

CHAPTER TEN.

CAN THERE BE A RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT IF PALESTINIAN CITIZENS OF ISRAEL ARE NOT INVOLVED?

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Most literature on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict approaches it from the perspective of the two-state solution. However, Israel has constructed an undemocratic one-state reality spanning the entirety of Mandatory Palestine.* This confronts Israel and the Palestinians under its control with a quite different set of challenges and choices. The most fundamental of these for Israeli Jews is

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* *Editor's note:* See Glossary.

whether the one-state reality Israel has established is to be democratic or apartheid. At present it is not democratic, since millions of Palestinians have lived under Israeli military rule for five decades without civil or national rights. The expansion of Jewish settlements, the growing influence of the settler movement on the major right-wing political bloc that dominates Israeli politics, and the Jewish majority's complete distrust of Palestinians and their leadership all indicate an intention by Israeli Jews to assert total control over all Palestinians living west of the Jordan River. These dynamics deepen the internal Jewish struggle as to the meaning of Jewish self-determination, whether within the Green Line* or beyond it. They also underline the observation made by Edward Said in the late 1970s that no matter where Palestinians live, and regardless of their legal or administrative status—citizens or not, they are targeted by Israel as enemies of Jewish sovereignty.

Imposed fragmentation

Israel's approach to its conflict with the Palestinians has become hegemonic principally because it has fragmented the Palestinian people into multiple discrete sectors, each of which is forced to conduct negotiations and struggle in isolation from the others. The establishment of the Jewish state on 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine dispersed Palestinians throughout the region as refugees, where many still remain. Today, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip must accept harsh Israeli conditions—amounting to acquiescence in a demilitarized and non-contiguous mini-state—if they are to achieve national sovereignty, while Palestinians living inside Israel must acquiesce in their status as second-class citizens in the state of the Jewish people if they are to retain access to what has become Jewish land. Israel's strategy to impose its will has been to block the development of any common Palestinian struggle while expressing disingenuous intent to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict,

* *Editor's note:* The "Green Line" refers to the pre-June 1967 armistice boundary established in 1949, now recognized by the International Court of Justice as the legal border of the State of Israel.

thereby preventing Palestinians from amassing political, diplomatic, or military power to counter the asymmetry between the two sides.

Palestinians, for their part, have resisted this imposed fragmentation. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) struggled mightily to gain recognition as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians. In so doing, it was forced to compromise its comprehensive and inclusive disposition towards Palestinians and lower its political ambitions. This shift began in 1974, when the PLO, which had previously called for full liberation and independence for the entirety of Mandatory Palestine, began to assert sovereignty on areas occupied by Israel in 1967. This implied that Palestinians must accept the political reality established on the ground in 1948, leaving those who remained inside the Jewish state to fend for themselves. The Oslo I Accord (1993), which became the reference point for subsequent efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the conflict, carved the post-1948 reality into the legal and diplomatic consciousness of the international community and, by extension, that of Palestinian diplomatic institutions. But Israel's policies towards the territories occupied in 1967 led to growing recognition among Palestinians that any sovereignty they might acquire in those territories would be emptied of substantive content. These policies are myriad and include, most notably, the ceaseless expansion of Jewish-Israeli settlements in the West Bank; the rise of extreme nationalist political forces in Israel, which seek to violently reconfigure the demographic and topographic realities on the ground; the isolation and siege of Gaza; and proposals to reduce the number of Palestinians inside Israel through territorial exchanges with a future State of Palestine, including "the Triangle," an area of Israel in which more than 300,000 Palestinians have been living as second-class citizens since 1949.

The increasingly entrenched one-state reality makes Palestinian citizens of Israel a more salient constituency in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole. The last two decades, especially, have seen growing recognition by Palestinians that their community in Israel has become a strong political player that could significantly influence future Israeli-Palestinian relations. This recognition is warranted, given these Palestinians' Israeli citizenship and thus their status

(albeit limited) as an in-group member. Palestinian citizens of Israel live in better economic and social conditions than their brethren under occupation. They possess greater freedoms and can participate in the political game through elections, as well as choose their representatives to the Israeli Knesset (parliament). Nevertheless, they feel targeted by the dominant Jewish nationalistic majority, with the encouragement and incitement of leading ministers and officials. Aggressive nationalistic legislation, offensive administrative regulations, and blunt economic discrimination validate the common sentiment among Palestinian citizens of Israel that the Israeli state and the Jewish majority within it seek not merely to guarantee exclusive Jewish hegemony over state resources, but to subordinate all Palestinians—citizens or not—to Jewish hegemony. This presents Israel's Palestinian citizens with several options. They can surrender, which is unlikely; resort to violence, which is not effective; seek to protect the limited privileges afforded to them by the status quo; or pursue diplomatic means to delegitimize Israel and increase international pressure on the state to withdraw from Palestinian areas occupied in 1967.

