

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE CASE OF THE PALESTINIANS IN ISRAEL

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“Do you know what it’s like to be a minority in this country? I hope you never find out what it’s like to be a minority”. This is how Lucy Aharish, an Israeli Arab television host reacted to her guest Benzi Gopstein, an Israeli trouper from Kiryat Arba in the West Bank, during her current-affairs program on Channel 2 earlier this month. Often criticized for her silence, the first Hebrew-speaking Arab to present a show in Israeli television could not take it any longer after the extreme right-wing guest expressed his vision of the place which Arab citizens occupy inside Israeli society, a place he believes shouldn’t exist. Aharish answered his strong statements by sharing the experiences of a person living in two worlds and not belonging to any of them.²

The journalist’s struggle is routine to many Israelis. More than ever, Israeli Arabs have to balance between two worlds, two identities and two nationalities. This essay will endeavor to portray the many aspects that shape the identity of the Arab citizens of Israel. The evolution of the individual and collective identity of this group breaks through the history of the Palestinian struggle and the developments of civil rights in Israel, balancing and strengthening the country’s democracy. Israeli Arabs’ relationship with the state is marked in bold terms by contradicting attitudes where the Palestinian nationalism and the Israeli citizenship try to adjust to each other. Such combination has permitted an astonishing commitment of this group to peace and coexistence, but it still calls the attention to the intrinsic problems and contradictions of Israel’s ethnic democracy.

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² Moran Sharir, “*Mad as hell: When the Arab news anchor couldn’t take it anymore*”, Haaretz, July 8, 2014.

The State of Israel is by many scholars considered a democracy and concurrently a Jewish State. Its image has become routinely associated with its Jewish population, making it commonplace to use the terms Israeli, Jews and Israeli Jews interchangeably. Politicians, journalists and the general public tend to equate Israelis to the Jewish population living in the territory of the state of Israel. This is a common and yet serious mistake.³ Although the state is a result among other things of the liberation of the Jewish people, Israel during its independence chose to grant citizenship status to all citizens living in the territory. For this reason, Israel is today home to a wider population. Jews, in fact, comprise about 75 percent of the country's 8,2 million citizens. Arabs follow as the largest demographic minority, with estimate 1,7 million citizens.⁴ Although they compose an ethnic minority, this is a relevant slice of the country's population, and a growing one. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics forecasts that the number of Arab citizens will continue to grow faster vis-à-vis its Jewish counterparts. The fertility rate among Arabs, although in decline, is still higher. It is predicted that by 2050 they will compose around 35 percent of Israel's population, thus signaling a relevant turn of events.

However, this is not a homogeneous population. In fact, Arabs in Israel are part of a rather diverse community. Arabs in the country are 83 percent Muslim, 9 percent Christian, and 8 percent Druze.⁵ This is quite a sensitive point since religious differences shape the opinions and individual identities of this group - which the Israeli government has consistently used in its favor. Yet, it is important to notice that they all hold one element in common: none of them are Judaic.⁶ This clear fact marks off Arabs as a distinct religious minority, as opposed to the Jewish majority.

The contrast between the two groups is axiomatic. Most Arabs live entirely different lifestyles and have a relatively more conservative culture. Aesthetics, symbols, dress codes and styles are very unique and translate each group's ancient and modern traditions. Also, names, family dynamics and physiognomy of each population make it almost impossible to mistake one group by the other. The dominant culture is that of the

³ Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians: The Conflict Within*, 20.

⁴ Lidar Gravé-Lazi, "On its 66th birthday, Israel's population nears 8.2 million", *The Jerusalem Post*, May 1, 2014.

⁵ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_02&CYear=2010

⁶ Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 6.

majority and is also the one attached to the state's symbols, granting Arab culture a marginal role exclusive to this minority's areas.

