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# **(Im)possible Alliance**

**The Rocky Relationship of the  
Zionist Left and the Israeli Arabs**

Marzuq Al-Halabi

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## The Rocky Relationship of the Zionist Left and the Israeli Arabs

*Marzuq Al-Halabi*

A quarter of a century later, it is safe to say that the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin (1995) was a turning point in the relationship between the Palestinian-Arab minority and the Jewish majority in Israel. That was the moment in time when the Israeli Arabs went from being welcome to being “persona non grata” in Israeli society, and when the Jewish majority shifted from actively promoting the inclusion of this minority in national politics to advancing their exclusion. Until that time, the ruling elites, who were commonly associated with the Zionist left, had sought to include Palestinian citizens of Israel in parliamentary politics. This was based on the understanding that the Jewish majority needed the Arab minority's blessing when the state was first established, and that integrating them into national politics would help reinforce Israel's status as a democracy<sup>[1]</sup> (there were, of course, additional motivations, to be discussed further on).

Then came the events of October 2000 and the beginning of a reverse trend among the Jewish-Israeli elites, especially on the right. The growing right-wing bloc began to reiterate its objection to the participation of Arab citizens in Israeli politics<sup>[2]</sup>. Arab citizens found themselves navigating between these opposing views, as profound

shifts began to alter the political climate in Israel and throughout the region. These changes affected the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel and its relationship with the state and with Jewish society. In the following analysis I focus on the changing relationship with the Zionist left, whose governments – until Rabin's assassination – had enjoyed the unqualified support of the Arab electorate.

### Arab citizens invited to “participate in building the country”

Israel's Declaration of Independence from 1948 appealed to Arab citizens to take part in building up the newly-formed country. Although policy on the ground was governed by security reasons – e.g., subjecting Arab citizens to a military administration for almost twenty years – this founding principle was translated into an inclusive, respectful discourse that prevailed for many decades. The integration of Arab citizens into Israeli society and politics was initially a way to reinforce the government's legitimacy, by receiving the blessing of the Palestinians who had remained in Israel while others became refugees. The Israeli Communist Party, which relied upon Jewish-Arab

partnership, treated the establishment of the state as a welcome anti-imperialist move to counter the reactionary Arab forces in the region[3]. The party advocated for a progressive socialist state that would benefit all the working classes in Israel, Jews and Arabs alike. The local Arab leadership, on its part, embraced the new state's invitation and eagerly joined in national politics. Yet this minority still struggled to gain full legitimacy from the Israeli establishment. Jews and Arabs in Israel met at the intersection of common interests, driven by a mutual wish for legitimacy, with both seeking an alliance between the new state and its Arab citizens.

***“Jews and Arabs in Israel met at the intersection of common interests, driven by a mutual wish for legitimacy”***

Over time, this idea expanded to serve other goals. The Jewish elites, namely the pragmatic Zionist left, wished to emphasize the existence of moderate Arabs – i.e., citizens of Israel who vote for parliament – as opposed to extremist Arabs who call for destroying the Zionist entity. These elites also wanted to prove that Israel was the only democracy in the Middle East, as exemplified by giving all citizens the vote. The image of a lone democracy grew more important as regional tensions rose. Also, giving Palestinians in Israel the vote helped to distinguish them from the Palestinians remaining outside Israel's borders, and became a key feature in shaping this minority as first Israeli and only then affiliated to the Arab region or the Palestinian nation. Channeling Arab activism into parliamentary politics also helped thwart potential challenges to the state, such as armed struggle or civil disobedience[4]. Finally, the political participation of Arab citizens reinforced

the Zionist narrative of the conflict and lent legitimacy to its existence within the Arab region.

