The Place Of Non-Jewish Citizens In Israeli State And Society

The establishment of the State of Israel presented a “unique and extremely complex”,[1] situation for Jewish-Arab relations, as the Arab majority that had dominated under Mandate metamorphosed into a minority in Israel. Conversely, the Jewish minority became the governing majority of an official homeland, pledging “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex”[footnoteRef:2]. However as this essay will discuss, the irreconcilable definition of the state as both ‘democratic’ and ‘Jewish’ has amounted to the ongoing and institutionalised discrimination of the non-Jewish population within Israel. To discuss the place of non-Jewish citizens, and necessarily that in relation to Israel’s Jewish inhabitants could, mistakenly, suppose a period of monolithic histories. Yet the experience of non-Jewish citizens diverged greatly, pronounced with differences of religion, gender and class. Arguably, the presence of Muslim, Druze, Christian, Bedouin and Circassian peoples within the Jewish state omits any notion of a fixed ‘place’ altogether. Given the scope of the issue at hand, therefore, this essay will focus primarily on the place of Palestinian Arabs. ‘Place’ will be taken to be determined by their political and socio-economic position in one dimension, and their response of determined resistance as the other. The former depicting the inferior place of non-Jews underpinned by an Israeli regime of control. The later emphasising their place as historical actors. [1: Elie Rekhess, ‘The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian Minority in Israel’, Israel Studies, Vol 12, no 3, (2007), 3.] [2: Israeli Declaration of Independence, 1948.]

Politically, the crux of one’s ‘place’ within a country lies with their access to, or restriction from, citizenship. The administration in Israel is based on the 1950 Law of Return, which embodies the “ethnic foundation”[footnoteRef:3] of the State of Israel, and the 1952 Citizenship Law, which marks the admittance of non-Jewish minorities. Though the right of claim to Israeli citizenship by Palestinian Arabs has been used in modern discourse to legitimise the ‘democracy’ of the state, the reality of its implementation is a regime in which Jews arriving from abroad are not immigrants but repatriates[footnoteRef:4], whilst non-Jews are forced to provide extensive proof of residence for the same privilege, and hundreds of thousands devasted by the Nakba disaster are excluded altogether. A similar picture emerges within the electoral sphere. Legally, Arab citizens have the right to vote and are elected to the Knesset, but the enduring reality is one of underrepresentation and tightly censored control. Hillel Cohen’s Good Arabs discuss the early network of collaborators established in the Arab community by the Israeli security forces, as revealed by documents unintentionally declassified in the 1990s.[footnoteRef:5] Pressed to inform on the political predilection of their neighbourhood to the authorities, this policy exemplified how from 1948-1966, security services were used as a tool of manipulation to safeguard the dominance of the Jewish minority party at the expense of Arab representation. Further still, such tenacious and intrusive surveillance, accompanied by the threat of interrogation for Arabs who spoke out against the state, served to “shape the contours of Arab political discourse”[footnoteRef:6]. The political status of Palestinian Arabs during these years, therefore, was not only characterised by exclusion but deep-rooted efforts by the Israeli authorities to penetrate and wield Arab political consciousness. Furthermore, a glance at the years succeeding the 1993 Oslo Accords resonates with an image of continuity rather than change. In 2011, just 13 of the 120 members

