

# Arab-Israelis and the Events of October 2000: Trends and Attitudes toward the State of Israel

Uri Horowitz

**T**he violent incidents involving Arab-Israelis in early October 2000, and their subsequent boycott of the prime ministerial elections in February 2001, made the issue of their relations with both Jews and the Israeli government an urgent issue on the public agenda. A sense of this urgency can be seen in, among other things, the intensive preoccupation with this issue on the part of the written and electronic media, and in the number of seminars dedicated to it by various important academic bodies throughout the country.

It should be noted that the government has long been conscious of the potential volatility of the political and social situation among the Arab population. Over the course of 2000, prior to the outbreak of the riots, a five-year plan for developing the economy and infrastructure of the Arab sector had been developed. Recognizing that Arab-Israelis had suffered many years of neglect, the plan's goal was to reduce the socioeconomic inequality that existed between the Jewish and Arab publics. Implementation of this plan was delayed, however, for various bureaucratic reasons. In addition, the plan did not offer a fitting response to the question of the collective status of this public — which defines itself as a Palestinian minority — in a country whose majority views the state as Jewish and democratic in orientation.

Among Arab intellectuals and political opinion-makers, the October

events and the election boycott served to amplify an ongoing internal dispute within the Arab-Israeli public, as to its relationship to and status within the state. Each of the political elements involved in this debate saw the October riots and the election boycott as developments that vindicated its

**Among Arab intellectuals and political opinion-makers, the October events and the election boycott served to amplify an ongoing internal dispute within the Arab-Israeli public, as to its relationship to and status within the state.**

particular position.

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that, since the signing of the Oslo Accords, a perception has been growing among Israeli Arabs that their individual and collective status issues would not find redress as a result of the peace agreements. It was therefore incumbent upon them to take their fate in their own hands and change their relations with the state. This realization was due in part to prior inaction in this regard by the government of Israel. Beyond this, Arab-Israelis came to realize that both the Palestinian Authority and the various Arab countries in the region regard their identity concerns as issues

that belong to the domestic Israeli political arena, and which do not require action on their parts. In the background, note must be taken of the general feeling among Arab-Israelis that boycotting the elections was a step in declaring independence from the patronage of the Jewish-Zionist Left, which had come to take their support for granted. Arab-Israelis were now throwing their hats into the ring themselves, demonstrating their ability for action as a sector with the capacity for independent decisions.

Before presenting the two central schools of thought in Arab-Israeli politics with regard to the state, it is worth noting the main points of agreement between them:

- *The need to change the Jewish-Zionist character of the State of Israel.* There is general consensus among the various political and intellectual forces within the Arab-Israeli community that those laws that characterize Israel as a Jewish state, such as the Law of Return and various laws relating to state lands, should be rescinded.
- *The necessity of an Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement.* There is a general consensus on the need for an historic compromise between Israel and the PLO/Palestinian Authority, as the body representing Palestinians both in the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Diaspora. This is a necessary condition for resolving the



problem of the Arabs of Israel. Failure to reach such a rapprochement will ultimately lead to a reversal of all the achievements attained by Arab-Israelis in their relations with the state.

- *The domestic independence of Arab-Israelis.* There is consensus among all Arab-Israeli political factions regarding their independence (i.e., with reference to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority) in issues relating to decisions and actions in the Israeli realm, their problem being unique by virtue of the fact that they are citizens of the State of Israel.

In matters relating to their status within the state and the nature of their relationship to it, there are two main political currents among Arab-Israelis, within which one may find any number of secondary and tertiary subgroups. The first of these calls for the continuing Arab *integration* into the Israeli mainstream of political, economic, and social life, albeit on a new and more equal basis. The second calls for *isolation* from general Israeli society, on either a secular-national or religious-Islamic basis. In the background, there is a silent majority, which essentially accepts the status quo, while demanding improvements in the socioeconomic realm. This attitude is in decline, however, and it has no significant representation within the Arab-Israeli political and ideological discourse.

The following describes recent developments in the stances and perceptions within these two political currents, as they have found expression in the Arab-Israeli media, the Israeli Hebrew-language media,

and the Palestinian media since October 2000:

### ***A. The pro-integration movements***

At the center of the groups favoring integration is the Israeli Communist Party (known by its Hebrew Acronym, MAKI) and its allies from the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (HADASH). It receives some additional support, albeit in a sporadic and less dedicated fashion, from most of the parties that form the United

**Those who hold for integration stress the importance of cooperation with sympathetic elements in Jewish society, as their natural allies.**

Arab List (UAL) in the Knesset and from the Arab Renewal Movement, headed by Member of Knesset (MK) Ahmad Tibi. These elements see themselves as involved in a struggle with dominant forces in the Jewish-Israeli ruling elite. They believe that this elite has made an intentional decision to cut Israeli Arabs off from legitimate political and social circles in Israel, thereby depriving them of their share of the socioeconomic 'pie.' They also suspect this elite of planning to cut them out of Israel entirely, by including predominantly Arab parts of Israel in territory to be ruled by the future Palestinian state. Those political elements which share this overall set

of beliefs interpreted the violent approach taken by the state against their protests in October as a state-orchestrated demonstration, meant to de-legitimize Arabs in the eyes of Israeli Jews, to weaken their political-social standing, and to perpetuate their deprivation.