The state's motivations coincided with the interests of the local Arab elites, although arguably the latter had no promising alternative. The war between their country and their nation actually increased the motivation of Israeli Arabs to participate in politics and distinguish themselves from the Palestinians outside Israel's sovereign borders, including those fighting against it. As far back as the early 1950s, MK Tawfik Tuby of the Communist Party even proposed that Arab citizens be enlisted to the Israeli army in order to strengthen their identity and integrate them as equal citizens. Communist circles later argued that his real goal had been to prevent the deportation of Arabs remaining in Israel after the war.

In the first few decades of Israel's existence, domestic Arab politics operated on the assumption that at least some parts of the Israeli governments wished to see the Arab minority integrated into the country's political and social life. In our conversations over the years, the late writer Emil Habibi, who was an MK for the Israeli Communist Party “Maki” in the 1960s and 1970s, stressed the good ties that existed between Arab MKs and many actors in Israeli politics, including Jewish religious parties and the socialist Mapam Party. The Israeli Communist Party, which dominated Arab Israeli society until the 1980s, assumed that reasonable coexistence depended on an alliance between Jewish and Arab workers, and that Israel's future lay in the ability of these two groups to cooperate. The expected resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict according to the 1947 Partition Plan also necessitated a positive approach to relations with the state and its Jewish majority. During these decades, Arab politics

in Israel focused on civil rights and equality, not on collective national aspirations. Given the assumption that in any scenario, they would remain an integral part of Israeli society, that is where they invested their efforts and political resources.

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However, this strategy did not achieve the desired results. The Arab minority remained suspect to parts of Jewish-Israeli society with more political power than those who advocated for a domestic alliance. The military administration imposed on Arab citizens from 1948 to 1966 evidenced the suspicion with which the first- and second-generation Jewish leadership viewed them. While the rhetoric of the Zionist left favored political participation, in practice Israeli Arabs suffered discrimination and were barred from fully enjoying the fruits of the young country's progress, its growing wealth and speedy development. Worse still, the state continued to dispossess Arabs of their

lands, a policy that eventually led to the first Land Day. On that day, March 30, 1976, the Arab community first held mass marches and rallies against ongoing expropriation of their land, mainly in the Galilee region located in northern Israel. The government chose to forcefully suppress the protest, with tragic results: six young Arab Israeli men were killed and hundreds wounded.

The first Land Day, marked annually since then, became a milestone in the development of the Palestinian-Arab identity in Israel and the relationship between this minority and the state. The Israeli Arab leadership saw it as the day the wall of fear that had held this power structure in place collapsed. They hoped to leverage the event to form a collective representative body, such as an Arab Israeli parliament, a notion that matured only in the late 1980s, when an attempt was made to organize a nationwide conference of Arabs in Israel. Then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin banned the event, legally relying upon the national emergency regulations. It became clear that abiding by the law and working towards egalitarian coexistence was not going well.



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Pamphlet of the Israeli Communist Party calling for unity and brotherhood of the working class beyond the borders of race, ethnicity and nationality

## October 2000: Disillusionment sets in

Despite these vicissitudes, the Arab parties supported Yitzhak Rabin's government until his assassination. They helped form the majority bloc that allowed the Oslo Accords to go ahead. This was the heyday of relations between Israeli Arabs and the Zionist left. The rhetoric of Jewish-Arab partnership was translated into action, and resources were allocated closing socioeconomic gaps and developing infrastructure in Arab communities. Arab participation in public life was viewed more positively, and this minority went from being the ultimate suspects to legitimate and even desirable political partners. Three years were enough to create a feeling of euphoria that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was about to be resolved, thanks to the Oslo Accords, and that Arab citizens could expect a bright future of civic equality and fulfillment of their rights. Official declarations spurred this sentiment, drawing Jews and Arabs together and generating high hopes. In those years, Arab citizens saw themselves as not only part of Israeli society, but also as key players in achieving peace with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world. The political partnership with the Jewish majority seemed poised to improve their lives and finally make them equal citizens.

