

Arab Israelis

All the major Zionist ideologues of note, from Jabotinsky on the right to Katzenelson on the left, envisioned a state with Arabs and Jews treated equally by law. Israel's Declaration of Independence enshrines this. After 1948, those Arabs that remained within the state of Israel were granted citizenship. But they were regarded as enemy combatants or sympathizers and put under military rule, with their lands subject to confiscation if the army felt it necessary. The exceptions were the Druze, who served with distinction in the Israeli army. Arabs had the vote. Some Arabs thrived and succeeded in many areas of Israeli life. There were Arab political parties and significant representation in other parties, such as the Communists. There were Arab members of the Knesset. But the general Arab population was disadvantaged in terms of the allocation of resources and what are called "Land Rights".

After Oslo, significant attempts were made to improve the lot of the Arab community, but nowhere near enough. The general feeling was that Palestinian aspirations would be met through the creation of a Palestinian state and Arab Israelis would choose either to move into and become a part of that, or be secular Israelis like the Jewish secular Israelis. Not surprisingly, many Arabs felt unhappy with this. They felt that, as they had always lived in this part of the world as Arab Christians or Muslims, it was their land too and they had every right to stay as loyal citizens while still expressing a commitment to their religions and to other Arabs. They argued that they were no different to Jews living in Christian States with their citizenship and civil rights whilst being loyal to other national and religious aspirations.

Of course there were some, like Kahane and his latter day apostles, who argue that Arabs should all be kicked out because they would never be loyal to a state predominantly Jewish. With typical Israeli indecision or perhaps neglect, the feelings of Israeli Arabs, even those unreservedly loyal, were ignored, in the same way that no serious attempts were made to woo and win Palestinian minds and hearts after 1967 in territory suddenly under Israeli rule (or for that matter other Jewish Israeli voices). When Israeli Arabs protested about land confiscation, although they had access to the Supreme Court, they were routinely manhandled. In 2000, a peaceful demonstration resulted in 13 Arab Israelis being killed by the police in the Galil. The Arab population gets a minute proportion of the budget and the infrastructure of its communities, and the opportunity to build for the new generation is severely curtailed.

Of course it is not Apartheid. Anyone who experienced South African Apartheid knows that. The USA was not described as an Apartheid state, despite its scandalous treatment of its black population until relatively recently, because its Federal laws did not impose ideological restrictions or limitations. Neither does Israel. Indeed, there is an Arab minister. Under Apartheid no black could vote, let alone sit in the legislature. Many states are exclusive in various ways. Israel is. The Law of Return is an example. However, there is discrimination and it is this which needs addressing.

Many Jewish Israelis are concerned about preserving the Jewish nature of the state. All the more so since there are tens of other Muslim or Arab states but no other Jewish one. But then these same people would rather have 290,000 Russian non-Jews given the "Right of Return" than address the issue of trying to accommodate its existing Arab population.

It is hardly surprising that as a result Arab opinion is radicalizing and polarizing. It is becoming more religiously extreme, vocal, and assertive. For their part, Jewish Israelis feel threatened by the clear desire of many young Arabs to identify more with Islamic fundamentalism and Palestinian aspirations. In recent years, Israeli Arabs increasingly have been found giving help to terrorists and other enemies of the state. In response, there has been as much talk about redrawing boundaries and transferring population as about how to integrate them into the state.

I believe it is right that the Israeli Ministry of Education has now published textbooks for Arab schools that give an Arab perspective. But the real issues are still not being addressed. What is to be the nature, politically and socially, of Arabs living within Israel's borders, whichever way they turn out to be finalized? And how does Israel deal with a seriously alienated minority? These issues will not go away, however wishfully some like to dream. There will be no ethnic cleansing, no expulsions, no magic. Either you bury your head in the sand until your backside is blown away or you try to deal with it. So, what are the options?

The easy one is to start sharing resources more fairly and investing in Arab communities, which in the long run will only help the Israeli economy. This needs to be done on both sides of the "Green Line". But there are both religious and political issues that need dealing with as part of an overall plan that cannot be an instant solution but may lead to a long term one.

Firstly, one could treat the Arab population, whether Christian or Muslim, as a separate, protected, and empowered minority within the body politic. Such status would recognize their difference, allowing them to be loyal both to a political entity and to a religious, ethnic, cultural identity, just as Jews are in the Diaspora. Once upon a time secular Zionists objected to this solution on the grounds that religion should be a subsidiary sub category of its own. Indeed, separate religions were recognized in the state, but the dream was that all Arabs would turn into mirror images of secular Jewish Israelis. The reality is that Israeli Arabs see religion as a way of identification, as indeed do Charedi Jews who, also, while being citizens still do not identify with a great deal in Zionism or secular Israeli society.

It seems to me that by taking these two simple steps, Israel could begin the process of reintegration that itself would resolve both the specific identity of a Jewish State while giving its Arab citizens a sense of partnership and identification. It is facile to dismiss all Israeli Arabs as enemies. This is dangerous and insulting to many, as anyone familiar with Israeli Arabs knows full well. There may well be enemies there (where aren't there, even amongst Jewish Israelis?), but there are far more who have the wonderful potential to be friends, professionals, and financial partners.

Each person, religiously and civilly, in Israel or elsewhere, deserves to be judged on his or her own merit, not tarred with the same brush as suicidal maniacs. Jewish religious law requires of us to treat the stranger who chooses to live peacefully amongst us as an equal in terms of civil law, charity, and welfare. There is no way we can be a Jewish state if we refuse to abide by the ethical principles of Judaism.

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