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# The Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel

*Stanley A. Ringler*

אם יצטרף השם—peace with the Palestinian populations of the West Bank and Gaza will be achieved in our time. To fail in this quest will result in our becoming a degraded international pariah state. It will bring upon us decades of unimaginable economic, cultural, and social discrimination, boycott and aggravated assaults on our proud self-image as an enlightened and moral people. The consequences are too painful to imagine. Let us assume, therefore, a positive scenario.

A peace agreement is achieved on the principle of two states for two people. Israel's concerns for comprehensive security arrangements and defensible borders are met. The major settlement blocs are incorporated within Israel's permanent borders. Israel's Jewish majority character is recognized. Only a symbolic number of Palestinian refugees, if any at all, are repatriated into the Jewish state. A permanent end to the conflict is declared on a mutual basis.

Palestinian aspirations for independence are realized. The Israeli occupation is ended. Palestine consists of a contiguous land mass on the West Bank with a capitol next to Israel's, in or adjacent to Jerusalem. Geographically the newly independent State of Palestine includes two parts, with the Gaza Strip linked in some way to the rest. It will include 100 percent of the territory within pre-1967 West Bank borders, after agreed upon exchanges of land.

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What then? Imagine Israel living side by side in peace with her Palestinian neighbors. Imagine too that the nightmare scenarios of the right wing will not come to pass. There will be no terrorism originating in Palestine. Rockets and missiles will not be fired at Ben Gurion Airport from the heights of Palestinian hilltops overlooking the Sharon valley and coastal strip. Water sources will be shared, and trade and tourism will be encouraged. Most if not all of the relatively small settlements spread throughout the territories will be evacuated.

Will then, an Israel at peace, begin to address with energy and determination her numerous, potentially explosive domestic problems? Indeed, the list is long and troubling. This begs the question: do we really have the leisure to wait for a settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict before we address the most challenging problems on our domestic agenda?

### Israel's Palestinian Arab Citizenry

By far the most important issue on Israel's agenda is the relationship between the Jewish majority population and the Arab Palestinian minority within Israel proper. And while the issue is not entirely unrelated to the peace process, for Israel's Arab citizens, their domestic problems are more immediate and demanding of resolution than the struggle of their people across the Green Line.

How could it be otherwise? More than 21 percent of the citizens of Israel are Arabs. Overwhelmingly, this population lives separate and apart from Jewish residential communities. There are 1.7 million Israeli Arab citizens who live in social, cultural, and religious communities that are impacted and, for the most part, impoverished. In fact, more than 54 percent of Israeli Arab families live in poverty. The percentage of Arab children living in poverty in the Jewish state, 67.9 percent, is even more dramatic.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for the impoverishment of Arab Israeli towns and villages are many. For one, Arab communities are simply not funded by government ministries at levels proportionally equivalent to Jewish communities. Compared to Jewish municipalities, local Arab communities are sorely lacking in adequate social services (medical, welfare, etc.), educational facilities and resources, cultural and recreational facilities, infrastructure (roads, bridges, and sewage systems), access to public transportation, and government

offices. Above all else, as a consequence of the appropriation of Arab lands, limited government approval for new building within constricted residential areas, and no serious effort to advance requests for approval of development plans, Arab villages and towns are severely overpopulated and impacted. Densely populated housing conditions confirm the urgent need for new housing construction permits and for the expansion of existing municipal borders. It is time also to initiate the development of new communities in the Arab sector. Unlike the inspiring story of the settlement and construction of seven hundred new Jewish towns and cities since the establishment of the state in 1948, not a single new Arab community has been created.<sup>2</sup>

With a handful of exceptions, Arab towns and cities do not have contiguous industrial zones where accessible work opportunities could offer Arab women and underemployed men jobs. Needless to say, such areas are also important for purposes of municipal tax income. Not surprisingly, some 90 percent of Arab communities in Israel are classified in the three lowest socioeconomic rankings by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>3</sup>

The issue of work and equal opportunity is one of the underlying sources of existential frustration and bitterness among Israeli Arabs. It is also an explanation for the general conviction that they are broadly discriminated against and unjustly treated. Thousands of educated Arab citizens, most graduates of Israeli institutions of higher education, are unable to secure appropriate work. Not surprisingly, the largest number, more than ten thousand, are teachers.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, teaching in the Arab sector was considered to be a profession offering employment opportunity, stability, and local accessibility. The fact is, however, that there are an insufficient number of positions in the Arab sector to absorb so many teachers. Furthermore, many Arab teachers are actually professionals with degrees in other fields who cannot find jobs in the Jewish workplace.

