

The Political Coming-of-age of the “National Minority”

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When Israel was established in 1948, in an area considerably larger than that allotted to it by the UN Partition Plan of November 29, 1947, only 150,000 Arabs remained where 800,000 had lived prior to the conflict which erupted when the Plan was announced. Zionist leaders, among them first president of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, considered it a miracle that the emerging Jewish state was practically “clean” of Arabs. In fact, it was no miracle. The Zionists had conducted the 1948 war in a manner intended to lead to just such a result. It was not only the Deir Yassin massacre (April 9, 1948)¹ that induced the Palestinian Arabs to flee their homeland; other, not so well known, but no less infamous, massacres contributed to this process of “cleaning” Israel of Arabs. Only recently, in August 1984, an Israeli journalist, Yoella Har-Shefi, uncovered the fact that the Israeli army has massacred the inhabitants of Dawaymeh village in southern Palestine on October 28, 1948.² There are many Galilee inhabitants who can relate their experiences in 1948 and who can describe the “mini-massacres” carried out by the Israeli army in their region, and its attempts to expel them from their villages and homeland. Under such circumstances, it was a miracle that as many as 150,000 Arabs remained rooted in their villages and towns in Israel in 1949 when the Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria—signed the Armistice agreement with Israel.

There is no doubt that the Zionist leadership which became the government of Israel was not reconciled to the presence of this very small

Arab national minority, and initiated a policy of national oppression designed to liquidate it.

Firstly, it launched a campaign of "combing" the Arab villages to flush out what is called "infiltrators," that is, those who had returned to their homes after the military operations. Secondly, it imposed a harsh military regime in the regions where the Arabs remained in order to make their lives unbearable. Thirdly, it institutionalized the classic Zionist policy—the conquest of land—by promulgating laws and administrative orders to confiscate Arab land and thus deprive the Arab inhabitants—who were mainly farmers—of their means of livelihood. In this way, the Israeli Land Administration gradually seized over one million dunums of land belonging to Israel's Arab citizens, reducing Arab land ownership to an average of one dunum per head, whereas during the British Mandate period the average had been sixteen dunums per head. Lastly, it implemented measures intended to force stagnation on Arab economic, social and cultural life.

The grand Zionist design was apparent not only in actions but in words. *Hador*, the ideological organ of Mapai (the dominant Labor Party in government at that time, and predecessor of the present Labor Party) commented in 1950 that the continued presence of the Arab population in Israel was but a question of time. What raised the hopes of the Zionist leadership was the fact that the small Arab national minority was dazed by the catastrophe of the 1948 war, by their feelings of alienation, and by the absence of the traditional Arab national leadership. All traditional Arab national activists, the known intellectuals and the professionals had left the country, and the Arab national minority of 150,000 was largely composed of peasants, workers and the middle class. Under the circumstances, the question is: how did this small Palestinian Arab minority survive?

Without belittling the strong Palestinian Arab national sentiment of the refugees, those who remained in their villages in the Galilee were able to overcome the fear of the Israeli occupation, motivated by their attachment to their homeland. A large number of Arabs became citizens of Israel, after the Rhodes (Israeli-Jordanian) agreement which "handed" the villages of the Triangle over to Israel.³

The Jewish-Arab Communist Party of Israel was able to fill the vacuum left by the failure of the traditional Arab national leadership. Its Arab members, strongly backed by the Jewish members, mobilized the Arab population and stood in the vanguard to resist the Zionist policy of uprooting and expulsion, and led the fight against the policy of national oppression and racial discrimination. The Communists initiated rep-

representative conferences to oppose the military administration and the confiscation of Arab-owned land, to abort the attempt to spread national nihilism among Arab youth and to preserve the Palestinian Arab national identity. In these actions, the Arab population enjoyed the support of the Jewish (Israeli) democratic forces. Obviously, this support was not always extensive, but it was present to some degree throughout the years. The extent of Jewish democratic support of course depended on the issues involved.

Another factor in the survival of the Palestinian Arab minority was its rapid growth. In the years since the establishment of Israel, the Arab population has more than quadrupled, and now numbers over 600,000.⁴ The Palestinian Arabs are no longer the demoralized, alienated, broken branches of the Arab national minority of 1948, but a strong, compact people, militant in their struggles on both internal and foreign issues, and proud of their national identity. They have been able to generate new strength for survival—for the dangers threatening their existence have not disappeared—and have generated a new generation of productive intellectuals—poets, novelists, writers, thinkers, artists and professionals—whose works have frequently been published in the Arab countries and, in certain cases, translated into other languages.

