

Ghassan's Prediction and the Emerging New Palestinian Reality

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During the past year, I've had the pleasure of receiving visits from Ayman Odeh, Ahmad Tibi, and most recently Basel Ghattas—as they passed through Washington. All are Palestinian citizens of Israel. And all are Members of the Israeli Knesset, part of the Joint Arab List that won a record 13 seats in the last Israeli election. It was a delight to sit with them and learn from them not only about the difficulties they face, but the progress they have made.

I have [written](#) about how I first became attached to the Arab community in Israel. It was the insightful Palestinian novelist, Ghassan Kanafani who caused me to divert my doctoral dissertation research from the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to the Palestinian Arabs who remained in their homes after Israel was created in 1948. He gave me two reasons. While much had already been written about the refugees, there was an absence of good literature about the Palestinians “inside” and, he said, they are the most promising component group of the Palestinian people since they have been forged like steel in the hearth of Israel. Facing enormous difficulties, they have developed a uniquely progressive identity and, he believed, the day would come when they would be in a position to provide real visionary leadership for the entire Palestinian people.

My meetings with Odeh, Tibi, and Ghattas have given me the sense that Ghassan may have been right. These are remarkable individuals, part of a larger movement that has faced down the increasingly repressive, ultra-nationalist Israeli government while defending their rights and securing their political role.

For the first three decades, the Arabs in Israel couldn't form political parties or join unions (these were reserved for Zionists or Jews). They lived under a draconian and discriminatory legal system. They lost their lands to widespread confiscation. The Israeli educational system forced them to study Hebrew and Jewish history instead of their own language and history. And those who resisted, were imprisoned or forcibly expelled from the country.

Like other civil rights movements, these Palestinian citizens of Israel used every available opening to win their rights, facing down arrests, expulsions, and lethal violence. While tremendous problems remain, Palestinian citizens in Israel now form political parties, join unions, and teach their language and history. They still face systemic racism in housing, employment, education, allocation of the state's budget, and many other areas—and yet they have built and sustained a fighting force that continues to press their demands for justice and equality.

In creating their Joint List, the Palestinian citizens of Israel have forged a remarkable

national unity bringing together diverse political currents: nationalists, traditionalists, and progressives—Muslims and Christians, alike. Netanyahu’s far-right governing coalition has stepped up its assault on the Arab community in an effort to divide them and break their resolve. Israel has created a fake new identity for Christians—in an effort to divide the Arabs on the basis of religion. They have charged some Arab Knesset Members with “incitement” for advocating on behalf of their Palestinian brethren living under the suffocating economic embargo imposed on Gaza. Israel has passed laws prohibiting Arabs and progressive Jews from supporting the non-violent boycott movement protesting Israel’s settlement policy and making it more difficult for them to receive grants from the EU to promote democracy and human rights. None of these repressive measures have broken their resolve or unity.

In addition to my earlier studies, I have, in recent years, [polled](#) the Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel, as well as the Palestinians living under occupation and those in exile. Of all of the component parts of the Palestinian people, the Arabs in Israel are the most forward looking and the most committed to achieving justice for the entire Palestinian people. And as I have watched Odeh, Tibi, and Ghattas in action, I have been impressed by their political savvy. Unlike the divided and visionless leadership of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the members of the Joint list have vision, a sound political sense of tactics and strategy, and a demonstrated ability to connect with the people they serve. While it is correct to acknowledge that Israel has done everything it could to weaken, punish, discredit, divide, and tie-in-knots the Palestinian leadership under occupation, the Israelis have been no less harsh in the treatment meted out to their own Palestinian citizenry. In this context, it is significant to note that while the efforts of several Arab states have failed, it is fallen on the shoulders of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel (the collective leadership of the Arab community in Israel) to launch an initiative to bring about reconciliation between the Palestinian factions of Fateh and Hamas.

I have just finished reading a [compelling Haaretz article](#) “Stop with the Nonsense that Palestinians Are a Minority In Israel”. The writer Gideon Levy argues that since Israel has refused to separate from the occupied territories and continues to entrench its settler colonies deeper into the heart of the West Bank and the Arab areas of what they call “Greater Jerusalem”, the “era of the two state solution [is drawing] to a close” and has been replaced by a de facto “bi-national state” in which the numbers of Jews and Arabs are roughly equal. In this new reality, Arabs are not a minority, they are half of the population.

If this is to remain the case, and I see no evidence that the Netanyahu government will change direction or that any outside power will compel them to do so, then the Palestinian struggle will inevitably be transformed from one demanding independence into a movement demanding equal rights. This will merely be an extension of the fight that the “inside” Palestinians have been waging for seven decades. If this is to be the case, we may well see the day when the Palestinian citizens of Israel will emerge, as Kanafani predicted, as the new leadership of a unified Palestinian community fighting for justice and equality.

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