

Topic: **National Identity**

Updated: **June 2014**

## 1948-1967

- Israel's War of Independence in 1948 created a unique situation for the Arab minority in the Jewish state.
- More than 100,000 Palestinian Arabs chose to remain in their homes and subsequently became Israeli citizens. However, they remained nationally, culturally and religiously tied to the outside Arab world.
- It left the Arabs in Israel torn between four circles of ethno-religious and national identities: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, and religious (Muslim, Christian or Druze).
- Their loyalty conflict was well described by a contemporary Arab leader: "My State [Israel] is at war with my [Palestinian-Arab] people."
- Israel's Declaration of Independence made no reference to Arab national or collective rights. Rather, it focused on individual civic rights.
- The omission of the terms "nationality" or "national rights" in Israel's Declaration of Independence reflects the unique designation of Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people, and as a state whose official nationality is derived from Jewish identity.
- The Declaration continues to drive a critical wedge between the State's Arab citizens who enjoy civic status but lack national recognition, and the Jewish majority, which practices national rights by virtue of the legal definition of the State as a Jewish state.
- During the 1950s and 1960s, the national component in the collective identity of Arabs in Israel was relatively dormant. They were placed under military governance, and lacked national leadership. (For the role of the Communist party, see below).
- The Palestinian national movement went into a sharp decline after 1948, ignored by the Arab world and physically cut off from the neighboring Arab states.

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- During this period, the national Arab cause was largely represented by the Israeli Communist Party (ICP) and, to a lesser extent, by a relatively small group of Arab nationalists such as **Al-Ard**, *The Land*.
- The ICP regarded the Arabs as a national minority as well as Israeli citizens. **Al-Ard** called for self-determination of Arabs in Israel (**Al-Ard** was banned in 1964).

### 1967-2000

- After 1967, as a result of renewed contact with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and the rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Israeli Arabs gradually reclaimed their Palestinian identity and heightened national consciousness. The Communist Party led many to identify with the PLO and its political goals, and express solidarity with the Arab residents of the West Bank and Gaza in their struggle against the Israeli occupation.<sup>2</sup>
- Following the Oslo Declaration of Principles (1993) and developments in the mid and late 1990s, Israeli Arabs felt that they had been left out of the political process.
- Arab intellectuals and politicians began to reconsider their national status in Israel. Based on the assumption that as Arabs, their future lies within Arab society, they focused on what they perceived as a built-in contradiction between the designation of Israel as a Jewish state and its definition as a liberal democracy committed to the equality of all its citizens.
- Arab representatives pointed to what they perceived as the inherent weakness of the Jewish, democratic state, stressing their difficulty in identifying with its Jewish symbols, such as the flag and the anthem, or with its ethnocentric worldview.
- Instead, Arab elites developed alternative, more equitable models to represent the national needs of the Arabs community. These models included demands to name Israel "a state of all its citizens," and establish a bi-national state.

### 2000-to date

- A central pillar in these calls is a new self-definition as a "national minority" that deserves collective rights. Reference was now made to the Palestinians in Israel as an "indigenous minority" or as "homeland minority."
- Four position papers concerning the civic and national status of the Arabs in Israel were published in 2006-2007, marking yet another milestone in the developing national consciousness of the Israeli Arab community (see also fact sheet on "The Future Vision Documents").

<sup>2</sup> The following section is based on: Amal Jamal, "Group Rights for Indigenous Minorities – Theoretical and Normative Aspects." In: Elie Rekhess and Sara Ozacky-Lazar (eds), *The Status of the Arab Minority in the Jewish Nation State* (Tel-Aviv University: The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab cooperation, 2005), p. 29 [in Hebrew].  
Rouhana Nadim, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State*, Yale University Press, 1997, Chapter 8, pp. 130-151.  
Elie Rekhess, "The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority In Israel", *Israel Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 1-28;  
Asad Ghanem, Nadim Rouhana and Oren Yiftachel, "Questioning 'Ethnic Democracy': A Response to Sammy Smooha." *Israel Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1998), pp. 253-267.

- In recent years, Israeli Arab political and intellectual elites occasionally expressed rejection of Israel's nature as a "Jewish State," thus reinforcing their Palestinian identity. The acceptance of Israel as a Jewish State, according to this viewpoint, would certainly damage the Palestinian cause since Israel strives to relinquish such demands as the right of return for Palestinian refugees.<sup>3</sup>
- On the popular level, Land Day demonstrations have become a prominent manifestation of Palestinian identity among the general public (see also fact sheet on "Land and Planning"). The 2010 Land Day commemoration was one of the largest ever convened. Thousands of Israeli Arab demonstrators waved Palestinian flags in pronounced identification with the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Following these events, commentators agreed that Israeli Arabs' alienation from the Jewish state was growing.<sup>4</sup>
- Mohammad Zeidan, Chairman of the Supreme Arab Monitoring Committee, declared that Arab Israelis will not abide by certain Israeli laws, which he termed "racist." These include the proposed law on loyalty, which stipulated the disqualification of Israeli citizenship from individuals who act against the State of Israel, and the law which declares that Israel is a Jewish state.<sup>5</sup> However, he later explained that the Israeli Arabs' struggle was not a struggle against Israel, but a struggle for equality and for a Two-State solution. He stated, "We are part of Israeli society and we are struggling to remain part of it."<sup>6</sup>