Arabs are also a linguistic minority. Although most of them are bilingual today, and even though Arab is one of the official languages of the state, it still plays a marginal role in Israeli society. Arabic and Hebrew do not share mutual intelligibility. Arabic is Israel's second official language, which does help in the dealings with the government, and there are Arabic channels on public radio and television. Nevertheless, Arabic is not a compulsory language in public Jewish schools as Hebrew is in Arab ones, marking a clear hierarchy between the two of them

Most importantly, despite of being an ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural minority, Arabs in Israel are a national minority. They have a sense of belonging to the land and feel close ties with the Palestinian nation. They share a common history, narrative and identity with the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. This is probably the most controversial features of the collective identity of the Arabs in Israel and one that the State refuses to accept.

All of these elements that compose the identities of this group corroborates to the fact that they are almost an inassimilable minority. They engage in separate lives from the Jews and do not wish to assimilate with the majority. Jews, who do not expect or do not wish them to do so, promptly accept this. Most Arabs live in closed communities and wish to preserve their culture and society. About 90 percent of Arabs live in relatively autonomous all-Arab towns or villages. In addition, the majority of them does not leave the country or even wish to. Even though they show a strong degree of identification with the Palestinian people and do advocate for the creation of the Palestinian state, the majority of Arabs do not consider themselves ready to move to a Palestinian state.⁷ Consequently, Arabs in Israel are not only an inassimilable minority but also a permanent one.

Due to its diversity, the Arab community in Israel has many internal struggles. Political opinion and collective identity are not always the same among Christian, Muslim and Druze populations. The latter, for example, do not identify themselves as

⁷ In 2009 only 24 percent of Arabs considered themselves ready to move to a Palestinian state. This rate has oscillated between 10 and 25 percent over the past two decades. Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 17.

Arabs and have a much higher level of engagement with the Israeli government.⁸ Religious, clan and geographical differences was very often an obstacle at the beginning of the State for Arabs to organize a common agenda, and Israel used this to suit the needs of the Jewish majority.

Traditionally, the state has sought to differentiate between the distinct religious groups by applying “personalized” approaches towards each of them. It has established a hierarchy where Druze are at the very top, followed by Bedouins, then Christian Arabs, and at the very bottom Muslim Arabs.⁹ This is all too related with the goal of the state to prevent the formation of a unified Palestinian national identity. The national element is one that the state refuses to accept and has sought to diminish or inhibit by dividing them into groups mentioned earlier. As argued by Rhoda Kanaaneh, this is an old practice, finding roots in the early years of the state in an explicit policy articulation such as signaled in the conclusions of a 1949 Inter-ministerial Committee on the integration of Arabs into the Jewish state: “the committee decided that the best approach to Arabs should be to prevent them from coalescing into a single group and “the best way to deal with minorities was ‘to divide and subdivide them’”.¹⁰

Such policy orientation can also be explicitly found in a top-secret memo about the policies of the government towards the Arabs. “The government’s policy [...] has sought to divide the Arab population into diverse communities and regions [...]. The municipal status of the Arab villages, and the competitive spirit of local elections, deepened the divisions inside the villages themselves. The communal policy and the clan divisions in the villages prevented Arab unity.”¹¹ This strategy has proved to be successful for some time and with some of the groups by fostering a diverse environment, competitive local elections and clan divisions, as stated in the memo.

The most successful case was definitely that of the Druze, which now see themselves as a different group, apart from the rest of the Arab community. The Jewish majority at large finds the Druze to be “loyal” friends of the state. They engage in military service and enjoy a separate educational system. This special relationship is largely due to the segmental policy, which began back in 1936 during the Arab rebellion,

⁸ Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh, *“Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military”*(Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009), 10.

⁹ Kanaaneh, *Surrounded*, 10.

¹⁰ Kanaaneh, *Surrounded*, 10.

¹¹ Tom Segev, *“1949: The First Israelis”*(Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1998), 65.

where Zionists engaged in building links to the Druze communities in Palestine and Syria. This was part of their strategy of building alliances with non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslims in order to undermine Arab nationalism. In 1956, Israeli officials and a small elite of Druze leader agreed upon mandatory military service for Druze men. This was a huge step in this relationship since the military is regarded by many Druze as a stable source of financial security. Privilege also poured from other actions of the state towards them: selection of a large number of Druze to run for parliament on government-controlled lists, bigger budget allocations to Druze villages and appointments to government ministries and agencies.¹² Bedouins also enjoy a relatively special treatment from the state and a portion of them also engages in the military. In general, the state has tried to politicize the minorities inside the Arab population (“Good Arabs”) and depoliticize the Muslim Arab majority (“Bad Arabs”), which is regarded as the most threatening one - in the sense of building a strong national identity - for being larger and better organized.