Ironically, in an Israel recognized for its success in the field of high technology, a sector in dire need of qualified workers, Arab candidates are routinely rejected on spurious grounds. The same is true in most other major sectors including industry, finance, business and government. Tsofen, the Arab-Jewish organization promoting integration of Israel's Arab citizens into the high-tech industry, notes on its website that 44 percent of Arabs

with degrees in the exact sciences work in teaching positions, and only 51 percent of Arabs who have studied law, economics, accounting, or business management work in places relevant to their education.<sup>5</sup>

The example of high technology is instructive since the consequence of failure to find work in the field has resulted in a large number of people who studied exact and computer sciences seeking work in primary and secondary educational institutions within the Arab sector. Tsofen estimates that only 1.5 percent to 2 percent of the workers in the high-tech sector are Arabs.

The few open positions in teaching in the Arab sector along with the disinterest in filling open positions in the Jewish sector with Arab teachers has resulted in an abundance of qualified and underutilized Arab academics. Many, in desperation, find themselves seeking work in other low-paying manual jobs. The number of unfilled positions throughout the educational system, not including large numbers of positions that are filled with unqualified people, is in the thousands. This number is expected to grow rapidly each year going forward.<sup>6</sup>

It can be argued that the percentage of Arab men working is not much different than the percentage of Jewish working men in Israel (60.3 percent compared to 72 percent). As noted, however, many are underemployed. Furthermore, the salary gap between Jewish and Arab urban workers is 34 percent below the average,<sup>7</sup> while the overall gap between Jewish and Arab men according to a Bank of Israel report in 2011 was almost 50 percent.<sup>8</sup> To this must be added the additional expense that Arab workers are compelled to cover in traveling to work at sites often at great distances from their home communities. This is hardly surprising since 70 percent of Israeli Arabs live in areas considered to be peripheral to major population centers: 52.3 percent in the Galilee, 23.8 percent in east central areas (known as the Triangle), and 15.9 percent in the Negev. There are clear disadvantages attendant to this reality. But further complicating it is the surprising lack of adequate, *or any*, means of public transportation throughout most of the Arab sector. There is no explanation for this other than government discrimination in the provision of services and the building of infrastructure in centers of Arab population.

Conditions are further exacerbated by the reality, as noted, that there are virtually no significant centers of industry and commerce

in areas contiguous to most Arab communities. This also explains why only 26 percent of Arab women are in the workforce. There are few opportunities in their home communities or in contiguous areas. To make matters worse, no reasonably accessible transportation to more distant locations exists, and in their communities, there are few or no day-care facilities available for children. Nor are there any afternoon informal educational frameworks for children.<sup>9</sup> Among Arabs who are employed, some 60 percent work outside of their home towns and villages.<sup>10</sup>

In a recent comprehensive research project of two leading academics, Professor Eren Yashiv of Tel Aviv University and Dr. Nitza Kasir of the Bank of Israel, conditions in the Arab sector were described graphically by concluding that "Israeli Arabs live in geographical and economic ghettos."<sup>11</sup>

Above all else, the attitude of Jewish employers to Arab citizens seeking jobs is disturbing and discriminatory. Historically, specious arguments such as the classic explanation that many positions are security sensitive and therefore only Israeli Army veterans are qualified to apply, have long ago been proven to be fictional. Likewise, the claim that Arabs are culturally unable to integrate into a so-called Jewish work environment is an obvious expression of prejudice, not of fact. Prejudice and racism continue to be definitive reasons why many Arabs are unable to secure work in other than low-paying, labor-intensive positions.

Phenomena inherent in working in low-paying, labor-intensive positions distant from one's community of residence, include: physical strain, injury, and exhaustion. This is one of the reasons why many Arab workers abandon the labor market years before the official retirement age. To make their situation more difficult, 40 percent of Arab workers have no pension program.<sup>12</sup> This is a consequence of the minimalist benefits offered workers in low-level positions. Together these factors contribute to the widespread poverty among Arab families in Israel.