After Rabin was assassinated, the euphoria initially persisted. Yet willingness to cooperate with the Zionist left came to an abrupt end in the October 2000 riots, when 13 young Arabs were killed by Israeli security forces deployed specially with sniper backup to suppress demonstrators flooding the streets. The protests had erupted in response to the violence of Israeli security forces against Palestinians, especially in the al-Aqsa mosque compound, where then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon had paid a visit. The violent clashes reached

Arab communities in Israel and ended in tragedy. The riots, which lasted throughout the first week of October 2000, marked the end of Jewish-Arab coexistence. The partnership collapsed, along with the hopes of Israeli Arabs that the conflict was on the verge of resolution and they on the brink of flourishing coexistence with their Jewish neighbors. That was the watershed moment that shattered their confidence in cooperation with the Zionist left – whose government, headed by Ehud Barak and Minister of Public Security Shlomo Ben-Ami, had sent the forces to forcefully suppress the protests.

At the time, I was working as an organizational consultant for the New Israel Fund. I saw firsthand the havoc that this mutual crisis of faith wreaked on Jewish-Arab relations in general, and specifically in joint organizations. The feeling was one of a mutual betrayal. The Zionist left was seen as unwilling to recognize the basic right of Arab citizens to mass protest, while the latter were seen as having crossed a line and betrayed Israel in favor of their Palestinian brethren in the Occupied Territories. Once the rupture occurred, it was difficult to go back. It was also hard to formulate a joint manifesto by Jews and Arabs concerning the October events. Both Arabs and Jews left their workplaces at joint nonprofits, and these ceased to function. I recall how the teams at the New Israel Fund (an American nonprofit working to promote equality and democracy in Israel) decided to hold an internal dialogue between Jewish and Arab employees in order to rebuild our relationship. The process took about two years and was, after hard work, declared a success.

The crisis drove both sides, the Zionist left and Arab Israelis, to examine what had happened to their relationship and how it could be rebuilt. For the Arab community, the October

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Demonstrations  
by Palestinian  
citizens of Israel  
in early October  
2000

events dealt a severe blow to their sense of affiliation with the state. The young people killed were seen as the victims of a just struggle for freedom of protest and for the existence of a national Palestinian identity. Israeli Arabs became bitterly disillusioned with the basic assumptions that had guided their political activity for decades.

***”The October events dealt a severe blow to Israeli Arabs’ sense of affiliation with the state”***

Large groups of Israeli Arab intellectuals and activists gathered to discuss the new state of affairs and how best to respond. The result was the publication of four “vision documents” in 2006-2007, outlining the desired relationship between the Israeli state and its Arab minority. The significance of the documents lay in being the first coordinated measure taken to make the ambitions of Israeli Arabs clear to the Jewish majority – not another party platform or nonprofit work plan, but the detailed, non-partisan credo of Arab society in Israel. The visions outlined in the documents ranged from expanding the idea of autonomy

to demanding a bi-national state within the 1967 borders with just distribution of resources and government.

The documents<sup>[5]</sup> reframed the position of Israeli Arabs, calling for coexistence and for a historical resolution to their relationship with the state. The goal was to engage in dialogue with Zionist leftist circles about the core issues, in the hope of correcting the distorted relationship between the two communities.

One major mistake was that the Arab leadership in Israel did not adopt the documents or leverage them, despite great interest expressed in Jewish circles. Another flaw was that the documents focused on the desired future and ignored less favorable scenarios. They did, however, challenge the assumptions of “traditional” Arab politics about an alliance with the Zionist left and the feasibility of the two-state solution. They also highlighted the need to examine other potential solutions, such as civic nationalism or a bi-national contractual democracy. They were written in the language of international law and United Nations conventions on the rights of national, linguistic and indigenous

minorities, and also addressed issues such as a post-national state, historical reconciliation, and distributive and transitional justice. This rhetorical style was adopted in order to relate to international norms beyond the local confines of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The authors believed that couching controversial issues in international language would create a space for dialogue and offer a way out of the impasse.

