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## Israel Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713677360>

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Alexander Bligh

Online Publication Date: 24 January 2003

**To cite this Article** Bligh, Alexander(2003)'Israeli Arab Members of the 15th Knesset: Between Israeli Citizenship and their Palestinian National Identity',*Israel Affairs*,9:1,1 — 15

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/13537120412331321503

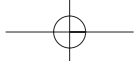
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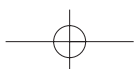
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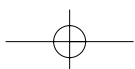
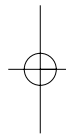
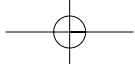
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AFTER OCTOBER 2000





# Israeli Arab Members of the 15th Knesset: Between Israeli Citizenship and Their Palestinian National Identity<sup>1</sup>

ALEXANDER BLIGH

One of the outcomes of the Arab nations' struggle for independence from Western powers during the first half of the twentieth century was the division of the Arab National Movement into sub-ideologies, and, as a result, the establishment of separate nation states with their respective specific ideologies. At the start of the twenty-first century, it looks as though this split did not end with separate Arab national entities. The Palestinian National Movement is likely to witness yet another split: in spite of common Palestinian ideological and emotional obligation and commitment, the Palestinians now face quite a number of political and geographical constraints, which may lead to the emergence of several new national Palestinian movements. Perhaps the first indication of such a trend is the political behaviour of Israeli Arab members of the 15th Israeli Knesset (the Israeli parliament), who have demonstrated since the October 2000 violence inside sovereign Israeli territory a new kind of Palestinian nationalism: Israeli Palestinian, unique to them.

Residents of the West Bank (in this article, 'the territories'), former Jordanians, are separated physically and by Israeli authorities from residents of the Gaza Strip. Both groups are developing along similar, yet also different, political lines. East Jerusalem residents carry the documents of Israeli residents although they identify with the West Bank. Moreover, such duality and complexity does not end here. In at least one case, which was exposed in August 2002, Palestinians living in Jerusalem took part in a violent struggle against Israeli authorities. Beyond all of this, there is still another Palestinian population – Israeli Arabs, citizens of the state, who regard themselves as Palestinians in terms of their national identity, but different by virtue of their Israeli citizenship, as to how they regard the

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Dr Alexander Bligh is a senior lecturer and the chair of the Political Science and Middle Eastern Departments at the Academic College of Judea and Samaria. He served as the adviser on Arab affairs to the prime minister of Israel, and has dealt on a daily basis with Israeli Arab issues. In his academic capacity he has published extensively on Palestinian, Jordanian and Saudi topics.

Israeli authorities' attitude towards them, and their perception of the need to resort to terror. Their commitment to the overall Palestinian concept is similar, to a certain extent, to the differences among Arab populations in the Middle East over 50 years ago when Israel was fighting for its independence. This comparison and a close look at the specific lines of political development of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens, and in particular, their leadership, can lead to the conclusion that the state of Israel is beginning to recognize the development of a new Palestinian People – a segment of the Palestinians, with unique characteristics and a strong emphasis on its uniqueness *vis-à-vis* other Palestinians, the state of Israel and its policies regarding the Arab community.

The wave of terror in Israeli-controlled territories, followed by violence in the Palestinian Authority (PA), and their combined, accumulated effect on Palestinian Israelis have contributed to and strengthened the development of this process, which began before October 2000.

The uprisings in the territories (from 1987 to 1992, and then from October 2000 until the present) and the resulting political developments, have had a major, inestimable impact on the formulation of Israeli–Palestinian relations. This fact is represented by the start of the Oslo process and a string of agreements between Israel and the PLO that had a dramatic influence on the political position of Israeli Arabs within the Israeli political system and the Palestinian political system as well. Afterwards, in October 2000, the Oslo process fell apart – to the disappointment of the Palestinian public in Israel and the PA. The *intifada* – the uprisings of 1987 to 1992, and the current one – are an expression of the direct confrontation between Palestinians from all demographic and geographic groups, including the leadership itself, and the state of Israel. These events have crystallized the feeling of Palestinian identity on an emotional and ideological level, and have placed Israeli Palestinians – or Israeli Arabs – in a new context of challenges and problems, and have affected their political behaviour, patterns of activity and methods of protest.