of the Knesset were Arab citizens, revealing the declaration of commitment to enhancing Jewish-Arab equality “remained no more than political slogans”[footnoteRef:7]. Whilst proposed amendments designed to curtail Palestinian access to citizenship from the West Bank and Gaza[footnoteRef:8] exhibit no sign of de-ethnicization. Certainly, the factors above are crucial. After all, granted access to citizenship and the right to vote could hardly be contested as fundamental to one’s civic status. In accordance with Israeli law, all non-Jewish citizens secured as much. However, the Proclamation of Independence, and its resolute authority gave the absence of a state constitution in replacement, drives a “critical wedge”[footnoteRef:9] between the place of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens in Israel. Though non-Jews were afforded civic status, the Proclamation’s omission of reference to ‘nationality’ or ‘national rights’[footnoteRef:10] concerning the country’s Arab population critically denied them national recognition. Meanwhile, by virtue of the legal established of Israel as a Jewish state, the Jewish population were in comparison bestowed not only with national rights but as embodied by the Law of Return, collective rights too. [3: Yossi Harpaz and Ben Herzog, ‘Report on Citizenship Law: Israel’, Country Report 2018/02, (European University Institute, 2018), 2.] [4: Harpaz and Herzog, ‘Report on Citizenship Law: Israel’, 2.] [5: Hillel Cohen, Good Arabs, The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967, (UC Press, 2011), 3.] [6: Cohen, Good Arabs, 3.] [7: Elie Rekhess, ‘The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel’, Israel Studies, vol. 12, no 3, (Fall 2007), 11.] [8: Elie Rekhess, ‘The Arab Minority in Israel: Reconsidering the “1948 Paradigm”, Israel Studies, Vol. 19, No. 2, (2014), 192.] [9: Rekhess, ‘The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel’, 4.] [10: Rekhess, ‘The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel’, 4.]

Within the socio-economic sphere, it is the appropriation of land that dominates the discourse of Palestinian Arab status. Under the enactment of a string of legislation, including the Absentee Property Law 1950, the Land Acquisition Law 1953 and the Prescription Law 1958, an injurious amount of land was expropriated by the Israeli government. Estimates vary greatly depending on the investigative body, but one figure obtained by the Israeli Land Authority states that 1,250,000 dunams of land were confiscated in 1953 alone.[footnoteRef:11] As observed by Nadim Rouhana, the expropriation of land represents a prime example of how ethnoreligious principles of the Israeli state exclude the Arab citizenry[footnoteRef:12]. Used to construct Jewish-only settlements in the name of “public good”[footnoteRef:13], this policy was forged among the perception of Arab demographic growth, economic prosperity and land ownership as an “existential threat”[footnoteRef:14] to the public (Jewish) good. More broadly speaking, the subordinate position of Palestinian Arabs within the Israeli economy is underscored by both the constraints imposed by the Jewish majority, as well as measures designed to curb the development of their separate economic autonomy. The priorities relegated to Jewish advancement which left Arab regions which leftover half of their villages still without electricity by 1971[footnoteRef:15] amounted to a policy of coercive and systematic neglect. Meanwhile, the integration of Arabs into the Jewish economy, and most notably the reallocation of land, effectively destroyed the Palestinian pre-war subsistence economy, leaving the population both dependent on the Israeli (Jewish) labour market, and simultaneously deprived them opportunity to construct an independent path of development.[footnoteRef:16] Together, these policies served to reinforce the socio-economic inequality between the two groups. As was the case in the Israeli political realm, a regime that in principle afforded non-Jews civil equality, in fact left the impoverished place of Palestinian “anchored in the state apparatus”[footnoteRef:17]. [11: Henry Rosenfield, ‘The Class Situation of the Arab National Minority in Israel’ (in Minorities and the Dominant Culture), Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 20, No. 3, (1978), 390.] [12: Nadim M. Rouhana, ‘” Jewish and Democratic”? The Rise of National Self-Deception’,

Journal of Palestine Studies 35 no. 2, (Winter 2006), 65.] [13: Yifat Holzman-Gazit, Land Expropriation in Israel: Law, Culture and Society. (Routledge, 2006), 99.] [14: Rouhana, '" Jewish and Democratic"? The Rise of National Self-Deception', 65.] [15: Raja Khalidi, 'The Arab Economy in Israel: Dependency or Development', Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol.13, No. 3, (University of California Press: Spring 1984), 69.] [16: Khalidi, 'The Arab Economy in Israel: Dependency or Development', 64.] [17: Noah Lewin-Epstein & Moshe Semyonov, 'The Arab Minority in Israel's Economy: an Israeli Dilemma', Israel Studies Bulletin, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Berghahn Books: Fall 1993), 5.]