It is possible, for the purpose of generalization, to state that three political trends were current among the Arab national minority in Israel from the beginning: the patriotic trend, the nationalist trend, and the pro-establishment trend.

The patriotic trend, mainly represented by the Communist Party of Israel, recognized, on the one hand, the state of Israel and on the other, the rights of the Palestinian Arab people. It fought against the aggressive, expansionist policy of the Israeli ruling circles and therefore strongly opposed their predatory wars in the autumn of 1956, in June 1967, in March 1978 (against South Lebanon), and June 1982. Its four members of the Israeli Knesset were alone in voting against all these wars and the Party struggled immediately for the withdrawal of Israel from the territories occupied in the June 1967 war, and later from South Lebanon after the June 1982 war.

The Communist Party of Israel has formulated a program for the solution of the Palestine problem based on: the evacuation by Israel of the West Bank—including Arab Jerusalem—and the Gaza Strip; recognition of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people, including their right to self-determination and the establishment of their own independent state; and

recognition of the right to independence and sovereignty of the states in the region, including Israel and the emerging Palestinian independent state, with Arab Jerusalem as its capital. The Party also calls for the solution of the refugee problem through implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions. This program has become the consensus of world public opinion as expressed by the resolutions of the UN General Assembly, as well as by the UN Conference on the Question of Palestine which met in Geneva in August-September 1983, by various world conferences, in statements by political movements, national and international, and by many key states, including the Soviet Union. The only active opposition to this program stems from Israel and the United States.

The program is also the one adopted by the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, established in 1977 in Israel by various Arab and Jewish forces at the initiative of the Communist Party of Israel. The Front includes many Arab patriotic forces which endorse its political platform. These forces are represented by a number of heads of Arab local councils and other public elements active in various domains.

The six-point program of the Front, as well as the peace plan outlined above, covers the defense of the interests of the working people, the struggle against the policy of national oppression and racial discrimination imposed on the Arab national minority, the defense of democracy against fascist practices and encroachments, the fight for the elimination of the communal discrimination suffered by Sephardic (Eastern) Jews, and the struggle for the equality of women.

The nationalist trend was—and is—basically patriotic in the sense that it subscribed to the emphasis on the Palestinian Arab identity of the Arab national minority in Israel. Like the first trend, it considered this minority part of the Palestine Arab people and it also converged with the first trend in the militant fight against the policy of national oppression and racial discrimination. Its partisans differed from the Communists on three levels: they rejected the Communist ideology with all its internal and external implications; they did not accept the political solution to the Palestine problem advanced by the Communists, and they had no faith in the imperative need for cooperation between the Arab national minority and the Jewish democratic forces.

Obviously, it is difficult to draw a full map of this trend because it has not been static. It will suffice for our purpose to draw a line between two periods of time: (a) before the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization—the PLO—in 1964, and (b) after the establishment of the

PLO, its meteoric rise to cover the Palestinian scene, and its internal and external developments.

Before the establishment of the PLO, the partisans of the nationalist trend oriented their policy toward the Nasserist movement and looked upon it as the catalyst for the solution of the Palestine problem. In their public statements, they called for the implementation of the Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947.

After the establishment of the PLO, the nationalist groupings based themselves on the PLO's fundamental ideology and policy. They considered the PLO the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestine Arab people, including the Arab national minority in Israel, and this in contradiction with the Communist Party of Israel and the Democratic Front which considered the PLO the sole representative of the Palestine Arab people who have the right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with Arab Jerusalem as its capital. In the view of the Communist Party and the Democratic Front, the solution of the Palestine problem determines the question of representation; this means that the Arab national minority in Israel will remain part of Israel and cannot, therefore, be part of the future Palestinian state.

Whatever the case, the Arab national minority has developed and established its own representative institutions, such as the Democratic Front, the National Committee in Defense of Arab Land, the National Committee of Heads of the Arab Local Councils, and other popular organizations.

It is difficult at present to determine the attitudes and policies of the nationalist trend for two reasons: firstly, because of the inner split which tore the fabric of the main organization, *Abna' al-Balad* (Sons of the Village), and secondly, because of the present difficult, antagonistic alignments within the PLO. Certain of these groups support the PLO policy as formulated at the Sixteenth Session of the Palestine National Council (meeting in Algeria, in February 1983) while others reject the base resolution of this session, that is, endorsement of the Arab plan for a settlement adopted by the Arab summit meeting at Fez, Morocco, in September 1982.⁵

The pro-establishment trend was instituted by reactionary social forces: remnants of big landowners, *mukhtars*, opportunists and national nihilists. They were organized in election lists affiliated to the main Zionist parties, mainly Mapai. In the fifties, with the help of the military regime and under

heavy economic and administrative pressure, these lists managed to secure about 75 percent of the Arab vote. The successful members of the Knesset belonging to these lists carried out the tasks of whitewashing the official Zionist policy of national oppression and racial discrimination both in Israel and outside it, sabotaging the struggle of the Arab national minority for equality, and aiding in the implementation of Zionist practices against the Arab masses in Israel.