### **Recent Developments**

- Arab intellectuals have increasingly discussed the need to recognize the status of the Arabs in Israel as "indigenous people". Thus, for example, As'ad Ghanem and Mohanad Mustafa argued in 2011 that the political discourse of Palestinians in Israel has moved from the individual achievements level to the politics of rights on the collective level, and to the politics of identity. This discourse is considered of utmost importance in the politics of indigenous marginalized groups within colonial entities.<sup>7</sup>
- Similarly, political scientist Amal Jamal, examined, in a newly-published book entitled "Arab Minority Nationalism in Israel: The Politics of Indigeneity", the changing status of Israel's Palestinian citizens from 1948 to the present day, comparing it to that of indigenous groups in other countries.<sup>8</sup>
- "If the Jewish majority continues to operate as an ethnic group and to control all the state's resources and institutions exclusively, Arab-Palestinian citizens will keep raising their indigenous identity, deconstructing Jewish hegemony", he concluded.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mada al-Carmel, the Haifa based Arab Center for Applied Social Research, which considered as one of the leading Israeli Arab research institutes, has dedicated its December 2009 newsletter "Jadal" ("Debate") to discuss in details the question of recognizing Israel as a Jewish State and its implications for the Arab citizens of Israel. See: <http://jadal.mada-research.org/?LanguageId=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Susser, "Land Day march highlights dilemmas facing Israel and its Arab citizens." *JTA – The Global News Service of the Jewish People*, April 2, 2010. See: <http://jta.org/news/article/2010/04/02/1011448/land-day-march-highlights-dilemmas-facing-israel-and-its-arab-citizens>.

<sup>5</sup> Jacky Khoury, "Arab MKs join 10,000 protestors to mark Land Day." *Ha'aretz*, March 31, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *JTA*, April 2, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> "The Palestinians in Israel: The Challenge of the Indigenous Group Politics in the 'Jewish State'", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 31/2., June 2011, pp. 177-196.

<sup>8</sup> Amal Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism in Israel: The Politics of Indigeneity*, Routledge, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> *Ha'aretz*, June 28, 2011.

- The February 2012 issue of *Jadal*, a periodical published in Haifa by Mada al-Carmel, an Arab Research Institute, focused on “The Crisis of Collusion: The Problematic of Cultural Praxes among Palestinians of 48”. The editorial stated that “In order to transform thinking on social realities and ultimately those realities themselves, it is crucial to reexamine assumed axioms in given society. Based on this premise, *Jadal* critically reexamined some axioms regarding the relationship between what it referred to as the “colonizer” and the “colonized” in the Palestinian context, in particular regarding the Palestinians of 1948.
- “We endeavor to examine and question the basic assumptions underlying the system of relations between the Palestinians of 1948 and the Zionist colonial regime that has ruled them since 1948”, the editorial concluded.<sup>10</sup>
- Based on annually-conducted field studies, Sammy Smooha concluded in 2012 that between 2003-2012, the attitude of Arabs in Israel towards the state and the Jewish majority have worsened, as was illustrated in the following findings:
  - **12.2%** of the Arabs considered Israeli citizenship as their most important framework of belonging. **45.2%** considered “religion” as most important **41.3%** opted for Palestinian nationalism and 1.3% declined to answer.
  - **24.5%** of the Arabs deny Israel’s right to exist (**20.5%** in 1976; **11.2%** in 2003).
  - **49.5%** support the establishment of a Palestinian state in all of Palestine, to replace Israel.
  - **69.6%** of the Arabs do not accept Israel’s right to exist as a state which retains a Jewish majority.
  - **82.2%** of the Arab respondents accused the Jews of [perpetuating] the Nakba.
  - **70%** of the Arabs say that the government treats them as second class citizens.<sup>11</sup>
- Yoram Cohen, Head of Israel’s Security Service stated in 2012 that over the past year, there had been only three terror attacks in which Israeli Arabs had been involved, and that Israeli-Arab involvement in terror has declined.
- “Their involvement in terror is not great,” Cohen said. “We arrested 20 to 30 Arab Israelis last year, as opposed to 2,000 Palestinians from Judea and Samaria. The problems with Arab Israelis are complex, but they are not security problems. They are alienation, integration, employment, poor municipal management, crime and drugs”.
- “The ideological leadership of the Arab public in Israel,” Cohen continued, “is much more extreme than the public, and sometimes pulls in directions with which the public does not identify.”<sup>12</sup>
- To sum up: the development of a national identity for the Arabs in Israel is strongly influenced by internal and external factors.
- Discriminatory government policies in the socio-economic sphere have undoubtedly contributed to a sense of alienation of the Arab minority and have reinforced Palestinian cohesion.
- The ongoing national struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, however, diminishes

<sup>10</sup> *Jadal*, Issue 12, February 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Smooha, Sammy, *Still Playing by the Rules: Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel-2012*, Jerusalem, The Israel Democracy Institute, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> *Ha’aretz*, February 3, 2012

Israeli readiness to incorporate Israeli Arabs into the Israeli collective, and is a barrier to advocates of integrative policies. At the same time, the unresolved conflict reinforces the Palestinian Arab component in the national identity of Arab Israelis.