

Israel, a Matrix of Jewishness: A Commentary

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Abstract: Israel is the only state in the world which adheres to her ethnic character and ready to give up any idealism for the maintenance of Jewishness. Despite of the severe criticism from several international actors, Israel is continuing her majoritarian ethnic hegemony against her own Arab minorities and from time to time employ legal and social techniques to maintain and promote the hegemony. The use of both psychological and economic tools is also the part of their game plan. Furthermore, the country seeks the support of non-governmental actors such as Jewish agency as well, to make the domination a permanent one. A total unconcern for human rights and ethics by Israeli authorities is also to be noted. The article explores how the sociopolitical system of Israel is systematically maintain the Jewish character of the state and as a result how far they sideline the interest of Israeli Arabs to maintain the Jewishness. The analysis explores certain factors as findings before concluding it such as the sociopolitical discrimination of Israeli authorities against Israeli Arabs.

Keywords: Jewish Character, Israel, Arabs, Rights, Equality

Israel, the only non-Islamic and democratic state in West Asia, came to be identified as a political entity in 1948. Its very existence is based on Jewish ethnicity and character. The Declaration of Independence of Israel says that “the Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people where their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped” (MacQueen 2013, 337). The state of Israel has declared her policy that she is ‘open for Jewish immigration’ and called upon Jews around the world to ‘rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and up building’ (*ibid.*, 338). Rouhana and Ghanem call Israel as a ‘constitutionally exclusive ethnic state’ (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 323). Endorsing this view point and citing Israeli general public and politicians, Rouhana and Sultany opine that “if Israel is the state of the Jewish people, and if the Jewish citizens enjoy democracy, then Israel by definition must be both Jewish and democratic” (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 8). However, it may also be considered that the political manifesto of Israel in 1948 maintained that “the State of Israel will maintain complete social and political equality among its citizens with no distinction based on religion, race or gender” (Peleg 2004, 416). In addition, the constitutional law of Israel declared itself to be a Liberal Democracy.

The exclusive Jewish character of Israel is clearly visible through its national life. Not just the national life, it could also be comprehended on its constitutional terms. Rouhana and Ghanem make it further evident while they argue that “the term Jewish State is used to describe Israel, it is not merely applied descriptively to denote that Israel has a Jewish majority or that its culture is determined by its majority” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 322). To bolster their arguments, they comment that “Israel embodies an ethnic state in theory, ideology, and practice of ethnic exclusivity, in the sense that it is the state of the Jewish people only and not of its Arab citizensⁱ, with one major exception: that Israel serves a broad range of civic needs of its non-Jewish citizens” (*ibid.*, 322). The attitude of extremist Israeli Jewish Public towards other Israelis is explicit in the words of Joseph Weitzⁱⁱ. To him,

I had already reached this fundamental conclusion as early as 1940, concerning which it is entered in my diary as follows: Among ourselves it must be clear that there is no place in the country for both peoples together ... with the Arabs we shall not achieve our aim of being independent people in this country. The only solution is Eretz Israel, without Arabs ... and there is no other way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighbouring countries, transfer all of them, not one village or tribe should remain (Davis 2003, 20).

In 1969, Moshe Dayan stated cogently that “classifying the Arab citizens of Israel as Israeli’ is plainly offensive, since their status as citizens is not equal to the status of those citizens of the state of Israel who are classified in law as Jews” (*ibid.*, 72). Basic Law: Knesset, Article 7a amended in 1985 disqualified the political parties if the party rejects the definition of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. According to Pinson, “the definition of Israel as a Jewish state is embodied in this legislation in a way that any attempt to challenge it can be defined as illegal” (Pinson 2007, 357). Moreover, systematic exclusion of Arab members of Knesset has also been made in the key positions in the Knesset. Deasi rightly observed that “for long Arabs were prevented from occupying some top posts of trust including all cabinet ministries and three most sensitive Knesset committees Security and Foreign Affairs, Finance and State Comptrollership” (Desai 2006, 127). Analyzing the sociopolitical reality in the Israeli civil society and public, Peleg constructs the following viewpoints in relation with the Israeli official attitude towards non-Jews. To him:

- The State is ideologically committed to its Jewishness, with this ethnic notion interpreted extremely broadly.
- There is a lack of a clear primary legislation that determines the principle of equality as a supreme basic norm.
- There is no full-fledged recognition of the rights of the minority, an area where Israel lags behind many other countries with significant minorities (Peleg 2004, 425).

University of Haifa in a survey conducted in March 2001 identified two factors inter alia as the reason for non-liberal nature of Israel. These factors are:

- A constant striving for homogeneity and consensus.
- The ethnocentricity built into Israeli culture and society (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 16).