Growing solidarity with residents of the territories and the PA has created a widespread protest movement that has several different expressions. The conflicted, complex attitude of Israeli Arabs towards the state of Israel on the one hand, and their attitude towards their own people – Palestinians who are residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – on the other, form the basis for a substantial change in the political behaviour patterns of Israeli Arabs. The change has both immediate as well as long-term repercussions.

The uprising is not the only reason for this change. Since the mid-1980s, and perhaps even earlier on, Israeli Arabs paved a distinct path for themselves. This combined traditional symbols, such as clothing, strict

adherence to religious rituals and the importance of family relations, with at the same time adoption of national values in the form of identification with alternative symbols. Concurrent with this process was participation in Israel's educational frameworks and the development of professional connections between Arab and Jewish business communities in Israel. All of the above leads to the question whether the political trends of recent years – particularly because the Israeli Arab October riots coincided with the start of the *intifada al-Aqsa* in the territories – indicate parallel and coordinated patterns of activity between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians living in the territories in order to achieve complementary goals. In other words, have Israeli Arabs, together with their political leadership, developed for themselves a unique identity? Is it still relevant to study 'Palestinization' (integration with the Palestinians) as opposed to 'Israelization' (Israeli Arabs' complete integration into the Israeli system) – since, by combining the two – by pre-planned design and also to some extent spontaneously – this population created a new identity and patterns of activity that provide it with new importance and impact between the state of Israel and the Palestinian population.<sup>2</sup>

One way to examine this dilemma is through an analysis of the parliamentary functioning and the role of Arab members of the 15th Knesset via a comparison of activities during Knesset sessions before and after the October riots. As the main focus of this article concentrates on this aspect, we will not delve into extra-parliamentary activity in which members of Knesset (MKs) used their rights and privileges in order to advance a variety of Palestinian issues. The data that indicate substantial changes in the perception of how Arab MKs regard their roles stem from October 2000 events. For the purpose of this research, a quantitative approach has been adopted in looking solely at Arab members' actions in the Knesset. The analysed data cover proposals for private member bills, queries that have been addressed, oral queries and calls to order.

The 15th Knesset, whose members were elected in May 1999, is in session during one of the most difficult periods in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The riots in the territories were followed immediately by clashes between the Israeli police and Israeli Arab citizens. During the incidents, 13 citizens were killed. These clashes have been investigated by a special committee of inquiry – the Or Committee – headed by a Supreme Court judge. This fatal confrontation signifies a milestone in the history of Israel's majority–minority relations. The dimensions of this turning point could probably be clarified by the publication of the Investigating Committee's conclusions, as well as by the possible continuation of a still small but growing number of incidents in which Israeli Arabs have participated one way or another in acts of terror against Israeli citizens, in conjunction with the continued struggle with the PA. The result of the ongoing fighting between Israel and the Palestinians in the PA has been

extensive human suffering and economic deprivation among their fellow Palestinians, which has presented Israeli Arabs with a steadily growing dilemma. How, as citizens of Israel, can they continue to identify with the state that oppresses their brothers while providing as much assistance as possible to their brothers without violating acceptable norms of civil behaviour?

Perhaps the main reason for this dilemma, as analysed here, is connected with the similar yet also substantially different ideological and political development of the political and violent behavioural patterns of Israeli Arabs and the PA leadership. This topic should be addressed by taking into account two central issues: the involvement of Israeli Arab leadership in the Israeli political establishment; and the development of an independent political system, separate from the Israeli one, that pursues an independent foreign policy – mainly with the PLO, the PA and the Palestinians in the territories. The connecting links between both of these issues are the Arab MKs, particularly Tibi<sup>3</sup> and Bisharah<sup>4</sup> – who speak in a similar language when referring to the state of Israel and its institutions, but actually prefer different allies. For Tibi the Palestinian Authority and Arafat are at the top of the list; for Bisharah it is Syria as the bedrock of Arab nationalism, which indeed indicates a major difference in their respective political orientations. Although Tibi tries to present his Palestinian solidarity and nationalism as a particularly national Palestinian trend, Bisharah presents his views regarding the national standing of his people as stemming from a larger pan-Arab ideology reminiscent of Nasserite ideology of the 1950s and 1960s. However, both present the Israeli Arab Palestinian ideology as unique: similar to the larger ideology, Palestinian or pan-Arab respectively, and yet entitled to its own national attributes.