In recent years, the sensation of Arabs being affiliated to an inimical minority has grown mostly due to the intifadas and terrorist attacks from the other side of the border. To many Jews, Arabs represent a “security challenge”, since they are part of a broader Palestinian community and nationality that is still in war with Israel and thus represent potential enemies of the state. This suspicious approach is evident in many public policies, specially security-related ones.¹³ Also, Israel exempts this group from military service, which serves them very well, since they would deeply resent fighting their fellow men on the other side of the border.

Arabs are put in a state of constant vigilance and acts of subversion and disloyalty are severely punished. It is extremely uncomfortable to be regarded in suspicion by your own state and quite a challenge to the majority to accept equality for a minority that belongs to the “enemy’s side.” Many Israelis, who find the Palestinian nationalism among Israeli Arabs to be a security challenge and a contributor to a “zero-sum game” in Arab-Jewish relations, share this view.¹⁴

¹² Kanaaneh, *Surrounded*, 12

¹³ This is largely shared in Dan Schueftan’s *“Palestinians in Israel: The Arab Minority and the Jewish State”*, where he argues that the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel constitute’s a challenge to Israel’s national security.

¹⁴ Oded Haklai, *“The Arab Minority in Israel; Challenges and Limits in Recent Disciplinary Approaches”* (Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 132.

Nevertheless, this approach proved itself barren over the time. Preferential treatment to some of the groups did not reflect in equal treatment if compared to the Jewish majority. The socioeconomic gaps between Jews and Arabs (be it from any religious group) are still remarkable. Also, land expropriation and coercive policies that benefited nobody but Jews made many Arabs realize that what they had in common far outnumbered their differences. Today, it prevails a sense of Arab unity, which does not ignore its differences, but tries to push a common agenda in benefit of all.

What would then be the correct term to address the Arab minority in Israel? Are they Israelis or are they Palestinians? Just like the world depicted by Lucy Aharish in her television show, to be an Arab in Israel is to be both, but neither. The identity of this group is a rather complex one and it has evolved since the first years of the state. We can say the Arab population has gone through two simultaneous, concurrent and conflicting processes of “Israelization” and “Palestinization”.

The so-called Israelization process started in the first phase of this population in Israel, from 1948 to 1966. During this period of time, the Arab population in Israel lived under military rule, separated from the rest of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza. The repressive methods of the state prevented the flourish of a Palestinian identity, as few had the courage to openly identify as such. Therefore, during this phase, an Israeli Arab identity prevailed. The Israeli state also purposely tried to instigate through the Arab public educational system an Israeli identity by inhibiting any Palestinian nationalism among Arab youth.¹⁵ What Ian Lustick calls ‘quietism’¹⁶ may identify this phase.¹⁷ It is largely marked by low civil rights, constrained political life much connected to the ‘hamula,’ and clientelistic affiliations. In 1966, one year before the Six Day War, Arabs in Israel were granted full citizenship. This marked a new era where Arabs could engage politically in the country, participate in elections, form political parties, conduct protests and strikes.

After 1967, with the annexation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, a strong process of “Palestinization” escalated among Arab citizens who had been cut off from their counterparts and were again reunited. This marks the beginning of a second period in the evolvement of their identity, characterized by a national

¹⁵ Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians: The Conflict Within*, 27.