Electoral participation

Palestinians living under occupation have shown, and to a great extent still show, much understanding as to the special conditions in which Palestinians inside Israel live. Most have not expected Palestinian citizens of Israel to join a violent struggle against the occupation. Nonetheless, Palestinian-Israelis are expected to lobby for Palestinian aspirations for statehood inside the Israeli political system, and for that to happen they must fully integrate into it. These expectations have thus far not materialized, since the rising nationalistic trends in Jewish-Israeli society have blocked Palestinians' attempts to engage with them politically. This structural rebuff has led, in turn, to calls from Palestinians to boycott Knesset elections, reducing their electoral impact still further.

Palestinian citizens of Israel have participated in Israeli elections since 1951. The failure of this participation to yield effective, positive changes in their prospects, together with the rise of an oppositional ideological consciousness among nationalist and religious sectors, has led to a continuous and steady decline in Palestinian electoral participation. Whereas over 80 percent

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of Palestinian citizens participated in the elections before the 1980s, and delegated an increasing number of Arab members of parliament to the Knesset, the decades since have witnessed a growing election boycott as Palestinians have sought alternatives to the formal political system. Electoral participation by Palestinian citizens declined from 79.3 percent in 1996 to 63.5 percent in 2015, while more than 80 percent of Palestinian citizens boycotted the special election in 2001.* The 2001 boycott meant that Labor's Ehud Barak was replaced as prime minister by the right-wing leader Ariel Sharon.

TABLE I. PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS BY PALESTINIAN CITIZENS OF ISRAEL, 1996–2015.

Year	Participation (%)
1996	79.3
1999	75
2003	62
2006	56.3
2009	53.6
2013	57.3
2015	63.5

This reduced participation is an expression of growing Palestinian disillusionment in the capacity of Israel's political system to represent them. The long-term fall in Palestinian participation was slightly affected by the establishment of the Joint Arab List, which united all the Arab parties ahead of the 2015 election (see Table 1). The reversal of the decline in participation between 2009 and 2015 is an important development, but one that is likely to persist only if the Joint List manages to demonstrate political efficacy or if future

* *Editor's note:* Israel held a prime ministerial election in February 2001 after Ehud Barak resigned as Prime Minister in December 2000.

elections take place in the wake of a major clash between the State of Israel and Palestinians in Gaza, as occurred in the 2013 and 2015 elections. The Gaza conflicts of 2012 and 2014 inflamed national sentiments among Israel's Palestinian citizens, which translated into higher turnout for Arab parties as an act of protest.

Many Palestinian leaders in Israel call on members of their community to utilize every available institutional opportunity to advance their interests. Notwithstanding its limitations, the Knesset does provide some resources to Arab parties—resources which might be used to enable Palestinian society to articulate its needs and desires in a sanctioned Israeli forum. Others reject such participation on the grounds that it legitimizes the Israeli system and enables Israel to assert its “democratic” character without affording Palestinians any real influence over Israel's discriminatory policies. If the Joint Arab List does not manage to significantly affect Israeli policy—and this is the most likely scenario, given its dwindling legitimacy in the eyes of most Jewish parties and the unwillingness of the latter to integrate it into their decision-making processes—the influence of the latter camp will grow and the percentage of Palestinian citizens participating in Israeli elections will decrease further. If this happens, an increasing number of Palestinian citizens will seek alternative means to express their dissent and protest their subordination.

Ideological differences, tactical consensus

One might generalize that Palestinian citizens of Israel prefer to avoid totalizing, “either/or” diagnoses of existing Palestinian reality and strategies for improving it. Palestinians in Israel are demonstrating much political maturity in avoiding the traps set by the Jewish far-right, which views them as enemies and seeks to push them into a direct clash with the state. They tend to pursue a “selective” strategy, remaining committed to their Palestinian nationality while simultaneously struggling for the full individual and collective rights of citizenship. This approach represents the most effective utilization of the opportunities available to them. Through this

selective engagement, the Palestinian minority in Israel seeks to overcome the “double marginality” imposed on it by Israelis and occupied Palestinians alike, and to utilize its “double consciousness”—identifying as both Israeli and Palestinian—to promote the best possible reality for all parties, including itself. In other words, the Palestinian community in Israel does not aspire to be a “bridge” for peace, as if it were the United Nations rather than one of the victims of Zionism.* Instead, it seeks to use what influence it has to end the suffering of millions of fellow Palestinians living under brutal occupation.