In accordance with this, both MAKI and HADASH opposed a total boycott of the elections, recommending that the Arab public cast blank ballots. According to the party's view, totally boycotting the elections would have served the interests of Jewish forces that sought to shove Arab-Israelis into the political and social margins. Moreover, following the broad boycott of the elections by the Arab public, the central integrationist movements expressed concern over the creation of a dynamic of isolationism and widespread nationalistic agitation among Arab-Israelis. This risked incurring damage to the ability of Arab-Israelis to influence various political and social mechanisms in Israel, which is necessary for the betterment of their situation.

In this spirit, these bodies expressed their opposition to the establishment of an Arab-Israeli parliament, an idea favored by isolationist Arab-Israeli movements. Active participation in the Knesset, they stressed, remained important, particularly in regard to legislation on civil equality and the awarding of national rights to Arabs as a recognized minority. In this context, those who hold for integration stress the importance of cooperation with sympathetic elements in Jewish society. Such elements are their natural allies in the fight for individual



equality, for recognition of their national/ethnic identity, and for advancing the principle of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of 'two states for two peoples.' According to this outlook, the reality created in the wake of the October events and the boycott of national elections facilitated the process of Arab-Israeli integration into the Israeli political system on a new basis. Accordingly, immediately following the elections, elements in MAKI and HADASH expressed support for the idea of establishing a third axis — a social-democratic one — through which Jews and Arabs could be partners in the Israeli political system.

In any event, these movements believe that Arab-Israelis will succeed in integrating into the State of Israel in the foreseeable future. Successfully doing so, however, will require them to preserve a delicate balance between pursuing recognition on a collective national basis, and standing firm for Arab civil rights on an individual basis. This will be accomplished by carefully ensuring that demands and achievements in the area of collective rights do not engender a backlash among the Jewish public, which might harm the cause of individual equality. At the same time, the opposite is also true: care must be taken to prevent achievements in the field of individual equality from jeopardizing Arab-Israeli efforts toward recognition of their collective, national identity. This delicate balance can be realized only if Israel changes its identity from a democratic-Jewish-Zionist state into what in Israeli political parlance is called a 'state for all of its citizens' — i.e., a state dedicated to the well-being of all of its citizens on an equal basis.

### ***B. The pro-isolation movements***

The isolationist movements can be divided into two main branches: the secular-nationalist, at the center of which is the National Democratic Coalition (BALAD), headed by MK Azmi Bishara, and the fundamentalist-Islamic, headed by the Islamic Movement. The Islamic movement in Israel is composed of two factions, and is led by the more radical of the two, under the leadership of Sheikh Ra'id Salah, mayor of the town of Um el-

**The isolationist stream is gaining support, and the current atmosphere in Israel only strengthens this process.**

Fahm. Both secular and religious isolationists oppose Arab integration into Israeli political, social, and economic life, a process that they disparagingly call 'Israelization.' When isolationists are confronted with the inherent contradiction between their opposition to Israelization and their membership in the Knesset, they explain that their presence in the Knesset is a necessary evil, without which there would be no protection of their rights in the face of a hostile government. Moreover, their presence in the Knesset allows them to lay the groundwork for a solution to the problem of Arab-Israeli nationhood. Isolationists draw clear distinctions

between the issue of the civil equality on the individual level, which can be accomplished by transforming Israel into a 'state of all its citizens,' and the issue of collective national identity, which cannot be resolved in this fashion. They note that it is impossible in Israel to speak of an 'Israeli nation' the way that one might speak of an American one, since there are in fact two separate nations living within the same state: the Jewish and the Arab-Palestinian. In the aftermath of the October riots and the election boycott, various isolationist elements put forth a number of ideas (not all of which were completely fleshed out) for a solution to the problems of Arab-Israeli nationhood:

- Awarding *institutional autonomy* (including elected representative institutions) in all spheres, which would distinguish Arab-Israelis as an ethnic minority, on the basis of the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities. A Basic Law containing these elements was proposed by MK Azmi Bishara in March 2001. In parallel, senior members of the Islamic movement speak of establishing an autarchic society, which is similar in its characteristics to institutional autonomy.
- Awarding *territorial autonomy* to Arab-Israelis by establishing a number of autonomous districts in areas with high concentrations of Arabs (Arabs who live in ethnically mixed cities would be affiliated with the autonomous district closest to the city in which they live). Such ideas are being raised both by both secular and



Islamic isolationists. Among secular isolationists, the prevailing idea is the establishment of Arab cantons, which would have a status similar to that of cantons in Switzerland. However, unlike Swiss cantons, they would be permitted to establish special external relations with other parts of the Palestinian people. On the Islamic side, this concept goes even further and includes the establishment of an independent micro-economy and the provision of independent representation in the Palestinian National Council, the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the UN, and other international institutions.