Yet to discuss the 'place' of non-Jews in Israel as the manifestation of outside forces imposed upon them would be to deny their use of autonomy as resistance. A Palestinian history that focuses solely on the practice of state control is a history that relegates non-Jews to a place or position of passivity. What emerges from the work of Hillel Cohen is the scope of active opposition by Arab citizens against the Israeli regime, opposition "successful in no small measure"[footnoteRef:18]. The abetment of over twenty thousand "refugee-infiltrators"[footnoteRef:19] that crossed into Israel from 1948-1953 and subsequently bolstered the Arab population by approximately 15%[footnoteRef:20], shows attempts by the Israeli authorities to break the ties between their resident Arab sect and the wider Palestinian Arab consciousness failed. In the continual struggle over ideological hegemony, Palestinians have resisted the state-manufactured historical narrative to develop a "reading of reality"[footnoteRef:21] based on pre-1948 Palestinian society and the injustices of Zionist colonisation. Notably through the use of cultural symbols, informal education and linguistic articulations.[footnoteRef:22] For example, when the village of Saforia was devastated in the 1948 conflict, many of its inhabitants resettled in a neighbourhood of Nazerath they called Hai el-Saffafrah (translates to: the neighbourhood of the people of Saforia)[footnoteRef:23]. [18: Cohen, Good Arabs, 6.] [19: Cohen, Good Arabs, 6.] [20: Cohen, Good Arabs, 6.] [21: Sa'Di, 'Minority Resistance to State Control', 403.] [22: Sa'Di, 'Minority Resistance to State Control', 403.] [23: Sa'Di, 'Minority Resistance to State Control', 404.]

These insights have driven scholars such as Ahmad Sa'di to endorse a new narrative detailing the place of the Arab minority within the Israeli state. One that recognises not only the dimension of control, but also that of resistance[footnoteRef:24]. To stress the successes of the Israeli Arab citizens as "active agents in the shaping of their history"[footnoteRef:25] should in no way erode recognition of the extraordinary forms of economic exploitation and political control forced upon them, but it does require a modification of the claim that the non-Jewish existence in Israel was one of passivity and subservience. [24: Ahmad H. Sa'Di, 'Control and Resistance: Two Dimensions of Palestinians' Existence in Israel', Ethnic Challenges to the Modern Nation State, (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000).] [25: Ahmad H. Sa'Di, 'Minority Resistance to State Control: Towards the Re-analysis of Palestinian Political Action in Israel', Social Identities: Journal for the study of Race, Nation and Culture 2:3, (1996), 395.]

Having focused predominantly on the earlier years of the Israeli State, this essay has demonstrated the enduring and institutionalised position of Palestinian Arabs as lesser citizens within Israeli state and society. The disparity of attitudes regarding citizenship attainment, political representation, and economic discrimination are the amalgamation of regime that exerts "maximal control"[footnoteRef:26] over the position of Israel's Arab population in order to secure their continued subordination. Nonetheless, study with a greater bout acknowledges developments in the evolvement of Arabs in Israel which show their place to be no static phenomenon. Specifically, with attention awarded to the endeavours of Palestinian Arabs to

counter the “hegemonic Israeli worldview”[footnoteRef:27] that sought so explicitly to remodel Arab consciousness. In this lies the unmistakable value of Cohen’s scholarship, able to exemplify both the degree of control and resistant autonomy that has shaped the place of Palestinian Arabs within Israel. No longer were they “passive and subservient”[footnoteRef:28], but a “humanised historical actor”[footnoteRef:29]. The relevance of this dual perception is key given the politically explosive nature of the topic, for here delve not only into traditional historiographical research, but also the contentious and prevailing debate surrounding Israeli-Palestinian relations. Most recently, energised efforts towards Palestinian liberation has provoked a determined countereffort to promote Israel as both ‘Jewish’ and democratic’. Certainly from our study, the incompatibility of such is inherent in the preferential treatment of the Jewish population at the expense of the Palestinian Arab population. [26: Cohen, Good Arabs, 3.] [27: Cohen, Good Arabs, 3.] [28: Cohen, Good Arabs, 6.] [29: Yoav Di-Capua, ‘The Intimate History of Collaboration: Arab Citizens and the State of Israel’, Middle East Research and Information Project, (May 2007).]

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