¹⁶ Ian S. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Mendilow, *Israel's Palestinian Minority, From 'Quietism' to Ethno-nationalism*

awakening.¹⁸ Their nationalist identity flourished in regard to three important matters: solidarity with the Palestinian people, Palestinian identity, and Palestinian culture.¹⁹

Most Israeli Arabs have shown deep support to the cause of the Palestinian state and the well being of the Palestinians on the other side of the border. They have long advocated for the creation of the Palestinian state alongside Israel and the liberation of the Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza. These issues are central to the agendas of Arab parties and Arabs parties' coalitions in the Knesset: under the influence of the Communist Party and prior to the PLO move in this direction, Israeli Arabs already advocated politically for the withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders, re-division of Jerusalem, negotiation with the PLO, the creation of a Palestinian state, and the recognition of the right of the Arab refugees to return. Also, during the First Intifada, Israeli Arabs supported the Palestinians by general strikes, demonstrations and dispatch of reliefs to the territories.²⁰ They were strong supporters of the Oslo Accords and during the First Intifada backed up their fellow men by protests and the delivery of reliefs to the Occupied Territories. Their political participation in the national elections and in the Knesset would also reflect such solidarity. Arab parties, as well as mixed left-wing ones, worked to push forward an agenda for the creation of a Palestinian state.

A national consciousness flourished among Israeli Arabs as the Palestinian movement started to gain more defined features. They acquired a strong leadership, through the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization founded in the mid-1960s, and a well-defined cause to resist against the occupation. Posteriorly, the movement would abandon armed resistance and terrorism, and adopt a diplomatic and political approach. Arab Israelis have since then increasingly come to identify themselves as Palestinians and support the Palestinian nationalism, demanding its recognition by the State and its teaching in Israeli public education. During this period we can say that the people on the Occupied Territories moved from a population of refugees dependent on the Arab states to an organized and unified Palestinian people.

There is also a cultural expression to the Palestinian insurgent nationalism in Israel. As mentioned before, they were reunited with the Palestinians on the Occupied Territories after 1967. This made Israeli Arabs more conscious of their common

¹⁸ Eli Rekhess, *"The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel"* (Indiana Press University, 2007), pp. 2.

¹⁹ Sammy Smooha, *"Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype"* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 213.

²⁰ Sammy Smooha, *"Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype"*, 213.

heritage, narrative, history, as well as Islam. Now they were connected to other institutions that were not Israeli, but truly Palestinian.

While it is very salient and widely accepted that the process of Palestinization has developed since 1967, the process of Israelization is still widely debated. According to Sammy Smooha (2010), Israeli Arabs have since 1948 gone through a process of increasingly Israelization. As they have become citizens and therefore entitled to a wide range of civil rights and liberties - as well as welfare state policies and public benefits - this group has inevitably acquired Israeli identities. Israelization makes Arabs “bilingual and bicultural and adds the Hebrew language and Hebrew culture to their repertoire,²¹” without assimilating to the Jewish majority. According to Smooha (2010), they take Jews as their reference group in the sense that they wish to achieve the same socioeconomic standards, services and treatments. Israeli Arabs see their future tied to Israel and do not wish to leave the country or solve their problems by dissociating themselves with the state. They refrain from using violence and search for legal means to settle their disputes and fight for their rights.

There has been a significant growth in Israeli Arabs’ socioeconomic standards since the creation of the state. Today, Arabs have access to a wide range of products and services that is otherwise inexistent on the other side of the Green Line and even in other neighboring Arab countries. They have seen a significant growth of their businesses and have become more educated, with many achieving a middle class situation. This inevitably ties them even more to the land and to the state. Also, having access to Israeli products and pop culture has tied Arab youngsters closer to the Israeli component of their identity. A more free and modern lifestyle is definitely one of the advantages that Arab citizens are getting used to in Israel, especially those of middle class and wealthy families. Welfare state policies, which grant them a more prosperous and secure life in Israel; the rule of law, which permits internal disputes to be settled by legal means and away from the clan corrupt model; and democracy, which grants them liberty to fight for their causes, are some of the important products gained from their citizenship and cherished by most of them.

Nevertheless, this is still a topic of debate among scholars in Israel and abroad. Nadim Rouhana (1997), a preeminent Arab Israeli scholar, finds this process to be highly superficial, arguing that Arabs feel no emotional involvement with the state and

²¹ Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 8.

their attitude towards it is utterly objective.²² Their involvement in politics, for example, is a pragmatic one, necessary to the life in Israel. Hence, it does not reflect any type of subjective attachment to the state.