#### HOW DID ARAB MKs BECOME LEADERS OF THE ISRAELI ARAB COMMUNITY?

Since the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the ascent of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, Israeli Arabs have undergone four stages of leadership development, which have had a vast and steadily increasing influence on internal and external political discussions concerning their Palestinian identity:

1. 1974 – Establishment of the Committee of the Arab Municipalities.
2. 1982 – Establishment of the Monitoring Committee.
3. 1988 and afterwards – Development of a two-pronged informal leadership: the established institutions, led by the Committee of the Arab Municipalities and the Monitoring Committee; and – over it: the practical leadership, in which it was possible to discern competition between the national-political leadership (MK Darawshe was for a

certain period of time the dominant figure) and the Islamic leadership (Abdullah Nimr Darwish from Kafr Qasim was the leading figure in this category). At the start of the 1980s, the political structure was initially based on independent Arab parties, which were not just another branch of the Zionist parties as used to be the case during the first generation of the Jewish state. When MK Darawshe left the Labour Party in 1988, his act symbolized a split from old political patterns. The new leadership, from the early 1980s, was rooted in a continually developing system of internal and external relations. Along with civil society activities, different organizations appeared on the scene, which focused on various aims; in retrospect, these were humanitarian in nature, such as, for example, committees engaged in activities for unrecognized villages, or student organizations with their militant objectives.<sup>5</sup> However, these organizations did not try to hide the national Palestinian message inherent in their activities.

4. 1993 – Since the signing of the Interim Agreements with the Palestinians, the emphasis in leadership activity shifted, even if undeclared, to questions related to the political process and its long-term effects on the position of Israeli Arabs. The political leadership, that is: MKs, highly experienced in the political system, and having relations with Israel, undisputedly took the leading role in matters concerning their constituency. The various committees became tactical tools in the bigger picture whose lines were drawn during the ongoing competition between MKs for higher recognition and leading roles in their own community. At the same time, changes in ideological leadership development characterized the moral realm as well, contributing to the legitimization of the Israeli Arab leadership as the prime provider, within Israel's political system, of political support for the national aspirations of Palestinians in the territories. Other organizations were established throughout this period too. Their activities and aims also focused on achieving clear-cut political objectives (one example is Adalah (meaning 'justice'), an organization whose policy is to represent legally all legal issues relating to the Israeli Arab sector, among them: to react in the UN to Israel's positions and to Israel's responses to the organization).<sup>6</sup>

The 15th Knesset has 11 Arab Knesset members, nine of whom belong to parties whose majority constituents are Israeli Arabs. One MK resigned in 2002 from the Labour Party, having run in the most recent elections on its slate of candidates. Another MK represents Meretz (a left of centre party). Eleven is the largest number of Arab MKs that do not belong to the ruling parties, or to parties traditionally connected with them. For more than half of the current MKs, this is not their first term of office. In other words, this group is made up mainly of experienced parliamentarians,



leading a clear political line since the start of the December 1987 uprising: a combination of the advantages provided by entitlement to Israeli citizenship, together with a constant demand for full equality, and an attempt to advance Palestinian national demands and create in Israel the basis for full equality and perhaps cultural autonomy. This approach, probably shared by all Arab MKs for the past 15 years in spite of their affiliation with three distinct parties, preserved a clear and complete separation from the political aspirations of the Palestinians in the territories for an independent state, which was and is supported by every Arab MK, while emphasizing the status and allegiance of the Israeli electorate – through an attempt at change from within. From an Arab perspective, this is entirely fair – to call for providing Israeli Arabs with their legitimate rights in their country, without alienating the Jewish majority, which has no interest in a confrontation with the Arab minority.

