

THE FUTURE VISION OF THE PALESTINIAN-ARABS IN ISRAEL

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Several position papers on the future of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel have recently been issued. The most striking is "The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel," prepared by the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Councils and endorsed by the Supreme Follow-up Committee of the Arabs in Israel. What has gained the most attention is its national-historical perspective on three issues:

First, the document rejects the nature of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state which, the authors argue, perpetuates the inferior status of its Arab citizens. The present system, says the document, should be supplanted with a "consociational democracy," namely a bi-national state model, based on full power-sharing between the two national groups in government, distribution of resources, decision-making, proportional representation and the mutual right of veto on crucial decisions. The country's national symbols, such as the anthem, flag and emblem, would also be modified.

Secondly, the Committee's paper calls for full equality in the civic, national and historical spheres, including, *inter alia*, equal rights of immigration and citizenship quotas, a demand which may imply the elimination of the "Law of Return" allowing Jews to freely immigrate to Israel. Special reference is made to the socio-economic differences between the Jewish and Arab sectors, particularly with regard to land,

urban planning, housing, infrastructure, economic development, social change and education.

Demands for equal rights are intertwined with those insisting on the endorsement of the Palestinian historical narrative and recognition of the Arabs in Israel as an indigenous minority. The document calls for an official acknowledgement of the 1948 *Nakba* ("calamity"; referring to the defeat and displacement of the Palestinians). "Internal refugees" who remained in Israel and whose land was expropriated should be allowed to return to their original lands, and *Waqf* (religious endowment) property, administrated since 1948 by the Israeli government, should revert to the control of the Muslim community.

Thirdly, the paper suggests structural-institutional changes, specifically self-rule (autonomy) in education, religious and cultural affairs, and the media, in order to guarantee the unrestricted development of the Arab minority's specific collective identity. It also proposes the establishment of an elected, country-wide representative body for the Arabs in Israel.

This "vision of the future" marks yet another milestone in the development of national consciousness among Israel's Arab community. The Oslo Accords and the prospects for Palestinian independence in the Territories did not lead Arab Israelis to view this outcome as a

satisfactory expression of their national aspirations. Rather, it encouraged them to reconceptualize their national status within Israel proper. They thus began highlighting the inherent contradiction, as they saw it, between the State's identity as a Jewish state and its definition as a liberal democracy. They began searching for alternative models (autonomy, "state of all its citizens", bi-national state) and advocated the "reopening of the 1948 files." This process was accelerated by the deepening socio-economic discrepancies between Jews and Arabs, the result of government neglect, and the grave breach of trust between the Arab public and the State in the wake of the violent clashes of October 2000, in which 13 Arab civilians were killed by the police.

The document's authors intended to spark a dialogue on substantive issues, including how to administer a joint democratic state based on dignity and equality. While this may well occur, the document has already caused an uproar among the Jewish sector, for two reasons: (1) its perceived maximalist nature; and (2) the fact that the paper was adopted by a body representing all political streams of Arab society.

Parts of the Jewish public responded vigorously to what they understood as the authors' separatist intentions. Some columnists interpreted the document as "a declaration of war" against the Jewish majority and branded the Arabs as "enemies of the State". The call for a bi-national state without the concurrent recognition of Israel as the State of the Jewish people was perceived as a provocative attempt to de-legitimize the Jewish people's right of self-determination. Some also believed that the timing of the publication proved that the local Arab population had joined forces with other sources of existential threats to Israel such as Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran.

Indeed, leaders of the Arab public may have erred by merging the calls for a change in the national character of the State of Israel with their claims for civil equality, and by belittling the possibility of Jewish-Arab co-existence within a Jewish and democratic state. The inexorable link

in the document between the civil and national demands of the Arab community may discourage those circles within the Jewish public who show understanding for the civil aspects of the Arab demands included in the document, and are fighting discrimination and promoting the integration of Arabs into a more civic-oriented society.

Moreover, the call for a bi-national state offers justification for right-wing Israeli politicians who had already called for land swaps and population transfer. For them, this allegedly provides "definitive proof" that the Arabs in Israel are no more than a fifth column.

One thing is certain: expanding the scope of national Arab claims, foregoing the option of a shared civil society, and continued governmental disregard for the needs of the Arab public will engender frustration and agitation in the Arab sector, leading to a situation not unlike the one that preceded the October 2000 events.

Therefore, a new formulation for minority-majority relations in Israel must be devised, in order to both prevent a threat to the Jewish public and promote the trust of the Arab public. Special efforts must be dedicated to developing an integrated model based on equality and tolerance, mutual respect and dignity, and recognition of the legitimacy and right of collective existence of both national groups. A dialogue which takes into account the perspectives of both groups is more likely to be endorsed by the centrist-liberal camp of the Jewish public and by the many Arab citizens who see themselves as an integral part of the State in its current form.

Although this new social contract may not lead to the solution of the national identity dilemma of the Arabs in Israel, it could well alleviate tensions and promote a pragmatic non-violent search for understanding, buying crucial time until a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reached.