Researches, however, have shown that the majority of Arabs do show some level of attachment to the Israeli state and do identify themselves in a way that conveys such connection. In 2014, Arabs who favor their Israeli identity over their Palestinian was 33 percent and Arabs who defined themselves as Palestinian Israelis was 45 percent, whereas Arabs defining themselves solely as Palestinians was only 22 percent,²³ showing a high degree of attachment to their citizenship status. Most Arabs, however, would most favorably define themselves as Palestinians in Israel, Palestinian Arabs in Israel or Israeli Palestinians. A minority would exclude the Israeli term to their denomination, identifying simply as Palestinians or Palestinian Arabs. This is an interesting picture of how Arabs in Israel carry both identities and proves that they are not a zero-sum game and can coexist. They are not mutually exclusive, and as Laurence Louer (2003) points out, “to identify oneself as Palestinian is neither to reject Israeli citizenship nor to close oneself off culturally from Israel”.²⁴ The term “Palestinians in Israel” proves to be exactly it. It emphasizes the Palestinian nationalism without renouncing the Israeli citizenship attachment.

However, to balance both identities is an often exhausting task and, in the view of some, an impossible one. To flag a Palestinian identity in Israel can be seen by many as a hostile attitude, since most Jewish Israelis identify it as an inimical one. Also, to hold the Israeli identity in subjective terms is sure to receive criticisms inside the Arab community. Lucy Aharish’s outflow represents precisely it: the struggle of someone living in two worlds and not belonging to any. Therefore, although both identities have developed among the Arab community, there is an explicit conflict between the two of them. This has also to do with the sometimes-contradictory balance between the ethnic and democratic characters of the state.

To be considered by an Israeli identity solemnly, one has to carry the Jewish character of the state. To most people, Jews and Arabs alike, the most salient feature of

²² Nadim Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 119.

²³ Meirav Ariosoroff, “That is certainly no way to integrate Israeli Arabs into the workforce.” Haaretz, January 9, 2014.

²⁴ Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel’s Palestinians: The Conflict Within*, 29.

Israeliness is that of Jewishness. Therefore, for an Arab to fully hold an Israeli identity only on a subjective level is impossible. That is to say that the process of Israelization is one that operates mostly on the civil component, as far as the ethno-religious dimension of the state is concerned. Furthermore, the Jewish character of the state also hampers and limits the citizenship component of Arabs, since to be a “good citizen” would mean to fulfill and to contribute to all of the state’s goals and objectives, which include national security, cultivation of the relationship with the Diaspora Jewry, the Jewish culture and the Jewish elements of the state, to name just a few. As much as an Israeli Arab could try, he or she would still fall short of fulfilling the premises of the state. However, recent trends have shown Arabs even more prone to make use of their citizenship status to fight for equal rights, demanding their recognition as national minority inside Israel.

In sum, what have been shaping the collective identity of this group are the Palestinian nationalism and the Israeli citizenship at the same time. This increasingly unified identity places itself in the middle of the region’s conflict: between the Palestinian nation and the Israeli state. That is to say: the identity of this group is unique not only to Israel, but also to Palestine, since the Palestinian nationalism acquires different features from that of the Palestinians non-citizens of Israel. Hence, Arabs in Israel are a unique permanent national minority.

The relationship of the Arab community in Israel with its Jewish majority is one element that deeply influences and drives the development of this group’s identity. Two theses have been developing to deal with the trends that guide this complex relationship: the *Mutual Alienation Thesis* and the *Mutual Rapprochement Thesis*. Both propose ongoing trends that, just like the Palestinization and Israelization processes, dialog with each other.

Proponents of the *Mutual Alienation Thesis* purport that Arabs and Jews are becoming increasingly divided and tensions are rising to intolerable levels. They argue that the sense of deprivation among Arabs is rampant. Even though they have gone through a significant process of socioeconomic improvement, as mentioned earlier in this essay, they still fall short of the standards enjoyed by Jews. The gap between Arabs and Jews is noteworthy, giving them a huge sense of injustice and discrimination, since many attribute the gap to discriminatory policies perpetuated by the Israeli government,

such as unequal distribution of taxes, lack of investments in Arab schools, hospitals and other public services.