These approaches were at the core of Israeli Arab MKs' parliamentary activities during the 15th Knesset up until the eruption of the October 2000 riots. Contrary to the current approach, most pre-October 2000 parliamentary activity was directed at citizenship issues regarding the position of Israeli Arabs in the country. A look at private member bill legislative proposals at the early readings in the Knesset plenary shows a split that is more civil than national.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 40 per cent centred on questions relating to the socio-economic position of Israeli Arabs, such as issues of discrimination and the development of municipal infrastructures in most Arab municipalities. Among the bills proposed were those regarding equal opportunity in the workplace (al-Sana, February 2000), which prevents an employer from requesting details about military service, or an amendment to a civil law that would make it easier for a husband or wife of an Israeli citizen to be entitled to citizenship (Mahamid, December 1999). The next category of proposed legislation – accounting for about 30 per cent – concentrated on topics with importance for every Israeli citizen, Jews and Arabs alike. This composition of draft bills enabled the MKs to demonstrate their connection to Israeli society and Israeli citizens at large. These legislative proposals included, for example, a law encouraging citizens to donate their organs (Bishara, March 2000), free higher education (Dahamshe, March 2000), and retirement payments for teachers (Bahamshe, March 2000). Only in the third instance, accounting for about one-quarter of the legislative proposals for private bills, were there topics that focused on the national aspirations of Israeli Arabs, some of which identified with the Palestinian struggle. For example: Repeal of Certain Laws, which emphasize the Zionist dimension of the state – Keren Kayemet Le'Israel 1953, Keren Hayesod 1956, Status of the World Zionist Union and the Jewish Agency 1953 and 1999 – a draft presented by Bishara (November 1999); or, a draft basic law relating to full equality for the Arab

population (May 2000, a group of nine MKs: five Arab, one Druze and three Jews). It is important to point out that, before the events of October 2000, only a small number of legislative proposals were submitted regarding Islamic issues, in spite of the presence of MKs from the Islamic Movement. No legislative proposals whatsoever were raised regarding the status of the Palestinian population in the territories or the PA.

Clearly, the October riots caused a shock wave for Arabs and Jews alike, creating mutual suspicions among both populations and a gap that may widen and prevent any future civil cooperation. This suspicion is reflected in a substantial change in Arab MKs' legislative attempts following the October events. In view of the fact that the chances of Arab MKs advancing or promoting legislation are usually slim, it was reasonable to assume that post-October attempts would turn into a series of political demonstrations reflecting the frustration and anger of their electorate. This was not the case. The most substantial difference in legislative proposals was the clear and decisive move to topics relevant to the Israeli public at large. Two-thirds of all legislative proposals from October 2000 until May 2002 dealt with general Israeli political and social topics, which of course also represent the interests of Israeli Arabs – but are not of exclusive interest to this population. Within this context, there are, for example, legislative proposals regarding the issue of traffic penalties (Tibi, May 2001); a draft limiting the tenure of hospital directors and chief nurses (Tibi, July 2001); other drafts along these lines dealing with disability pensions (Bakara, December 2001), payment for participation in municipal bodies meetings (Bakara with two MKs, March 2002); and other general social issues.

With this increased involvement in issues that express Israeli Arabs' connection and belonging to Israeli society, there was a decrease in involvement in social issues characteristic to Israeli Arabs – from about 40 per cent prior to the October riots to about 25 per cent afterwards. Furthermore, Israeli Arab national and religious topics almost disappeared from Arab parliamentary priorities. In spite of the riots and the national Palestinian mood, there were no pro-national Palestinian legislative proposals raised by Israeli Arab MKs. In other words, PA rhetoric did not penetrate into the legislative efforts of Israeli Arab parliamentarians in spite of their alienation *vis-à-vis* the Jewish majority.

The legislative process is by nature long, and it is impossible to reap its rewards in real time. This is not the case with queries, most of which receive a response within a reasonable period, very soon after being raised. Oral queries receive an even quicker response. This format enables a rapid process in practical matters, in the form of an immediate report or accounting, which receives media coverage. This difference expresses the change in the nature of the queries. Prior to the October riots, 92 per cent of the queries dealt with Israeli Arab topics, with a focus on the civil aspect

of Israeli Arab identity, such as socio-economic deprivation and topics relating to discrimination. The remainder dealt with issues concerning Palestinians in the PA and the territories. With the outbreak of the current uprising, this division changed: only 80 per cent of the queries (October 2000–May 2002) deal with Israeli Arab civil topics, while 20 per cent focus on Palestinian issues with a strong emphasis on the national Palestinian element and the confrontation with the state of Israel, including even the fate of individuals involved in clashes with Israeli soldiers in the PA. An example is MK Bisharah's query about the Orient House and other offices in East Jerusalem (May 2002), which were closed by order of the domestic security minister; and, at another opportunity, three MKs posed a query into the fate of two Palestinians from the Jenin area involved in clashes with Israel's defence forces (Dahamshe, Mahul, Bisharah – July 2001). Other queries reflect the official PA line – in a very clear manner, leaving no room for misinterpretation. To give an example: in May 2001, MK Baraka submitted a query on the topic of 'dispensing poisoned candies from aircraft flying over the Gaza Strip'.

