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The Arab Society in Israel and the Nation State Law

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Not surprisingly, Israel's new Nation State Law has sparked strong criticism within Israel's Arab community. Yet while protest was voiced by all major Arab political elements, the Arab public as a whole has not mobilized to engage in any significant broad-based protest on the issue. This did not even occur with the mass demonstration in Tel Aviv, planned by the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee. Instead, the Monitoring Committee's attempt to advance a counter-approach revealed the cracks within the Arab leadership, highlighting in particular the relatively restrained approach adopted by the Arab Joint List. The impression is that as far as the Joint List is concerned, the law does not constitute a turning point in Israeli policy of recent years, and that taking an immediate resolute stand on the issue could cast a shadow over the continuation of cooperation with the government regarding the implementation of the five-year plan. This has not been the case in the Druze sector, which regards the law as an opportunity to attain renewed legitimacy for its special status, as well as economic benefits in areas it regards as essential.

Predictably, passage of the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People (hereafter, the Nation State Law) has aroused fundamental criticism within Arab society in Israel. The Arab political establishment has opposed the law, which it perceives as a direct blow to the minority sector and to the value of civil equality. The first to denounce the legislation were the Arab Joint List Knesset members who, during the vote, tore up a copy of the law. A post denouncing the legislation issued by MK Jamal Zahalka (Balad) contained a map of "Greater Palestine" that bore the colors of the Palestinian flag and made no reference to the State of Israel, and called for a general strike. MK Yousef Jabarin (Hadash) called on the Inter-Parliamentary Union to take measures against Israel. Sheikh Kamal Khatib, the acting leader of the Northern Branch of Israel's Islamic Movement, posted a video maintaining that the new legislation revealed the true face of Israel and proved that the conflict was essentially a religious one. The claim that the law revealed racial separation was also advanced by Palestinian-Arab intellectuals such as Prof. Assad Ghanem, who called for the beginning of a new chapter in the struggle against discrimination. In contrast, in a radio interview on Galei Tzahal, Joint List Chairman MK Ayman Odeh argued for the pragmatic approach espoused by both him and his party, Hadash. Although he denounced the legislation, he was careful to avoid

calling for extreme measures, refrained from using provocative terminology, and emphasized the need for civil equality. All the reactions mentioned above represent familiar responses reflecting the various nuances of rival elements within the Arab sector.

The majority of the Arab public appears not to be overly concerned by the law or its implications. Indeed, the protest activity on the ground has been quite limited. Small demonstrations were staged in a number of localities at the initiative of the Higher Monitoring Committee; Arab politicians were disappointed with the meager turnout at these protests. Against this background, a demonstration was held in Tel Aviv on August 11, 2018, planned as a mass demonstration devoid of nationalist manifestations. In practice, this demonstration, which had a large number of participants, including a significant number of Jews, and which included a number of vocal nationalist elements, has not made much difference in the overall situation.

This has also been true with regard to the more activist approach, manifested by the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee and the boldly worded message by its leader, Mohammad Barakeh. It primarily reflected the pragmatic approach of Ayman Odeh's Joint List, although the rival parties within the List continue to advocate differing positions, based on their distinct political identities. Thus, although the Joint List participated in the protests, it did so somewhat late and in a lower profile. This again expressed the internal tensions within the Arab political leadership with regard to personal relationships, the struggle over political seniority, and fundamental positions regarding the strategy to be adopted vis-à-vis the Israeli government in general, and in the context of the Nation State Law in particular.

Overall, the recent developments have not - at this point - appeared to constitute a formative change in the attitudes of the Arab population and social media. Public criticism within Arab society, which clearly opposes the law, is far less pronounced than among the Jewish public and political elements, or within the Druze community. Indeed, the restrained indifference demonstrated by Arab society has been distinctly evident against the background of the protests within the Druze community, whose spokespeople - including former senior commanders of the IDF - have leveled serious charges regarding the disparity between the Druze contributions to the state on the one hand, and the state's degrading treatment of this population on the other. This development threatens a crisis that the Prime Minister seeks to neutralize, primarily by means of a willingness to frame the unique status of Israel's Druze community in separate legislation, and complement it with economic benefits. In the meantime, the leaders of the Druze community who emphasize the need for a favorable arrangement are finding it difficult to withstand the pressure from within, among more extreme groups, which are calling to change the formulation of the Nation State Law.

Thus far the law has presumably not rattled the foundations of Arab society in Israel. Its adoption has been viewed as yet another expression of government policy in recent years. On the one hand, the government has labored to advance the Arab population's economic integration into the Israeli economy and, in so doing, to reduce socio-economic disparities with the Jewish population. On the other hand, the government is perceived by Arab society as taking contradictory steps in the socio-political realm that promote exclusion and inequality. From this perspective the Nation State Law is deemed as yet one more in a series of anti-Arab measures, including discriminatory statements by senior politicians and laws – such as the muezzin law, the Nakba law, and others – within the formal framing of the Jewish establishment's basic estranged views toward the Arab minority.

The fact that important elements among Israel's political opposition have opted to clearly embrace the Druze population has further illustrated the marginality of Arab society in the social order within the State of Israel. In this context, the established Arab leadership appears to believe that a severe and defiant opposition to the government could harm the orderly implementation of the five-year plan and perhaps also hurt the chances of expanding it with an additional five-year plan in 2020, which is already under discussion by the government. This realistic approach appears to be acceptable to the Arab public, which understands both the limitations of protest and the price of radicalization.

On the other hand, the Druze protest reflects the opposite view vis-à-vis the Nation State Law, which is perceived both as an insult and as a manifestation of the ongoing erosion of this community's special status in Israel. Since the establishment of the state, the Druze have succeeded in distinguishing themselves from Israel's Arab community, in binding their fate to the Jewish-Zionist hegemony, and in deriving benefit from this situation. The Nation State Law, with its symbolic value, and the government measures aimed at reducing the disparities with the Arab community created a sense of threat to their preferred status. The Druze appear to sense that, unlike the Arabs in Israel, they enjoy sufficient status to leverage the authentic protest in order to achieve essential benefits regarding the issues troubling them, primarily in the realm of land and construction. The background to the disagreements and tensions within the Druze community appears to be related to the traditional Druze leadership's fear that the support the community receives from Jews opposed to the government could also harm them vis-à-vis other Druze interests relating to Israeli policy toward the Druze in Syria. Others – primarily among the younger leadership, intellectuals, and veterans of the Israeli security system – have resorted to a more confrontational approach as part of the generational struggle over the future leadership of the community.

In conclusion, the social and political struggle surrounding the Nation State Law is still in its initial stages, and the manner in which it will unfold in the future is difficult to foresee. The coming months of the Knesset recess may facilitate a cooling off in tensions and a quest for a remedy for the Druze issue, most likely in the economic realm. In the context of the relationship with the Arab population, it is doubtful whether the law will have a significant impact on the processes that have played out in recent years. If an arrangement is reached with regard to the Druze, and mainly if it is institutionalized in separate legislation and accompanied by significant economic benefits, this will serve to further accentuate the gap between the Druze and the Arabs, and to increase the sense of alienation of the country's Arab minority. In this reality, it will be important for the government to work in conjunction with the Arab leadership to ensure the full implementation of the first five-year plan and to take measures in preparation for the adoption of a second, expanded five-year plan, which will also provide systemic solutions for issues not yet resolved. The aim should be to diminish the marked disparities that exist today. The restrained reactions so far of the Arab minority to the Jewish Nation State Law can and should serve to strengthen the shared interests of the majority and the minority, which is currently being manifested in the economic realm.