- Establishing a *bi-national state*, initially within Israel proper and ultimately in all of the territories west of the Jordan River. The model of rule for such a state is that which exists in Belgium — two autonomous national areas, Walloon and Flemish, each with its own government, but with a common central government in the capital. The country's resources would be divided relative to the size of each people as a percentage of the country's total population. Those supporting this idea claim that it is preferable to establishing 'two states for two peoples,' because there already is, de facto, a bi-national situation which makes it extremely difficult to establish two separate states in mandatory Palestine. In the wake of the October riots and the election boycott, this idea of a bi-national state would appear to be gaining strength.

One way or another, those with an isolationist orientation see the October riots and the election boycott as

indications that there is growing support for their outlook among the general Arab populace in Israel. These movements are attempting to use this to advance their various ideas in the direction of institutional autonomy. In this context, the following ideas predominate:

- A call for elections to a supreme representative institution of the Arab-Israelis, such as a parliament, which would formulate a national charter for the Arab-Palestinian minority in

**Both secular and religious isolationists oppose Arab-Israeli integration into Israeli political, social, and economic life, a process that they disparagingly call 'Israelization.'**

Israel, serving as its compass and its source of authority. Some individuals among the isolationists believe that Arab-Israelis should be represented in the Palestinian National Assembly and within other institutions of the Palestinian Authority. The goal of this representation would be to consolidate a national consensus regarding their special status as members of the Palestinian people, by virtue of the fact that they are Israeli citizens.

- A demand for reform in the structure and activities of the Higher Arab Follow-up Committee, which currently serves as the central representative body of Arab-Israelis.

The main thrust of this reform would be to convert the Committee into an elected body.

- Establishment of an independent system of national, cultural and educational institutions: an Arab-language university, theaters, museums and radio and television stations.
- Establishment of economic institutions, and independent health and welfare systems.
- Independent handling of foreign relations for Arab-Israelis. The heads of the Islamic movement, as noted above, are seeking special representation in the Arab League and in international Islamic organizations.

Arab-Israelis are currently in a transitional period, during which its leadership is undergoing a process of internalizing the significance of the events that took place in October, and the election boycott. This is a dynamic process, influenced by ongoing developments in Arab-Israeli relations with both the governmental authorities and with the Jewish public, and also by developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Occupied Territories. Issues which would no doubt influence this process include statements such as those made by MK Azmi Bishara while visiting Syria (which were considered subversive by many Israeli Jews); the expected conclusions of the government's Commission of Inquiry into the October events; and the implementation of a broad military action by Israel in the territories. Clearly, any of these would greatly



affect the relative standing of the integrationist and isolationist currents described above, and the directions that they might take.

In any event, it is clear that the isolationist stream is gaining significant support, and that the current atmosphere in Israel only strengthens this process. In spite of this, it should be remembered that the currents that seek continued integration, and the 'silent majority,' which would be content with improvement in the overall status quo, still comprise a majority.

At present, it is in the State's overriding interest to strengthen the status of the latter. This is a difficult and complicated task: in view of the severity of the problem, it requires involvement of not only the governmental authorities, but also — perhaps even primarily — the leading political, ideological and social opinion-makers from among both the Arab and the Jewish political leadership in Israel. As noted, both of the schools of thought described above challenge a fundamental principle held by the Jewish public in Israel — that the country is a Jewish state. Only unemotional dialogue between Jewish and Arab leaders regarding the

collective status of Arabs in the country is likely to find a formula which would be acceptable to both sides, and would facilitate coexistence as parts of a democratic society in the coming few years. In the longer term, it seems likely that the demand for a bi-national state will grow among Israeli Arabs: from a demographic perspective, the percentage of Arabs as a proportion of the total population in Israel is growing, and will likely continue to do so. In addition, changes taking place within the international

**One way or another, those with an isolationist orientation see the October riots and the election boycott as indications that there is growing support for their outlook among the general Arab populace in Israel.**

community regarding the status of ethnic minorities serve to encourage such demands.

At any rate, should it be possible to hold a successful and productive Jewish-Arab dialogue, it would then

be possible to find more flexible models for creating a state that is *both* Jewish *and* democratic. In this context, it is also conceivable that certain concessions could be made in the area of institutional autonomy. The authorities will also have to broadly implement a policy of affirmative action *vis-à-vis* Arab-Israelis. If the government fails to take these steps, the political consensus among Arab-Israelis is liable to shift in favor of isolationism. Such a shift could, in turn, encourage isolationist leaders to try to strengthen their activities independently of the political and social system in the country. Moves of this type could possibly even include attempts to internationalize the Arab-Jewish standoff, by pushing the Arab public into violent protests, which would be followed by calls for international intervention. Indeed, such ideas already exist in the minds of some Arab-Israeli leaders. Among the Jewish public, such developments would amplify calls for abrogating the political rights of Arab citizens. Such developments would also strengthen Jewish support for ideas that have been voiced over the past year, regarding the possibility of transferring predominantly Arab areas in Israel to the authority of the future Palestinian state.