications including the last student body elections at the Arab universities in the territories, their strength is important and has been growing every year.

In both the territories and pre-1967 Israel an increasing number of people, especially young people, are shifting more and more toward what we loosely call "Islamic fundamentalism." For example, just before the Arab uprising began I toured Judea and Samaria with the officer in charge of education. I was stunned to find that in all the schools we visited from Nablus to Hebron there were separate schools or separate classes for girls. In addition, the school principals estimated that over 50 percent of the girls now wore modest religious dress. This does not necessarily mean that those girls suddenly became pious or that they go to the mosque more than before, but for them it is a focus of identity, a way of signalling to the outside world a rejection of that feminine element imported from the West which was introduced by Israeli society in order to undermine their culture, according to their statements.

These are very strong signals. One recent survey reported that more mosques were built in the territories and Israel in the last seven years than in the previous seventy. There are more young men growing beards, which is the hallmark of the Moslem Brotherhood, in both Israel and the territories. There is a growing alternative Islamic leadership which in some ways has become more authoritative and has a more devoted following than the traditional or political leadership of the past.

In addition, there is an environmental impact to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. When the Islamic revolution succeeded in Iran, Moslem fundamentalists all over the world saw a Moslem regime that finally stood up to imperialism. After being

occupied, trampled on and taken advantage of for over three centuries by the West, a Moslem leader finally emerged who declared an Islamic revolution, stood up to the West, and even took American hostages with impunity. In other words, even if other Moslems do not agree with Khomeini ideologically, he has become a model to follow because he was successful. On Land Day in the Galilee, young people have been heard to shout, "Khomeini, Khomeini."

These sentiments are further aggravated by the fact that Arabs feel they are living in a land that is holy to them too. This is the land which contains Jerusalem, a holy city in Islam. The Mufti of Jerusalem, their religious leader, continually calls upon the people to show resilience, and everybody knows what that means. The former Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh al-Saih, has been president of the Palestine National Council, which adds to the symbolic dominance of Islam in Palestinian affairs.

There are about 100,000 Christians among the Israeli Arab population, some of whom are as afraid of Islamic fundamentalism as the Jews are and are quite happy to have some kind of Israeli protection. Yet there are other Christians who are much more extreme in their anti-Israel views than the central stream within the PLO, the most prominent being George Habash.

To conclude, over the past two decades the "Israeli" component of Arab identity has been greatly reduced, while the Palestinian component has increased to the point where their surging new identity today is that of a national minority. The recognition of this fact and the formulation of a policy by the Israeli leadership to deal with it is long overdue. Such a policy must lump together Israeli Arabs, who are Palestinians for all intents and purposes, with the rest of the Palestinian people under Israeli rule.

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