While these queries take time, oral queries are more spontaneous and their coverage in the electronic media (Israel Channel 33) and the press is more timely. This massive media exposure creates for all MKs in general, and Arab MKs in particular, an audience of Jewish MKs in the Knesset waiting patiently for their turn to question – while the media is looking for short and catchy headlines. In this format, the Arab parliamentarians' target audience widens, including not only their constituents at home but also the entire Israeli public, who need to be convinced about the Palestinian side of the ongoing struggle since Israeli Arabs are part of Israel's socio-civil fabric. These considerations have a direct influence on how the topics of the oral queries are divided: following the events of October, one-quarter of Arab MKs' oral queries were about general Israeli issues, topics that had never been raised before the riots. The appearance of a new topic was at the expense of Islamic religious matters, which constituted approximately one-quarter of all oral inquiries prior to October 2000, and since then have practically vanished.

The last item representing the change in the Arab MKs' outlook regarding parliamentary activity as a connecting link between identification with Israeli citizenship and solidarity with the national Palestinian cause is the issue of Knesset proposals. Success in having a topic transferred to a committee gives it and its subject matter a certain parliamentary legitimization, while removing the subject supports the oft-repeated claim that Jewish MKs all join hands when it comes to their actions concerning the legitimate interests of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens – although these same MKs differ substantially in their opinions on other matters. This phenomenon presents the clearest picture in comparison with other formats available to MKs: 51 per cent of all

Knesset proposals focus on a variety of Palestinian issues – including Israeli–PA relations, the deprivation of the residents and the desire among Israeli Arabs to contribute to the political process – now or in the future. One-third of the proposals concerning Israeli Arabs deal with every aspect of life in Israel and only 15 per cent are on general issues affecting all Israeli citizens.

There is no doubt that the events of October 2000 were a watershed, expressed in the parliamentary activity of Arab MKs. Two key issues captured the political centre stage:

1. On the national level – the overall Palestinian issue. For example, in the absence of institutions representing Palestinians in the territories *vis-à-vis* the Israeli authorities, the MKs act as representatives of this community and serve as its mouthpiece in every sense – from comprehensive political issues to individual cases of Palestinian distress in which Israeli did not act appropriately, in their opinion.
2. On the civil level – the overall Israeli issue. For example, the finding and identification of common denominators in the civil sphere so that Jewish Israeli citizens will be convinced through a long but deliberate process that despite the national difference, Israeli Arabs are an inseparable part of the state of Israel.

The focus on both of these issues was at the expense in the Knesset of Israeli Arab topics. The process is represented by direct activity in relation to relevant government offices and the ministers involved in the needs of the Arab sector. This is not all. Judging solely by parliamentary activity, it is clear that the power of radical political Islam in Israel is on the wane since October 2000 so that involvement in religious aspects of the lives of Muslim Arabs in the country as reflected in the Knesset has become inconsequential if not non-existent. That is, in spite of the participation of members of the Islamic Movement in the activities of the Knesset since 1996, one can assume that within the framework of the struggle to bridge the Jewish–Arab gap, MKs refrain – in every political aspect – from raising issues that have the potential for confrontation with the Jewish majority. The raising of Palestinian national issues, in comparison, is obligatory from a Palestinian point of view – particularly in view of the ongoing dialogue in Israeli society concerning an appropriate permanent solution. Accordingly, radical Islam opinions are very dangerous in that they can create among the Jewish public the wrong impression of identity with Hamas, while the promotion of some sort of solution for confrontation with the Palestinians is certainly within the Israeli consensus.

The political behaviour of the Israeli Arab leadership therefore corresponds to the model of political behaviour that was developed at the end of the 1980s during the first uprising: the political channel and the

formulation of pro-Palestinian public opinion, under the responsibility of Israeli Arabs; and the combined diplomatic-violent channel, under the leadership of Arabs from the territories and later on, the PA. Both leaderships see eye to eye on pursuing the same goal: the establishment of an independent Palestinian state through a change in the very nature and character of the state of Israel and a total abrogation of its Jewish Zionist characteristics.

Within this political leadership model, a special place has been reserved in the Israeli democratic system for utilization by the Israeli Arab leadership: the Knesset, the media and public forums. Thus, democracy offers legitimate avenues of public debate – helping to develop in Israel public sympathy for matters related to legitimate claims (such as civil services, which are in need of substantial improvement owing to the size of this population sector) together with radical political claims that parade under the guise of purely humanitarian interests.