The maintenance of Jewish character of Israel has become a socio-political strategy, which has been systematically executed by not only the official missionary but also the social institutions. It is for this purpose that the Jewish agency has been provided with a part of Israeli sovereignty. Making a remark on the role of Jewish agencyⁱⁱⁱ in the Israeli governmental mechanism Davis wrote that “it was possible for the state of Israel to exclude in law its non-Jewish citizens, first and foremost its Palestinian Arab citizens from the development and settlement of the country” (Davis 2003, 52). An amendment to the Knesset Basic Law passed in 1985 denied the right of those political parties to participate in elections which ‘rejects Israel’s character as a state of the Jewish people’ (Neuberger 1989, 68). The demographic status of Arabs within the territory of Israel has also been identified by Jews as a threat to the Jewish character of their state. In a conference entitled “The Balance of Israel’s National Strength and Security” by Institute of Policy and Strategy in December 2000 considered the issue and suggested certain remedies to the same including:

A birthrate planning policy that involves encouraging higher Jewish birthrates, canceling subsidy payments to families with many children, adjusting borders to include within the Jewish state settlement blocs in the occupied West Bank while attaching Arab towns near the Green Line to an eventual Palestinian state, and increasing the Jewish population in problem areas in terms of demography (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 7).

On demographic engineering in favour of the maintenance of Jewish character of Israel Rouhana and Sultany further explain about the promotional plans of Israeli authorities for having more children in their Jewish family. The commentary made by Schnell regarding the attitude of Jewish society in Israel is relevant in this juncture. To him, “they compartmentalized the Jewish sector into a model of a modern society, which was to be imitated, and into a Jewish religious culture, in relation to which they expected to maintain their autonomy” (Schnell 1990, 83).

Equality granted to Israeli Arabs with their Jewish counterpart in the country still remains a myth. Even though Israeli declaration of independence accepts Universal Equality, the same could be achieved by Arab Israelis only in Eretz Yisrael, in other words in a Jewish land of Israel. Commenting on this, Peleg outrages that in Israel ‘the specific commitment to equality did not include nationality’ (Peleg 2004, 416). Smooha and Gavison do not hesitate to argue that ‘full equality in a Jewish state is impossible for Arabs’ (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 10). After a meticulous analysis Rouhana and Sultany declared that “Jewish-Zionist character of the state, which makes equality for the Arab citizens unachievable” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 323) and the political consciousness in both Jews and Arabs are alike to feel that “Arab citizens’ citizenship is not real, in other words, that the Arabs are in effect citizens without citizenship” (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 10). The present political reality of Israel is that even the government has stopped to claim that both Jews and Arabs in Israel are equal in both their social and political status. To Davis, “legislation of the remnants of the non-Jewish, largely Palestinian Arab, population remaining under Israeli rule into the status of second-and third-class citizens” (Davis 2003, 37). Addressing the status of Israeli Arabs Rouhana and Sultany lament that:

Apart from the right to vote the status of the Arab citizens is now very much like that of noncitizen residents in democratic countries. Indeed, their status in many respects is worse, insofar as they are treated as unwanted, and, on some issues, such as land control, even as enemies (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 17).

The inequality of Arab citizens in Israel against their Jewish brethren brought them into a political ‘alienation’ (Desai 2006, 127) from their homeland. The prominent symbols and values in the state and its institutions are Zionist majoritarian ones and the Israeli Arabs in the country do not feel them as theirs^{iv}. Among others, Shitrit comments that “they live in a Jewish country whose symbols, flag, and national anthem are all Zionist and give little expressions to their Palestinian identity and heritage” (Shitrit 2014, 545). Moreover, in 2002, in a Knesset debate, Prime Minister Sharon made it clear in the presence of Arab members of Knesset that “in the Land of Israel, all the rights must be given to the people who live here. That is the difference between rights over the Land and rights in the Land”^v (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 16). Rouhana and Ghanem point out that “from the perspective of its Arab citizens, Israel employs a broad range of democratic procedures but openly violates equality in central laws and regulations and implicitly prefers Jews over Arabs in some regulations and statutes” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 323). A few of such statutes led to “93 per cent of all the territory of pre-1967 Israel being designated in law through Acts of the Knesset for cultivation, development and settlement by, of and for Jews only”^{vi} (Davis 2003, 39). The remaining parts of the country has been left for Israeli Arabs and these areas have been kept away from development plans. Therefore, one can agree with Schnell that “the Arab villages lacked a basic infrastructure, nor were there available suitable institutions or the professional skills necessary for the support of entrepreneurial activity”^{vii} (Schnell 1990, 88).