The thesis also revisits the point already exposed of Palestinization and even Islamization, as they portray the Arab minority as becoming increasingly radical and weary towards the state. This is largely also due to the various frictions between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as other Arab countries, such as the repression of the Second Intifada, the outbreak of the Second Lebanese War and Gaza War, and the construction of a separation barrier around the West Bank.

The continued failures to the peace process also plays an important role since it is regarded by many Israeli Arabs to be critical and indispensable to the progress of their internal struggle inside Israel. The 1990s created the illusion that better days were to come. During the government of Prime-Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the Oslo Accords were signed and a path to peace seemed to be under way. During this period, the Arab population saw a significant turn of events as discriminatory policies were lessened and more equal participation in government was achieved. This all proved to be barren, as the governments that followed Rabin's brutal assassination in 1995 by a Jewish extremist saw the rise to right and far right-wing parties. The acceptance of the two-state solution made many Jews more zealous about the Jewish-Zionist character of the state, since a Palestinian state was to be created alongside Israel, it was out of question for the state to abandon its Jewish component. Arabs also feared that lands in the Triangle – a region along the northeastern border with the West Bank, and home to many Israeli Arab towns and municipalities – could be swapped over by Jewish settlements inside the West Bank. This is a solution that the majority of Israeli Arabs would resent tremendously, but is commonly suggested in right-wing discourses.

Furthermore, the repression to the Second Intifada, the expansion of Jewish settlements and the violence against Arab protesters improved the sense of alienation by Israeli Arabs. For scholars of this theory calm is only temporary. Jews and Arabs are not only becoming increasingly divided but in fierce collision course.

The opposing view, that of the *Mutual Rapprochement Thesis*, is adopted by fewer scholars, such as Professor Sammy Smooha from the University of Haifa, but is no less important. According to them, relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel are more stable and balanced than the *Mutual Alienation Thesis* suggests and that the two groups are in process of adjusting to each other. This is largely due to the Israelization process,

which we have covered previously. Although aware of the many problems of Israel's democracy, Arabs have grown accustomed with the advantages offered by the state and see their lives and future tied to it. This has proved to be true, since most Arabs refrain from using violence or do not seek to disassociate themselves with the state.

The actions of the state respect the Arab minority in various manners and clearly distinguish them from the Palestinians. This recognition also comes from the Jewish majority, which increasingly understands that the Arab minority is a permanent and inassimilable one, that does not wish and will not leave the country and that plays an important role as a cultural minority.

This view also supports that the shift in Israeli politics has actually been an enlargement of the center groups, which understand the importance and indispensable role of the two-state solution to the peace process. Also, it is important to notice that the other Palestinian parties involved in the conflict do not expect the Palestinians in Israel to refrain from their Israeli citizenship or to engage in violent actions. They view them as a separate Palestinian population. The PLO regards Israeli Arabs "as part of Israel and; do not incorporate Israeli Arab grievances and demands in their political agenda, expect Arabs to lobby in Israel for the Palestinian cause; and call on them to take part in Israeli politics and to bolster pro-peace parties and movements."²⁵ Other Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas, also do not call on the Israeli Arabs to boycott Israel or act violently against their state.

Arabs in Israel have shown significant support over the years to the peace process and to coexistence. They are admirably committed to it and although protests, strikes and demonstration have risen over the past years, Arab Israelis have continually refrained from using violence and other types of subversive methods. Both the state and the Arabs maintain a fear balance between each other, knowing that they should avoid violence as much as possible. Not ignoring the disparities and inequalities among Israeli society, this thesis insists in the democratic character of the Israeli state and in the realization by the Israeli Arabs of their rights by fighting politically in a democratic environment for change and equality, avoiding violence and subversive means.