However, this trend weakened as the patriotic and nationalist trend strengthened. Lately, the Zionist parties, taking into consideration the growing consciousness of the Arab masses and their awareness of the political process leading to the discrediting of their agents, have relinquished the phenomenon of so-called Arab lists and, in order to attract Arab votes, have included their few supporters in their own main lists for the Knesset elections.⁶ In addition, the Arab supporters of the Zionist parties are allowed a certain amount of freedom to voice support for certain struggles of the Arab national minority, and are sometimes permitted to take part in some of their manifestations. Though the influence of this trend has been reduced and it now attracts less than forty percent of the Arab electorate, it nevertheless remains disruptive.

At the same time, it is important to note that the Arab masses have developed various methods of intensifying the struggle for their national and civil rights. In this respect, they have moved in two directions: to establish national Arab organizations to mobilize Arab forces in Israel of various ideological and political affiliations; and to establish Arab-Jewish organizations on the same principle. In both cases, such organizations have been established for specific purposes, and have proved their validity and credibility. At present, certain national committees are active:

The National Committee for the Defense of Arab Land was established in the autumn of 1975, on the broadest base, to offset the danger of the confiscation of what remained of Arab land, specifically in the Galilee where the largest concentration of the Arab population in Israel lives. It was this Committee that called for the general strike on the first Land Day, on March 30, 1976, which was fully observed by the Arab population and which ended with the martyrdom of six Arabs.

Since that date, the Committee has celebrated Land Day annually as a national day of remembrance and struggle. The Committee has become deep rooted in the country. Its activities are carried out in cooperation with the Jewish democratic forces, although its structure is Arab. Its activities in

recent years have included initiating a conference in defense of the Arab population in the mixed towns—Haifa, Jaffa, Acre, Ramleh and Lydda (held in February 1982 in Acre)—and one in defense of Arab land threatened by the Judaization of the Galilee, the Triangle and the Negev (held in Shafa ‘Amr in February 1982).

The National Committee of Heads of Arab Local Councils was established in 1975 to fight for the elimination of the discrimination experienced by the Arab local councils. This discrimination was one aspect of the official Israeli policy of national discrimination toward the Arab national minority. The Committee called for “equality and nothing less than equality.” Through the structural changes in the Arab local councils achieved through the success of the Democratic Front in the 1978 local elections, the Committee has become a militant instrument, leading the fight for equality, and is a significant feature on the socio-political map of the Arab national minority, in particular, and of Israel in general. It has become a valuable asset in the struggle for the national rights of the Arab masses in Israel; at the same time, it supports the struggle of the Palestine Arab people for their legitimate national rights.

As noted above, the Arab masses evolved other organizations to struggle for specific objectives when they discovered the vital necessity of these. Thus, while the Arab working people strove to join the general trade union organization [Histadrut], and achieved their aim in 1966, Arab university students, because of the policy of national discrimination, were unable to defend their specific interests within the general university student organizations in the various universities. They, therefore, established Arab student committees in every university and united them in a national Arab university student committee, the National Union of Arab Students in Israel. Under the same conditions, Arab secondary students established the National Committee of Arab Secondary Students in Israel. It is important to emphasize that these organizations are built on the broadest base possible under the particular circumstances affecting Arab students in Israel.

The Israeli establishment—with all the structure of Zionist parties—whether in power or the loyal opposition, did not play an important role in the political life of the Arabs of Israel.

In fact, Israeli ruling circles for over a decade and a half isolated the Arab working people from the economic life of the country as part of the policy of deprivation designed to push the Arabs to emigrate. Only the struggle of the Arab masses and economic necessity forced the Israeli

establishment to integrate the Arab working people into the lower grades in certain economic spheres, mainly agriculture, building and services. The door to industry in general was closed to the Arabs for security purposes, the assumption being that it falls within the military industrial complex. The Arab work force, however, though suffering discrimination, has never been passive and it is now engaged in the social and class struggles in the country.

