

## **Moving the Goal Posts for Israel's Arabs**

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The attitude of most Jews in Israel toward the Arabs in Israel has traditionally been hostility, avoidance, or indifference. But since the Al Aqsa Intifada and the tragic deaths of 12 Arab citizens, the level of interest in the subject has risen. There have been an unprecedented number of lectures, seminars and conventions devoted to the subject. The public response has changed too. The audience for such events in the past was mainly left-wing activists and general supporters of the left - now it has become very varied. Many of those who come to take part and ask questions are Israelis whose views are rooted in the tradition of the central Zionist stream.

Fewer Arabs come than before and those who do are more reserved. Many sit pensively, attentive to the new tones of the debate taking place mainly among the Jews.

The burgeoning interest in Israel's Arabs is not especially accompanied by polarized views. The number of slogans is on the wane, and those who come to conferences hoping to see a predictable confrontation between fear-touting Kahanists [followers of the right-wing extremist Meir Kahane] and those on the margins who deny Israel's right to exist are increasingly disappointed.

The true discussion on the Arabs in Israel has ceased to be a sectoral matter dealing only with the minority, or whether the majority has to give the minority a little more, and in what areas. It is becoming increasingly clear the subject now is nothing less than the image of the state, and its chances of survival.

This is a debate that focuses on the center of the political arena and to a great extent blurs the accepted lines of "right" and "left." It is taking place in the secular Jewish community, but among the participants are people from all the large and important Zionist movements, from Mapam on the left to Herut on the right. This is a group whose sense of ownership of the land was undermined by the first Intifada - people who have finally internalized the existence of Palestinians as legitimate and permanent, and who are now seeking

a new ideological and political balance.

This is a group that has come to understand that the issue of the Arab citizens of Israel will not be solved by and improved allocation of resources, or by showing more cultural tolerance. This issue is the key to Israel's stability and legitimacy.

There are two directions in the debate. One, presented by a team headed by Uzi Arad, is expressed in a summary of discussions held at a congress of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya in December 2000. Its approach is for Israel to develop a more determined expression of Zionism as the national project of a defined ethnic group - the Jews. The syntax of the opening sentence - "Israel is the state of the Jewish people" - leaves no room for any other group, only for some individuals at most.

It is a definition that fortifies exclusivity and appears to have two meanings. First - Arab citizens of Israel can never belong to the ethnic Jewish nationalist project that defines the state. Second - an Israel that is willing to deny its Arab citizens their rights, or make them conditional, has given up the idea of ever becoming a liberal democracy.

Another approach is expressed in a report sent to former prime minister Ehud Barak in November 2000 by 26 scholars who studied the issue of Israel's Arabs. (For the record, I was one of its editors).

The main thrust of the report is that Israel's only chance of living in stability, peace with its neighbors, and prosperity, is by becoming an inclusive, all-encompassing enterprise. Being a part of it must be based on civic principles, not on ethnic affiliation.

Israel, in effect, will have to change its spots. It must seriously and honestly offer the Arab minority just what all governments have been parading as their goal for decades, without keeping their promises - complete and true equality, including reparation for past injustices.

The Herzliya congress approach does not address the accumulated anger of the Arab citizens, but the scholarly report shows willingness to take the risks involved in sweeping change. What is clear is that, at last, the debate between the two approaches has shifted from the margins and moved to the center of the Israeli consensus