"We, Arabs, have come to realize the importance of fighting and engaging politically by participation in the Knesset and cooperation with the central government. We are part of Israel and we are entitled to equal rights by the state's Declaration of

²⁵ Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 7.

Independence.” This reflection, from Rassem Qassem (2013), chief of the Department of Welfare of the Israeli Arab municipality of Tira, manifests the ongoing trend of a large part of the Arab community to fully embrace their citizenship rights in order to fight for equality and better conditions by peaceful means. Tira is a small Arab town just northwest of Tel Aviv, bordering the region known as the “Triangle”. During a field research conducted there in 2013, I had the experience to watch more closely the struggles that the Arab community goes through and how this shapes their identities.

A large campaign was being conducted in recent years to boost tax revenues inside the municipality. The rate of tax evasion is known to be significantly high in Israeli Arab cities if compared to Jewish ones. This was also true in the case of Tira, which although considered a middle-class city, still performed poorly in tax collection. Not only do Arab towns produce less, but also most of its citizens refrain from paying their taxes. This is largely due to the sense of alienation shared by Arabs towards the state. In simple terms, Arabs do not feel that their contribution will ever come back to them the way they were supposed to and feel uncomfortable contributing to a state that they believe does not treat them equally. Most Arab citizens have a great sense of distrust with the state due to long dated discriminatory policies that benefits the Jewish majority over them. Yakub Halabi (2014) argues that in addition to the discrimination by the state in allocating resources to the Arab municipalities, the clan politics has obstructed the municipal attempts of penetrating society and extracting taxes.²⁶

National authorities argue that the low rate of investments in Arab towns is in fact a consequence of the poor performance in tax revenues. Tira is one of the many cities trying to revert this trend by fighting tax evasion and encouraging people to contribute. It signals a positive attitude of Arab leaders and local authorities to work with the state in order to bolster their socioeconomic status inside the country. However, the results still fall short if compared to the rates in similar Jewish municipalities. The resentment of the local population with the government’s policies is still remarkable and one of the most sensitive issues is unmistakably that of land.

Territorial control has long been a conflicting issue in Israel and one that has basically given form to the fight for the creation of the state. Decades after independence, land property and planning, be it urban or rural, is still largely attached

²⁶ Yakub Halabi, *Democracy, Clan Politics and Weak Governance: The Case of the Arab Municipalities in Israel*, Indiana University Press: 2014, pp. 98-99.

to the Zionist “mission”. The control of land is key to the whole Arab-Jewish conflict. For many Jews, control over the land and the fulfillment of the Zionist objectives was fundamental to the success of the Jewish State. This mentality has largely accompanied the state’s institutions long after the establishment of Israel. In the first years of the state, it launched a series of laws, such as the Absentees Laws and Ordinances and regulations that allowed the expropriation of much of Arab land arbitrarily and without a satisfactory compensation. The lack of a constitution or a bill of rights made breaches in the legislation useful to more land takeover as the years went by. Land is something of uttermost importance to Arabs, who come from traditional rural societies where prestige and status is largely associated with land possession. Israeli Arabs who have had their land expropriated by the state tend to be more skeptical towards the government and the peace process. Arabs who do not own land support coexistence initiatives as much as 66.7 percent, as opposed to 48 percent by those who have had their land expropriated by the state.²⁷

Housing planning and rural and urban development end up falling in the same situation. The growth of Arab towns and the licenses for new Arab constructions are significantly lower if compared to Jewish ones. Lack of permits results in a high rate of illegal constructions and a high number of people per house ratio. These are numbers that contribute to the sense of deprivation and distrust shared by Israeli Arabs when dealing with the government planning policies.

To Qassem however, further alienating themselves from the state and refusing to cooperate with it will only worsen their situation. He emphasizes that fighting to strengthen the democratic character of Israel by the political means open to them is the right solution. He argues that Israeli Arab society has experienced a huge development of its socioeconomic standards, with many Arabs having access to higher education and becoming independent professionals such as dentists and lawyers, a sharp contrast to the late 1940s where the majority of them were peasants who finished elementary school at most.²⁸ According to him, access to universities, consumer goods and culture has exposed and approximated Arab Israeli youth to the Hebrew culture, mentioning to be a common scene to find Arab youngsters cheering for Israeli soccer teams or listening

²⁷ Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel*, 25.