Israeli ruling circles, considering Israel a specifically Jewish state, could not conceive that the Arab citizens could have a say in both its internal and external policies. However, since Israel—in order to attract immigrants and gain credibility in the Western world—adopted bourgeois democracy and recognized the rights of its Arab citizens to “equality,” officially at least, the Zionist parties have appealed for Arab support as a means of falsifying the Arab masses’ will, on the one hand, and of neutralizing their political action, on the other. Those who were elected on Arab lists affiliated to Zionist parties were agents who were given the task of whitewashing the policy of national discrimination and oppression, but had no say in the formulation of Israel’s internal and external policies.

Only the Communist Party, which united Arab and Jewish members on an equal footing, rejected this Zionist approach and called on the Arab masses to unite in the general Israeli struggle for a policy of peace and genuine democracy, and in their specific struggle against national oppression and racial discrimination and for equality.

When the Zionist establishment unanimously supported the June 1967 war, and largely succeeded in isolating the Communist Party, it likewise isolated the Arab patriotic forces.

The situation has changed radically since then, however, due to the quantitative and qualitative changes which have taken place within the Arab national minority. The Arab masses are now involved in the many-sided struggles of the democratic anti-war forces in Israel. This was impressively manifested during the Israeli war against the Palestinian and Lebanese people in Lebanon in June 1982. The Arab masses expressed militant opposition to this war, taking part in strikes and demonstrations against the war in the Arab sector in response to an Arab *ad hoc* “Committee against the War in Lebanon and for Palestinian-Israeli peace,” and in the general demonstrations called by an Arab-Jewish committee against the war in Lebanon, by the Peace Now movement, and in other mass actions.

In these demonstrations, whether in the Arab sector or the general Israeli sector, both the Arab contingent and the Jewish democratic forces

condemned the Israeli adventurist policy, and called for peace on the basis of recognition of the national rights of the Palestinian Arab people, that is, for self-determination and statehood.

It is now generally known that the Arab masses constitute a democratic force in Israel allied with the Jewish democratic forces, and struggling against the Zionist consensus of the “four no’s”: *no* return to the 1967 borders, *no* withdrawal from Arab Jerusalem, *no* to the independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, and *no* to negotiations with the PLO.

It is not out of place to stress, without exaggeration, that the Arab national minority in Israel, together with the Jewish democratic forces, have succeeded in occupying a conspicuous place in the Israeli political scene, and thus posit an alternative to the catastrophic policy of the Zionist establishment. They have become a catalyst through their activities of solidarity with the Palestinian people suffering the terror of the occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and their defense of the national rights of the Palestinian Arab people.

Thus, the Arab masses deepen their national consciousness and consolidate their Palestinian Arab national identity, while at the same time placing before Jewish public opinion the way out of their crisis and toward a just peace.



1. On April 9, 1948, some 250 villagers—men, women, and children—from the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin were shot down by members of Irgun (Lehi).
2. In two articles in the Hebrew-language daily *Hadashot* (August 24 and 26, 1984), journalist Yoella Har-Shefi gave testimonies of Palestinians and Israeli soldiers who were in Dawaymeh on October 28, 1948 when it was overrun by soldiers of Moshe Dayan’s 89th Battalion. The report was subsequently discussed in the English-language issue of the Jerusalem daily *al-Fajr* (September 7, 1984).
3. The position of the frontlines of Israeli and Jordanian forces determined the armistice boundaries negotiated by the two states at Rhodes in April 1949.

The armistice agreements stated that “the Armistice Demarcation Line is not to be construed in any sense as a political or territorial boundary” (as in Article V, Section 2 of Israel’s agreement with Egypt; with Syria, Article V, Section 1; with Jordan, Article II, Section 2). The result, however, was the division of Jerusalem (the Arab Legion retained the Old City), and approximately 144 square miles of Palestinian

land were transferred to Israeli control, including some lands expropriated by Israel which belonged to Palestinian villages remaining under Jordanian administration.

In human terms, the shifting of boundaries under the armistice caused nearly 150,000 of those Palestinians hardest hit and displaced by the War of Conquest to be separated from their lands and/or rendered homeless as refugees in the West Bank and elsewhere.

5. Official Israeli statistics register a higher figure, sometimes 700,000, but this includes the population of occupied Arab Jerusalem.
6. Excerpts from the final statement of the Fez Arab summit of September 9, 1982 appear in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1983), pp. 202–203.
7. The Labor Alignment had two Arabs in its successful list of candidates in the July 1984 Knesset elections, the Likud one and the Shinui one.