### Arab-Jewish Relations

According to Professor Sammy Smooha's *Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2012*,<sup>13</sup> "Jews are fearful of Arab citizens and do not trust them." The *Index* reports that 57.6 percent of Jews avoid Arab areas in Israel "out of fear" and 51.5 percent of Jews fear the

implications of what they believe to be a high Arab birthrate. (In fact the Arab birthrate has been rapidly declining in recent decades. The difference between the Jewish and Arab birthrate has narrowed to roughly one half of one percent. According to the 2011 report of The Israel Bureau of Statistics, as noted in the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute publication on Arab Society in Israel, the birthrate among Moslem women was 3.51 children while that among Jewish women was 2.98. In comparison, the birthrate in 1980 among Moslem women in Israel was 5.6 children.)

In addition, 27.9 percent of Jews "favor denying Arabs the right to vote in Knesset elections"; 69.4 percent believe that Arab citizens who define themselves as "Palestinian Arabs" cannot be loyal to the state and its laws; and 39.4 percent would support the "transfer of some Arab localities in the Triangle region to a future Palestinian state."

Professor Smootha further points out in his 2012 *Index* report that while Jews associate Palestinian identity with the enemy, in fact most Arabs self-identify as Palestinian Arabs *and*, to a greater or lesser degree, as Israelis: 2.6 percent identify as Israelis only and not as Palestinian Arabs at all; 8.7 percent identify primarily as Israeli but also to some degree as Palestinian Arabs; 19.6 percent identify equally as Palestinian Arabs and Israelis; 37.6 percent identify essentially as Palestinian Arabs but also to some degree as Israelis; and 30.2 percent identify as Palestinian Arab and not as Israelis.<sup>14</sup> It should here be noted that the deepening of the Palestinian dimension of their identity has been constant over the last decade. This is due, in large part, to the intensification of feelings of bitterness at their condition as a discriminated-against minority subject to inequitable treatment and suspicion.

Jews in Israel fear and distrust Arab fellow citizens largely because they have little knowledge of and acquaintance with them. Out of ignorance Israeli Jews make certain assumptions regarding Arabs in general and then apply these attitudes to the Israeli reality. In fact, from a cultural point of view the commonalities are far greater than the differences. This is particularly clear among the youth. One is hard put to discern significant differences between secular Jewish and Arab youth. They tend to dress alike, speak alike, and share social and cultural interests. Even among educated adults, one finds that men dress similarly and share interests in nonreligious matters with their Jewish counterparts.

Young Arab women are now dominant among Arabs studying toward academic degrees. This has influenced their attitudes toward family and lifestyle. Arab women are more conscious of quality-of-life issues than in the past. They have aspirations to excel professionally and to live a lifestyle unimpeded by traditional social attitudes and cultural norms. This in part accounts for the dramatic change in Israeli Arab demographic statistics. What retards these processes, however, are the attitudes and discriminatory policies of the Jewish majority. The weekend paper editorial in the *Ha'aretz* newspaper on June 14, 2013, sharply defined the problems at the heart of the Arab-Jewish divide in Israel. It said:

One out of every five citizens in the State of Israel today is an Arab. Nonetheless, for most of the Jews living in Israel, the Arabs are transparent. They do not meet them in the street since most Arabs live in separate towns or in separate neighborhoods inside mixed cities. They also don't meet them at work since Arabs have a hard time filling desirable jobs . . . This is how the State of Israel lives as two separate states, one Arab and one Jewish, and the gap between the two countries in terms of standard of living, income level, quality of education and employment is enormous. This is the gap between the Jewish state of Israel, which is a developed Western nation, and the Arab state of Israel which is no more than a Third World Country.

In the perspective of the Arab population the facts are not disputable. The conviction that they are treated as second-class citizens who do not deserve equality is held by two thirds of Israel's Arab citizens. They feel "alienated" and "threatened" and they believe that "it is impossible to trust most Jews."<sup>15</sup>

The sense of alienation and injustice felt among Israeli Arabs is deep and unsettling. This situation is all the more disheartening in light of the fact that more than a decade ago, the government approved the report of the Orr Commission examining the root cause of Arab demonstrations in October 2000 and the exaggerated lethal behavior of the police in response. The report concluded that one of the main causes for the demonstrations was the "failure" of "numerous Israeli governments" to "show sensitivity towards the needs of the Arab sector, and the insufficient actions to equally allocate the resources of the state toward this sector."<sup>16</sup>