Rouhana and Sultany explain how the Israeli Knesset, especially the Fifteenth Knesset (1999-2002), through a number of discriminatory legislations sidelined the interest of Israeli Arabs in a systematic manner. According to them, the legislations seriously affected the status of Arabs in the matters of ‘political participation, right of expression, economic status, and even family life’. They accused that the legislations of Knesset during the period was aimed to “redefine the limits of democracy and legitimate discourse in Israel in keeping with the Zionist consensus”. For example, the first, Basic Law: The Knesset, section 7A (Amendment No. 35) passed in 15 May 2002 restricts the role of Israeli Arabs in national politics and upholds the ‘Zionist hegemony’ in the

democratic system^{viii}. The Penal Law (Amendment No.66) passed on 15th May 2002 prohibits ‘upon the free speech not only of Arab Knesset candidates but of all citizens’. In fact the law was aimed at the prevention of statement of Arab Members of Knesset in favour of intifada and resultant violence against Israelis. The law which made “Arab citizens as the weakest socioeconomic class in Israel and Arab children as the most vulnerable group in Israeli society” was The Emergency Economic Plan passed on 5th June 2002. The law excluded financial support to the families that do not have any member who have served in the Israeli Security Force, in other words most of the Israeli Arabs^{ix}. The Nationality and Entry into Israel Law passed by Knesset on 31st July 2003 restricted the citizenship of Israeli Arabs who are married to Palestinians and thus become the Israeli naturalized citizen. They argue that “the effect of the law is that families resulting from the marriage of an Israeli (invariably Arab) citizen and a Palestinian from the territories must either live separately or leave the country” (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 10-13).

The attitude of Israeli authorities made the Israeli Arabs to feel that “they were considered to be second class citizens in the Zionist Jewish state” (Schnell 1990, 90). Discrimination is there in the matter of land allocation and in several other sectors. Underlining the above fact, Peleg has noticed that “while Jews were allocated state lands and received substantial assistance in settling them, Arabs were denied such allocation and assistance” (Peleg 2004, 421). Furthermore, he notes that “Arab localities are often like isolated islands within the national regional systems” (*ibid.*, 424). He adds that “in terms of services given by the State to the Arab minority, as opposed to those given to the Jewish majority, we witness a similar pattern of long term discrimination, accompanied by hesitant efforts to deal with this reality in a more equal manner” (*ibid.*, 423). Rouhana and Ghanem agree with Peleg for that matter and according to them, sectors like “education, welfare, health, and in economic development policies, unequivocally different treatment, policies, and often regulations and statutory laws govern allocation of resources to Arabs and Jews” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 328). Israeli authorities do not provide any opportunity to Arabs to serve the nation thereby including them in the national life and even today “the state still treats them as part of the frontier” (Peled and Shafir 1996, 403). The rationale behind the negativism of Israeli Arabs maybe due to the reasons point out by Neuberger as”

From a superficial and formal point of view, the Israeli Arabs enjoy full equality: they are citizens, vote for the Knesset, and have the right to be elected to any office, from the presidency of the state down to municipalities One aspect of discrimination has to do with the transfer of typical governmental functions to the Jewish Agency which caters only to the needs of the Jewish population. The fact that Arab villages and towns are not designated as development areas and towns and are denied grants, loans, tax exemptions and other privileges to which they are entitled according to objective socio-economic criteria constitutes a further example of discrimination. A third example would be the practice of granting child allowances not only to veterans but also to Jews who did not serve in the army, while denying the same allowances to Arab non-veterans (Neuberger 1989, 73).

Beyond doubt, any independent observer can find that the Jewish character of the Israeli state has sidelined the interest of the Israeli Arabs. Ahmad says that “over the years, the Arabs have become a low-status minority. This gives them a huge psychological disadvantage vis-a-vis their Jewish counterparts. They are inferior to Jews in every respect: class, power, prestige, and dominant culture” (Ahmad 2018, 128). The Israeli authorities considered their Arab citizens as ‘a fifth column, a group that would join Israel’s enemies in any future war’^x (Peleg 2004, 417). Naturally, the attitude create a minimum of psychological animosity between the majority and the minority. Therefore:

Today, the status of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel amounts to second-class citizenship, or a probationary citizenship. Moreover, key positions in the government are occupied by individuals who have been openly hostile to the Arab minority in Israel going so far as to call for the revocation of their citizenship, and even for their collective transfer to a future Palestinian state (Ahmad 2018, 101).

As a result, it can be conceived that “the Arabs in Israel became a minority living at the mercy of a significantly more powerful majority that was determined to dominate it in all areas” (Peleg 2004, 419). However, a right observation has been made by Desai in connection with the attitude of Israeli authorities towards their Arab citizens. According to him, “the central point of the Israeli policy towards Arab minority was not based on the objective of integration, absorption and development but on the objective of control” (Desai 2006, 112).