The use of these channels began in the wake of the uprising in 1987. Since the early 1990s, they have become part and parcel of Israel's media and political system. In addition, there is the sometimes almost total ideological identification with the Palestinians (in the PA and Lebanon as well). The clear expression of the emotional commitment of Israeli Arabs to the Palestinians can be translated into practical terms by the activities that their immunity allows MKs to undertake. Apart from one recent exception, they enjoy access to every site in Israel and in the territories, free passage and routine meetings with PA leadership.

Offshoots of the change in Israeli Arab representation, aside from pan-Palestinian representation, which took root at the end of the 1980s, ripened after the October riots. Since then, most Arab MKs in their Knesset proposals, calls to order and queries on Palestinian issues, encourage appeals to the Supreme Court, and dedicate a small, but growing part of their parliamentary activity to questions focused solely on Israeli Arabs. Beyond the feelings of solidarity and identification that have already been mentioned, their particular interest in political processes since the signing of the declaration of principles in September 1993 will be touched upon. It appears that since then, Israeli Arabs from all levels of society feel that their status will change once there is a solution to the Palestinian problem. This perception is what drives their need to lift the political issue to the highest priority, as opposed to past precedents.

Whatever the status of Israeli Arabs will be once some form of settlement has been reached concerning the Palestinians, the struggle has already begun over the format of the settlement within the state of Israel between Jews and Arabs in political terms and indeed the very character of the Zionist state. Since absolute support of the *intifada* is now regarded among Israeli Arabs as a fact taken for granted, it is vital to build on this fact and to define the relationship with the state of Israel in clear,

unambiguous terms. No doubt should remain as to hostility for Zionist values. In this vein, Israeli Arab public opinion spokesmen continue ongoing, scrupulously careful examinations of the limits of free expression. The alleged remarks of MK Bisharah in Damascus regarding the right of organizations fighting in Israel exemplify the attempt to expand the limits of free speech. The absence of a decisively clear reaction on the part of law enforcement authorities in other similar cases is compounded by the absence of a clear policy regarding violence, which encourages – albeit indirectly – the growing trend of aggression among the Israeli Arab sector. However, the legal difficulties in proving such offences leads – at the end of the day – to their being disregarded and at the same time to the expansion of the definition of freedom of expression in directions that are far from the perception shared by the majority of Israel's Jewish citizens. What's more, the fact that the Hebrew and the Arab media are constantly engaged in controversies over these issues obviously does not hurt the cause of MKs making use of freer expression. In fact, this enhances their status as they play on the heartstrings of most Israeli Arabs without in any way risking a legal confrontation or endangering their legitimization among the majority of Jewish Israelis.

#### THE LEADERSHIP'S EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A FOREIGN RELATIONS INITIATIVE

Stretching the borders of free expression within Israel takes its place alongside another pattern of activity, indicating the growing attempt to represent Israeli Arabs as a national entity, separate and different, within the country by building an infrastructure of international legitimization in order to grant national minority status to Israeli Arabs. Within the framework of non-parliamentary activities, Arab MKs have been in the past and are currently engaged with this topic, albeit with extreme caution in order not to alienate the Jewish public. During the first half of 1999, former MK Darawshe recommended<sup>8</sup> that Israeli Arabs receive representation that reflects their status in the Arab League – another illustration of the move to separate representation as a separate national minority group. Towards the end of the violence in Israel in October 2000, MK Bisharah<sup>9</sup> appealed to the UN Secretary-General calling for protection of the national Palestinian minority in Israel.

Since 1987, and during the two uprisings, questions were raised regarding political, national and personal identity connected with Israeli Arabs. At the same time, the leadership totally abandoned the passive characteristics of the past. As part of the Israeli Arab separate identity building process (Palestinians living in Israel, or 'Arabs of '48' – the term used more and more frequently now) – in recent years there has been a substantial development of a political system that parallels the official

Israeli political system. The senior leadership maintains an independent political line, which is un-Israeli in that it vehemently and publicly opposes the Jewish Zionist nature of the state, but is not Palestinian as it does not consider Arafat as the political leader but rather a national figure who does not enjoy the legitimacy necessary to lead Israeli Arabs politically. In fact, the PA is not looked upon as a place for Israeli Arabs to live in, but as a source of inspiration, owing to its political success in persuading the state of Israel to retreat from some of its land. The Israeli Arab leadership's political uniqueness in this aspect is expressed in its internal and external relations – in contacts and connections with the government of Israel, the PA and Arab nations. Through this, an infrastructure is built of broad-based recognition of Israeli Arabs' political differences. This movement is still growing and is gaining momentum with the expanded attempt on the part of Arab political parties to gain legitimacy in the Jewish political realm. The massive abstinence from voting for the prime minister in February 2001 is a display of power that no doubt serves as a foundation for an attempt to achieve political goals after the next Knesset elections.