### Conceptual change: From seeking a solution to accepting the lack of one

The vision documents of the '00s laid out constructive goals for the Israeli Arab community, such as working towards a bi-national state, coexistence with the Jewish community and historic reconciliation. Israeli Jewish politics, however, took a sharp turn to the right after the October 2000 events and the second intifada. A belligerent nationalist discourse developed, culminating so far in the 2018 Nation-State Law. Many saw this law as a significant move towards excluding Arab citizens from the political domain – a record low in Israeli anti-Arab legislation[6]. In addition, the government's decision to ignore the recommendations of the Or Commission[7], which investigated the October events and strongly criticized the establishment's treatment of Arab citizens, was taken as a sign of Jewish unwillingness to fix the ailing partnership. The rift widened and hate speech against Israeli Arabs reached troubling heights, with manifestations of racism and harassment of Arab citizens increasing in the following years[8]. Today, many Israeli Arabs believe that the Nation-State law marked another phase, but certainly not the last, in the sea-change sweeping Jewish society. It is seen as a meaningful constitutional change that will filter, in both spirit and terminology,

into Israel's legal system, political discourse and daily life.

A group of Israeli Arab researchers recently published several strategic analyses[9] determining that the new right-wing elite is systematically steering Israel away from the original Zionist vision of a Jewish and democratic state, towards a future that may include one law for Jews and another for Arabs. These new politics no longer aspire, even rhetorically, to resolve the conflict, establish "two states for two peoples" or guarantee civil rights. Instead, they are reviving separatist elements in Israeli politics[10]. This is part of a broader context: many Jewish Israelis believe that the Zionist enterprise has achieved a historic victory, while Arab nationalism has suffered defeat in the wake of the Arab Spring[11].

The current mood of the Jewish public is reminiscent of the euphoria and intoxicating sense of power that followed the 1967 war, after Israel defeated the Arab armies in six days. The geopolitical power structure that has formed in the region since the first Gulf War tends overwhelmingly in Israel's favor. The remaining strategic threats, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, are not existential. Israel's geo-strategic position has improved, fomenting arrogance, racism and policies that run roughshod over Arab neighbors, including its own citizens. Israeli Arabs are reaching the conclusion that their relationship with Jewish society is set to deteriorate, not improve. This is creating a demand for different politics that are better suited to the new right-wing view of Arabs as second-class citizens who belong to the Arab Middle East and are not integral to Israel.

Meanwhile, their erstwhile ally, the Zionist left, is struggling with its own crisis and holds little sway over the direction that Israel is taking. The new Jewish elites have

*"Today, many Israeli Arabs believe that the Nation-State law marked another phase, but certainly not the last, in the sea-change sweeping Jewish society"*

adopted nationalist rightwing ideas and are gradually uprooting the cornerstones laid by the Zionist left: Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, the principle of rule of law, the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary, and civil liberties. The Zionist left is busy defending the rule of law, democratic institutions and its very existence and legitimacy, which in the current political climate, is often evaluated via its attitudes towards the Palestinians, whether within Israel or in the Occupied Territories, whereby any expression of support for the rights of Israeli Arabs is met with widespread denunciation.

Being on the "left" has become synonymous with being "pro-Arab", ostensibly at the expense of the Jewish public. Since their major ally has collapsed, Arab Israeli politics are now focusing on dealing with the nationalist right and the radical approaches it is trying to integrate into Israeli politics. The Zionist left, in turn, is not eager to renew its alliance with the Arab minority. True, some Arab and Jewish political circles still believe in joint action, but the overall dynamic is of separation. With the national discourse being led by the right, the Zionist left is trying to regain the support of the political center by undercutting the Arab public, while the Arab leadership is trying to emphasize its Palestinian-Arab identity and its loyalty to democracy and to resolving the conflict. The general feeling is that we are back to square one from 70 years ago, as though the Jewish-Arab conflict just began.