Drawing the information given above together certain factors can be explored. Firstly, the Jewish character of the state of Israel makes it a land of ethnicity. The ethnicity makes the Israeli authority to disregard basic principles of liberal democracy. Secondly, the Jewish character of the state prevents it to accept diversity of culture within the state and the state system shows only a little concern to the rights of the minority. Thirdly, the sharing of Israeli sovereignty with the Jewish agency in developmental matters has ultimately resulted in regional imbalances in development within the state of Israel. Fourthly, the Israeli Arabs in the state feel a sense of degradation and alienation from the state. Fifthly, the Israeli authorities discriminate between the Israeli Arabs and Jews and look at Arabs as second class citizen who have no rights over the land. Sixthly, the social welfare programs in the country are targeted only for the Jews not for the Arabs. It is clear that the Israeli state reasserts its Jewish character in its legal system, administrative system and national life. However, the attitude is not in favour of the interest of Israeli Arabs. In fact, the Israeli Arabs are deeply worried over their status in the state. Even those Israeli Arabs who are interested to contribute into the Israeli national life are denied to play their role in the national development and the authorities have no concern regarding the denial

of justice to them. The analysis could be concluded by agreeing with the words of Rouhana and Ghanem, as they observe that “we maintain that Israel’s present ethnic structure cannot provide its Palestinian citizens with equality, identity, and security-basic human needs that have to be fulfilled in order to normalize the Palestinians’ relationship with the state” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 321).

Notes

ⁱRouhana and Ghanem put it that Because Israel officially defines Jewishness and not Israeli citizenship as the criterion for inclusion in the state definition, it constitutionally (not only by policy and practice) excludes from its identity all citizens who are non-Jews (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 323).

ⁱⁱ Joseph Weitz, deputy chairman of the Board of Directors of the Jewish National Fund from 1951 to 1973. In 1967, contributing to the Israeli daily Davar Weitz he wrote it.

ⁱⁱⁱJewish Agency, in full Jewish Agency of Israel, international body representing the World Zionist Organisation, created in 1929 by Chaim Weizmann, with headquarters in Jerusalem. Its purpose is to assist and encourage Jews worldwide to help develop and settle Israel. To read more, visit <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jewish-Agency>

^{iv}Rouhana and Ghanem noted that compared with the Jews, who treat symbols, values, and institutions of the state as their own and who see them as part of their heritage and a source of identification, Arabs are conversely alienated from these same exclusively Jewish or Zionist symbols. Arabs cannot identify with many of the symbols of the state in which they are citizens because these symbols are exclusively rooted in the majority's religious and ideological heritage (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998, 329).

^v The Arabs, constituting the majority (two-third) of the population of Palestine in 1947, became a small minority in the new state (Israel). At the same time, the Jews achieved an overwhelming majority within a sovereign state, following centuries of migration throughout the world. (Ahmad 2018, 128).

^{vi} Several statistics demonstrate the gross inequality between Arabs and Jews in regard to land control. First, while Arabs make up 18 percent of the Israeli population, they own merely 3.5 percent of the state land. Over half of the land owned by Arabs in 1948 has been expropriated by the State. Arabs cannot acquire or lease land in some 80 percent of Israel's landmass (Peleg 2004, 422).

^{vii} To Peleg, while the Israeli Arabs have gone through a process of Palestinisation, they remained a unique group of Palestinians influenced by their special experience as Israeli citizens (Peleg 2004, 421).

^{viii} On 15 May 2002, the Knesset passed four amendments to existing laws that significantly reshaped the rules of the democratic game and parliamentary debate. Three of these, closely related, concern elections. The first, Basic Law: The Knesset, section 7A (Amendment No. 35), is aimed exclusively at Arab Knesset candidates (without actually saying so). The amendment (a) empowers the Central Elections Committee to prohibit individuals (subject to High Court approval) and entire political parties from running for the Knesset; (b) stipulates that parties or individuals will be disqualified for rejecting Israel’s identity as a “Jewish and democratic state” (not as a Jewish state and/or a democratic state, as stipulated in the law before its amendment); (c) stipulates that parties or individuals will be disqualified for supporting the armed struggle of an enemy state or of a terrorist organisation against the State of Israel; and (d) requires candidates to make a declaration in keeping with the above provisions (the text of which is provided in the third amendment passed the same day, which follows) (Rouhana and Sultany 2003, 11; Yiftachel 2002, 40).

^{ix} There are clear inferences that the Israeli State does not encourage the Arabs, particularly Muslims, to serve in the army (Ahmad 2018, 128).

^xPeleg notes that the physical separation of the Arabs, their ghettoisation via the Military Government, marked the Arabs as a fundamentally unassimilatable and unintegratable minority, people of a different kind, the ultimate other (Peleg 2004, 418).

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