The double consciousness of Palestinians in Israel reflects the rise of the Arab middle class, which is both nationally conscious and has accrued great economic wealth in recent years. Growing prosperity—despite the fact that around 50 percent of the Palestinian community in Israel still lives under the poverty line—has raised this group’s expectations and demands, but also its fears that existing gains might be lost. This class resents Jewish discrimination but elects to participate in the Israeli economy in an effort to raise Palestinians’ standard of living. It seeks to integrate with the Jewish-Israeli population and expects to be given a chance, not only on the economic but also on the political level. This same class anticipates that the state and the Jewish majority will permit it to translate its growing economic power into political influence, without having to entirely submit to perpetual Jewish hegemony. It believes it can achieve this delicate balance without disengaging from the Palestinian national question, especially in the form of opposition to Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories.

Having said that, and notwithstanding the many commonalities among Palestinians in Israel, this group is nonetheless split over future visions and strategies. Broadly speaking, three different approaches have gained support in the community, all of them driven and articulated primarily by the rising Palestinian middle classes.

* *Editor’s note:* See Glossary (“Zionism”).

STRATEGY

The first camp strives to reconcile its Palestinian-ness with its Israeli-ness. It supports the two-state solution, opposes Israel's formal definition as a Jewish state, and struggles against discriminatory policies. This camp enjoys the support of at least one-third of the Palestinian community in Israel, manifested politically in the Hadash Party as well as a small number of voters for Zionist parties.

The second camp more firmly situates Palestinian citizens of Israel within the broader Palestinian reality, beginning with the centrality of Palestinian national identity and the search for just solutions to the Palestinian problem in all its aspects. It rejects the Jewish character of the Israeli state and supports the struggle of Palestinians under occupation not just for national independence but for comprehensive liberation, utilizing all means legitimated by international law, including boycotts. Many members of this group envisage a democratic, one-state future for Israel/Palestine. This camp attracts the support of more than 20 percent of the community and finds institutional home in the Balad Party and the Abna'a Al-Balad (Sons of the Village) Movement.

Finally, there is the Islamic camp. It is ambiguous about its ultimate political aspirations and is sub-divided into two groups. The first argues that Muslims in Israel should exploit all available opportunities to promote the well-being of Muslim citizens, including representation in official Israeli institutions. The second is more dogmatic and less open to engagement with Israeli institutions. It views the conflict in religious terms and asserts that only religious beliefs, values, and practices offer hope for resolving it. This group is affiliated with the more conservative and dogmatic elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, and seeks first and foremost to transform the values and behavior of the Muslim community in Israel. It supports the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS)* against Israel, without announcing this position explicitly. These two groups together attract the support of more than 50 percent of the Palestinian community in Israel.

* *Editor's note:* See Glossary.

Since all camps share the belief that Israel's Jewish majority is radicalizing, they agree that it should not be given any excuses to use force against the Palestinian community. This results in a broad tactical consensus overlaying the political and ideological differences. Most opt for those tactics that are least vulnerable to persecution, such as establishing civil society organizations to resist governmental policies and protect the safety of their members by legal means and international advocacy.

So long as Israel does not precipitate a major crisis, whether in the Occupied Territories or inside Israel, the Palestinian minority will maintain its current approach, combining civic resistance to state discrimination (for instance, countering the Judaization policies of Arab areas by building beyond state-permitted housing zones and buying houses in Jewish towns) with efforts to build community-state relations to improve understanding and empathy and attract increased state resources. This approach is complemented by efforts to strengthen social, economic, and cultural ties with Palestinians in the West Bank and the diaspora, as well as with the wider Arab world. This "bonding and bridging" strategy seeks to maximize the resources available to Palestinians in Israel to endure and challenge the state's policies of Israelization, subjugation, and economic and cultural neglect.

Balancing in this way between Israeli and Palestinian societies reflects a quality rooted in the double consciousness of the Palestinian community in Israel, and its ability to transform this duality from a weakness into a major source of strength.