In summary, Arab politics in Israel are reorganizing around the perception of looming escalation. The guiding assumption is that the Israeli right will try to eliminate the boundary between sovereign Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and annex some or all of the latter, while shrinking democratic space and pushing Arab citizens of Israel into a corner. The

situation will be volatile, as Israel will have to contend with demographic equality between the Jewish and Palestinian collectives in the entire area stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. This will bring us back full circle to the origins of the conflict. To counter this alarming trend, Jews and Arabs need to join forces and redefine the left as a shared ideological space<sup>[12]</sup> promoting Jewish-Arab partnership.

Both Jewish and Arab activists are trying to find an effective formula for such an alliance<sup>[13]</sup>, to fight against the dire political situation created by the rule of the right. Apparently, there can be no "liberation" or coexistence without a shared struggle. Living together requires taking action together. Should the political attempt ever be made to transfer Arab Israeli citizens out of the country, it will hopefully encounter joint, decisive Jewish-Arab resistance. Our mission is now to strengthen the alliance between Jews and Arabs in Israel who wish to support the existence of Israel as a democracy.

*"Jews and Arabs need to join forces and redefine the left as a shared ideological space"*



## Endnotes

[1] This position was consistently upheld, from the Declaration of Independence that called for the Arabs remaining within the boundaries of the new state to take part in building it up, to repeated statements by the founding generation that the participation of Arab citizens in Israeli politics was desirable and would aid their integration into the life of the new state.

[2] The right began voicing this approach while still in the opposition – demanding, for example, that any concession in the Occupied Territories be contingent on a Jewish-only referendum, or vilifying Arab citizens as a fifth column and engaging in daily incitement against their elected leaders. One blatant manifestation was the raising of the electoral threshold for the Knesset, which was seen as an attempt to reduce Arab representation.

[3] This discourse dominated the party until the mid-1960s, when the party split and leaders Shmuel Mikonis and Moshe Sneh left. See <https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/parties/maki/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[4] In many rulings rejecting Arab lists or candidates for the Knesset, Israel's High Court of Justice declared both implicitly and openly that such cooperation would ensure control over the populace and circumvent unwanted developments. Also, the Arab leadership emphasized its focus on nonviolent civil struggle, in keeping with the rule of law.

[5] These documents are available on the websites of the organizations that helped lay the groundwork for their formulation, including Adalah, Mada Al-Carmel and Mossawa. They were published in Arabic, Hebrew and English.

[6] See the reasoning for Adalah's petition to the Supreme Court against the Nation-State Law: <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9569> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[7] See: <http://reut-institute.org/en/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=3482> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[8] See, for example, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel: <https://law.acri.org.il/en/category/arab-citizens-of-israel/arab-minority-rights/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[9] Two such reports have been published by strategic thinking groups consisting of intellectuals and Palestinian-Arab scholars in Israel. See the website of the I'lam Center in Nazareth: <http://www.ilam-center.org/en/default.aspx> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[10] See the latest strategic report by the I'lam Center: <http://www.ilam-center.org/en/default.aspx>. Also, many articles and conferences have used this terminology to describe the situation in recent years. See: <http://www.mada-research.org/2016/09/15> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[11] See Marzuq Al-Halabi, "Palestinian Citizens Must Decide What Kind of Future They Want": <https://972mag.com/palestinian-citizens-must-decide-what-kind-of-future-they-want/122851/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[12] See Marzuq al-Halabi et al., "You Have the Power to Stop Apartheid: An Open Letter to AIPAC": <https://972mag.com/you-have-the-power-to-stop-apartheid-an-open-letter-to-aipac/140666/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

[13] See an enlightening article by Prof. Gadi Algazi, an expert on Arab-Jewish partnership, critically analyzing relations in this partnership: "An Israeli-Palestinian Struggle for a Shared Future" (Hebrew): <https://www.haokets.org/2019/04/21/%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A7-%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%99-%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%A1%D7%98%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%9C%D7%A2%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%93-%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A3/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

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His academic education is in comparative literature, political science, and law. He has expertise in diverse areas of knowledge such as, identity and culture, language and

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