These processes affect the will to belong and the desire to be separate. These paradoxes exist in parallel: while Israeli Arabs have not yet maximized the potential inherent in Israeli democracy, they will continue to fortify their hold in governmental bodies, will try to be full partners in governmental coalitions, will strive to elect the first Arab minister in the history of Israel, and will deepen their penetration into the decision-making circles of foreign affairs and security. All of these are obvious signs of their connection to the current political structure of the state of Israel. At the same time, long-term waves of violence will be avoided, as they can disrupt the foundation for gaining maximum advantages from the political system. In this sense, the methods of the Israeli Arab leadership are similar to some Islamic movements in the Middle East, which undertake cooperation with the ruling bodies until the achievements of this cooperation can be used to undermine the legitimate government. In the light of these practices, the primary aim of the leadership is to exploit political achievements in order steadily to gnaw away and grind down the very nature and characteristics of the country by causing a change in the formal status of the Arab minority in Israel and granting it status that exceeds its scope as a minority. The secondary aim is to help achieve overall Palestinian objectives, as well as those of the PA and the PLO as the legal, and sole, representative of the Palestinian people.

All of the above defy the interests of the country, in which every Israeli citizen strives solely to achieve the country's interests. Arab Israeli leadership achievements will serve as the foundation of their involvement with their population in the process of seeking a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue. This solution will have to take into consideration

the growing political influence of Israeli Arabs who see themselves as an inseparable part of the Palestinian people. The events of October 2000 in the Israeli Arab sector were not just some emotional, random outbreak. These events were a milestone, if not a turning point, in a process with clear, and recognized, political aims that began long before the year 2000. The only random aspect was the timing of the wave of violence – which was set off by the *intifada al-Aqsa*. The process of increasing Israeli Arabs' awareness of their still unfulfilled power potential comprises their campaign to change the character of the state of Israel, through a simultaneous use of political and violent means. The vast majority of Israel's political and educational networks are fully convinced that the struggle will be sophisticated, ongoing and aimed at identifying legal loopholes that enable a most problematic struggle in the fight to destroy the very existence of the state of Israel in its present form.

## NOTES

1. This article is based on my written testimony for the Or Committee and it represents an improved version of a paper delivered in September 2002 at the First World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies in Mainz, Germany.
2. Cf. Alexander Bligh, 'The Intifada and the New Political Role of the Israeli Arab Leadership', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.35, No.1 (Jan. 1999), pp.134–64.
3. Dr Tibi's activity together with Arafat is known and there is no need to elaborate here. It is relevant, however, to present a characteristic quote of his: 'There's no doubt that we have a problem with the anthem. How does the Jewish soul of 'Hatikva' relate to Taibe?', *Ma'ariv*, 13 Feb. 1995.
4. Bisharah does not hide his opinions. He grants numerous interviews and writes many articles for the local and international press. See two examples that exemplify his opinions: *Ha'aretz*, 23 April 1999; 'Arab Citizens of Palestine: Little to Celebrate', *Tikkun*, Vol.13, No.4 (1998), pp.14–15, 65.
5. See for example the article under the headline 'The Taste of Vast Discrimination', on the subject of Arab student activities, *Ha'aretz*, 23 April 2000.
6. Adalah represented all Arab figures who appeared before the Or Commission of inquiry. See also Adalah's reaction on Israel's report to a UN committee on economic, social and cultural rights, 2 May 2001: <http://www.adalah.org/news22001.htm#1>.
7. All data taken from the official site of the Israeli Knesset: <http://www.knesset.gov.il/index.html>.
8. <http://arabicnews.com>, 1 July 1999.
9. [http://www.addameer.org/september2000/press\\_releases/monday9october.html#azmi](http://www.addameer.org/september2000/press_releases/monday9october.html#azmi).