

The Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian State

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The Arabs of Israel have devoted scant attention to the issue of their relations with the nascent Palestinian state. Even the unprecedented riots which broke out in October in Arab population centers within Israel, initially out of solidarity with their brethren in "the territories", has not engendered a serious discussion among the Arabs of Israel as to whether the Palestinian state taking shape in the "territories" might be a possible solution for them. On the contrary, ideas put forward before and after the "October Riots" by some Jewish Israelis to transfer areas with high density Arab populations (Wadi A'ra and the "triangle") to the Palestinian state, have been met with sharp opposition by Arab-Israeli politicians.

There are three possible reasons for this lack of engagement over the issue of a Palestinian state within Arab-Israeli political circles at present:

- The Arabs of Israel regard the establishment of a Palestinian state as a solution for those Palestinians living outside the Green Line (Israel's pre-1967 borders), but not as a solution for their own problems, whether collective or individual. What concerns them, first and foremost, is the demand for full equality in all areas of life in Israel and the righting of many years of

injustice. They also seek recognition of a special "national status" by the State of Israel, as well as resolution of the "48 files" which, in their code, denotes the problems created as a direct result of the War of Independence. These include the demand to settle questions of ownership/control over expropriated lands and Wakf (Islamic religious) properties taken over by the State after the war, and the demand to re-inhabit villages abandoned in 1948 by Arabs – now defined as "present absentees" – who remained in Israel but moved to other parts of the country.

- There is apprehension within Arab-Israeli political circles that broad preoccupation with the issue of a Palestinian state vis-a-vis "their own national identity", could damage their central goal of improving their national, social, and economic standing within the State of Israel. The Arabs of Israel are particularly concerned that the Jewish majority will exploit the current diplomatic process, which centers on the establishment of a Palestinian state, to perpetuate their status as second-class citizens. There are also fears that as part of that deal, Israel would cede to the Palestinian state areas with high-density Arab populations in the "Triangle" and Wadi A'ra areas. These fears intensified after the Camp David 2 Summit, where

the idea of a territorial exchange between Israel and a Palestinian state was discussed, and following the reactions of some Israelis to the "October Riots" demanding such an exchange. It is clear that the vociferous opposition to the concept among the Arabs of Israel stems primarily from the realization that if Israel were to do so, the move would take them from the "First World" to the "Third World" with all that this involves, as well as raising once again the specter of "transfer" as part of the political lexicon.

- The governing characteristics of the Palestinian state taking form in the "territories" are radically different from what the Arabs of Israel are accustomed to, notwithstanding their severe complaints against Israel. Any serious addressing of their relations with a Palestinian state, therefore, would necessitate comparing that state to Israel which, in turn, could weaken the Palestinians at this time, something the Arabs of Israel are not interested in doing.

Against this background, the "Oslo process," with its ultimate goal of a Palestinian state, created growing concern within Arab-Israeli political circles that Israel would regard the establishment of such a state as the solution to the Palestinian problem,

leaving Arab-Israelis marginalized or, as they call it, in a condition “*tahmish*”. This feeling is what is behind the growing engrossment of Arab-Israelis in national status issues vis-a-vis Israel, and the “48 files.” In this context, the political discussion has come to be dominated by the demand to transform Israel into a “country of all of its citizens”, negating its Jewish and Zionist character. Such a state would recognize the Arabs of Israel as a national minority, with all of the attendant implications, institutional and applied, as detailed below.

It is fair to assume that, in the wake of the “October riots” and the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state, this demand will grow stronger. It will be seen as being the desirable solution for solving the national-political problem of the Arabs of Israel, and will come in tandem with demands for equal civil status and righting the inequalities created by deprivation and neglect in terms of the economy, infrastructure, society, and more. As a fallback position, they will demand legislative recognition as a national minority within the “Jewish democratic state.” In this regard, some Arab-Israelis cite various international human rights conventions relating to minority rights of “indigenous inhabitants” [Aborigines] as models. This would entail recognition of the Palestinian national minority in Israel as a collective with a unique identity in terms of history, language, and culture, and the right to maintain these

on general and individual levels. It would include the obligation to involve the minority in any decision having an impact on it, and the right to organize politically on the basis of their collective identity. They would be entitled to maintain contact with the “parent” country of the minority (the future Palestinian state) and with other countries and bodies outside Israel. The majority government would be obliged to anchor the rights of the minority in special legislation, grant rights to natural resources contained in those areas where they are the majority, and return lands and historic sites to the minority. In the same spirit, there is currently a growing inclination by Arab-Israelis to appeal to international bodies to gain support for their demands in this regard.