²⁸ Yakub Halabi, *Democracy, Clan Politics and Weak Governance: The Case of the Arab Municipalities in Israel*” pp. 98-99.

to Hebrew songs. He points out that new generations are born Israeli and are less sensitive to history. In his point of view, time is augmenting the gap between Palestinians on both sides. Qassem clearly cites the process of Israelization that his community in Tira has gone through, arguing that this has deepened their feelings of attachment towards the state and made them more prone to fight for their rights as equal Israeli citizens.

Therefore, the fight of the Palestinians in Israel could be better defined as one for equal national representation. Arabs would mostly push an agenda that highlights the democratic character of the state, demanding the normalization of their status as a national minority in a democratic, non-ethnic state.²⁹ Although Qassem's vision is not entirely shared by all Israeli Arabs since it is largely influenced by his socioeconomic standards – Tira is considered a middle-class Arab town –, most of them are heading in this direction. The sense of alienation and deprivation does not mean disentanglement with the state. Further engagement with it, if the democratic institutions permit, can bring a more positive solution. Qassem also carries in his discourse the pledge for affirmative policies that could enhance the equality among Israelis by invoking the indigenous character of the Arab minority. In fact, the past two decades have seen a rise of the politics of indigeneity amongst the Arab minority leaders. According to them, the Arab community is located in a social and political order that precedes the foundation of the state and therefore its pre-1948 reality is a moral as well as an analytical basis on which treatment of the Arab minority in Israel should take place.³⁰

The contradictions between the Jewish and the democratic features of the State are many. Prof. Smootha(2008) defines Israel as an ethnic state because it is driven by ethnic nationalism. According to him, Israel fits this definition because the state and its symbols are identified with a main ethnic nation and not with its citizens, because it practices a policy of creating a homogeneous nation-state, a state of and for a particular ethnic nation and acts to promote language, culture, numerical majority, economic well-being and political interests of this group. However, the same author (Smootha, 2008) also qualifies Israel as a democratic state since it is successful in providing universal voting rights, a multi-party system, fair elections, change of government, civil rights,

²⁹ Sammy Smootha, *Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 2008.

³⁰ Oded Haklai cites Amal Jamal's description of the indigenous politics. *The Arab Minority in Israel; Challenges and Limits in Recent Disciplinary Approaches* (Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 138

independent judiciary, free press, civilian authority over the army, and popular and elite support for democratic institutions. Therefore, in the author's vision, Israel is an ethnic democracy, constantly balancing these two elements in its political agenda.

This is the balance that many Israeli Arabs now fight for: the enhancement of the democratic element of the state, granting all citizens equal treatment and proper representation of the state's national minorities. In other words, Arabs are well aware of the imperfections of Israel's democracy as far as they are concerned and resent the ethnic character of the state when it damages their individual and collective rights; however, the democratic character is regarded as the main tool to social and political reform with more than 50 percent of Arabs believing that despite the shortcomings, the regime in Israel is a democracy for both Arab and Jewish citizens and over 60 percent agreeing that Arab citizens can improve their situation using persuasion, political pressures, and voting.³¹

We should not neglect the fact that Palestinians in Israel are not ready and do not wish to leave the country. As a permanent national minority, they still have a long path to achieve equality and overcome the discriminatory policies of the state, however, over the course of history Israel has become the state where they run their businesses, educate their children and engage socially. As noted by Qassem during my visit to Tira, "many empires have passed through this land: the Romans, the Ottomans, the British... And we are still here, generations later we continue to run our businesses and conduct our lives... Now it is Israel, another chapter in our history." Perhaps Rasseem Qassem's statement could be better portrayed in Rouhana's vision of the exclusively objective engagement of Arabs with the Israeli state. However, the achievements of the Israeli Arab society to this date make such objective relationship dearly cherished.

³¹ Sammy Smooha, *Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel* (Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 19.