In recent years there have been a number of initiatives taken by the government to promote greater integration of Arabs into the economic mainstream. This is motivated by the recognition that failure to do so will result in the loss of critically needed manpower, a problem growing in urgency as the relative percentage of working Jews is rapidly declining. To put it more plainly, if the Arab (and *Haredi*) communities are not integrated into the workforce and marketplace, the Israeli economy will not be able to sustain itself in the future.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, the pressing challenge of economic sustainability and growth has not yet resulted in a deliberate and real change in government policy. To begin with it is sufficient to note that with 21 percent of the population, the contribution of the Arab sector represents only 8 percent of the Gross National Product. How could it be otherwise? What is required is a commitment on the part of the government to meet its obligation to equitably allocate resources to the Arab sector. Only in this way can all of the critical social and economic unmet needs from which Arab society is suffering begin to be addressed.<sup>18</sup> Were this to happen, in time, the Arab sector will offer a much enlarged pool of needed, skilled, human capital and an enriched market. Much more important is that the Israeli Arab community may, as a consequence, finally become sufficiently empowered to integrate into a hopefully more welcoming Jewish majority culture and society.

The issues of local community development, housing, formal and informal educational facilities, industrial zones, social services of all kinds, local and regional infrastructure, accessible transportation, employment opportunity, appointments to government offices and authorities, and ultimately a change in public status and relationship are all preconditions to meeting the needs of the state, not to mention the improvement of the Arab-Jewish relationship.

### Jewish Ethics and History

To put the matter in terms of Jewish ethics and moral principles, historically, Israeli governments, in terms of their relationship with the state's minorities, have failed to function honestly and justly. Not only have they, we, not met our commitments to our minority populations, we have been a party to their deprivation and unjust discrimination.

Unfortunately, Israel is not yet the society we aspired after and, even today, rhetorically claim it to be. Israel is not a state truly defined by the principles of justice and equality. And Israeli society certainly does not express the prophetic values of our tradition. Perhaps an even more painful indictment of the Israel reality is that after the Jewish historical experience of millennia of suffering from racism, discrimination, and persecution, we have failed to create a society that is clearly the antithesis to the ones in which we lived as victims. In terms of both domestic and, of course, foreign policy, we have fallen short, painfully so.

As rabbis we are familiar with the text in Leviticus 19:33–34: “When a stranger resides in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” In applying text to reality we find that, ironically, the “stranger” among us is in fact already a “citizen.” But his/her status has not changed. Nor have we acted as one would expect of a people who themselves “were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

As an Israeli Reform rabbi, who is a politically and socially engaged citizen, I would like to believe that our relationship with the Palestinian Arab citizens of our state is of concern to all of our colleagues and supporters. As progressive Jews, ought we not be at the forefront of the struggle for justice, equality, and peace within Israeli society?

The struggle to write the wrongs reviewed in this paper is compelling and urgent. It is also premised on the belief that we can make right the terrible wrongs that directly and indirectly we’ve allowed within the Jewish state. There is still time to avoid a threatening new explosion of frustration and violent protest against the current, regressive state of affairs in Israeli society. Our role is to speak out and press for justice and equality. We can do so in many ways. But no doubt, one unique way to do so is by strengthening the work of our movement in this politically charged field in urgent need of social action. The Religious Action Center has a role to play as does the Union. Together we can encourage and support a change in the Arab-Jewish relationship through our Israel movement. Some of our congregations are already engaged in meaningful initiatives to build genuine Arab-Jewish collaborative relationships. They need reinforcement and

assistance. And we can support and encourage a much-expanded and focused program of activities on the part of IRAC, our policy and legal action center in Israel. This will require a change or expansion of policy priorities.

We can lobby, educate, and support political change in policy through appropriate organs of intervention and advocacy such as the U.S.-based Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues and, in Israel, Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality. And we can directly engage as an exemplary community of Jews in acts of reconciliation and outreach to the Arab community in Israel through educational visits and coalition building initiatives throughout the Arab sector in Israel.

We can make a difference. We can influence a process that if not checked may bring about a social and political disaster in Israel. At the end of the day, the outcome of the conflict with the Palestinian people living across the Green Line (the pre-1967 borders) may bring about peace with our neighbors, but it will not ensure domestic peace and justice within Israel proper.

### Notes

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