Ironically, it is possible that the establishment of a Palestinian state could pull the rug out from under these demands. It is likely that the Jewish public will claim that just as the national rights of the Jewish people were realized with the establishment of the Jewish State, so the national rights of the Palestinians would be fulfilled by a Palestinian state in the “territories.” By this logic, the Palestinians living in Israel are entitled to full citizens’ rights as individuals, but not as a collective. Concern that such claims would be raised by elements of the Jewish public were expressed by Azmi Bshara, one of the proponents of “a country of all its citizens,” in an interview to the New

York Times (September 10, 2000).

From a practical standpoint, the establishment of a Palestinian state will oblige Israel to provide quick solutions to a series of issues, as follows:

- A physical separation between the State of Israel and the Palestinian state: For the past three decades the border between Israel and Judea and Samaria has been erased, at least in functional terms, from the standpoint of the Arabs of Israel. During this period, a multifaceted system of familial, social, economic, cultural, and — to some degree — even political relations has developed between the Arabs of Israel and the Palestinians in Judea and Samara. Similar relations have also developed between the Arabs of Israel and those of the Gaza Strip, though to a much lesser degree, because of the relative distance of Gaza from the main population centers of the Arabs of Israel, the closures Gaza has been subjected to over the years, and the fact that Gaza is fenced off physically from Israel proper. Any system which Israel devises to separate itself from the Palestinian state will have to provide a solution which will enable the Arabs of Israel freedom of movement to enter the Palestinian State. Failure to provide such freedom of movement will cause resentment among the Arabs of Israel, create tensions between them and the authorities, and result in extensive illegal border crossing.
- The nature of the political relations which will develop between the Arabs of Israel and the Palestinian state: The

upper political echelons of the Arabs of Israel have maintained regular contact with the upper echelons of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO in recent years. They trade political assessments, express public support for Palestinian political stances and serve as a lobby for the Palestinian cause within Israel. At the same time, the political leaders of the Arabs of Israel have demonstrated their independence from the PLO and the Palestinian Authority on all matters pertaining to their domestic political agenda. For example, they have persistently resisted the urgings of Arafat and other senior PLO officials to run for the Knesset as a united Arab list to amplify their influence within the Israeli political system. Similarly, they failed to respond to demands from some Palestinian quarters to initiate violent protests within Israel in order to pressure Israel to change its policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians. This pressure did not usually come from the PLO or the Palestinian Authority who are, apparently, sensitive to the delicate position of the Arabs in Israel. As far as is known, even the "October Riots" among the Arabs of Israel did not erupt as a result of any initiative from the Palestinian Authority. In this context, the question arises as to whether the establishment of a Palestinian state will change this pattern of behavior. For example, will the anticipated amplification of the struggle of the Arabs of Israel to change their national status following the establishment of

a Palestinian state bring their leadership to turn to that state for assistance? They could request, for example, that the Palestinian state help generate international and Arab pressure on Israel to give in to the demands of the Arab-Israeli minority, or decide to join a call to take part in violent protests against the Israeli authorities. At the same time there is a question whether the future leadership of a Palestinian state will maintain the same caution as shown by the Palestinian Authority to date. If not, seemingly simple problems may take on a new dimension in the complicated triangle: Israel — the Arabs of Israel — the Palestinian state. An example of such a complication would be the refusal by the Palestinian State to extradite to Israel an Arab from Israel suspected of security violations. Such a scenario illustrates the need, from Israel's standpoint, to establish from the outset clear-cut understandings with both the Palestinian State and the Arabs of Israel as to what is acceptable and what is not in the realm of political relations between the sides.

- Possible reactions among the Jewish public vis-a-vis national demands of the Arabs of Israel: As detailed above, the establishment of a Palestinian state may give rise to opposition and a lack of tolerance among the Jewish-Israeli public to demands from the Arabs of Israel. This lack of tolerance has already increased in the wake of the "October riots". Various Jewish political elements will

most likely raise anew the legitimacy of "the Arab voice" on matters critical to Israel, and question anew the loyalty of Arab-Israelis to the State. For their part, the Arabs of Israel could respond by turning to the Palestinian state, other Arab countries and the international community for assistance. In such cases, one could expect that the issue would spark a public debate in Israel that will be part of a larger argument over the future nature of the State of Israel in general. First and foremost it will be necessary to take care that this controversy does not flow over into violence. In this context, it will be necessary for the government of Israel to establish rules and frameworks for settling disputes and for the conduct of the debate, this without impinging on efforts to accord full citizens' rights to the Arab population and improve their economic and social conditions.

In conclusion: The Oslo process and its inevitable march toward an independent Palestinian state has increased the pre-occupation of Arab-Israeli political echelons with their own standing within Israel. At this stage, it seems that the dominant discussion is over the demand for formal recognition as a "national minority" with certain characteristics pertaining to territorial autonomy. In other words turning Israel into a bi-national state.