

60 years of Celebration and Regret

Contributed by Egypt News
Sunday, 18 May 2008

As Israel toasts its 60th anniversary in the coming weeks, rejoicing in Jewish national rebirth and democratic values, the Arabs who make up 20 percent of its citizens will not be celebrating

Better off and better integrated than ever in their history, freer than the vast majority of other Arabs, Israel's 1.3 million Arab citizens are still far less well off than Israeli Jews and feel increasingly unwanted.

On Independence Day, this Thursday, thousands of Israeli Arabs will gather in their former villages to protest what they have come to call the nakba, or catastrophe, meaning Israel's birth. For most Israelis, Jewish identity is central to the state, the reason they are proud to live here, the link they feel with history. But Israeli Arabs, including the most successfully integrated ones, say a new identity must be found for the country's long-term survival.

"I am not a Jew," protested Eman Kasseem-Sleiman, a prominent Arab radio journalist with impeccable Hebrew whose children attend a predominantly Jewish school in Jerusalem. "How can I belong to a Jewish state? If they define this as a Jewish state, they deny that I am here."

The clash between the cherished heritage of the majority and the hopes of the minority is more than friction. Even more than during the huge half-century festivities a decade ago, now the left and the right increasingly see Israeli Arabs as one of the central challenges for Israel's future - one intractably bound to the search for an overall settlement between Jews and Arabs here. Jews fear ultimately losing the demographic battle to Arabs, both inside Israel's borders and in the larger territory the nation controls.

Most say that while an end to its Jewish identity would mean an end to Israel, equally, failure to instill in Arab citizens a sense of belonging is dangerous because many Arabs promote the idea that, 60 years or no 60 years, Israel is a passing phenomenon.

"I want to convince the Jewish people that having a Jewish state is bad for them," said Abir Kopty, an Israeli Arab advocate.

Land is an especially sore point. Across Israel, especially in the north, the remains of dozens of Palestinian villages sit partly unused, scars on the landscape from the conflict that gave birth to the state in 1948.

Yet some of the original Arab inhabitants and their descendants, all Israeli citizens, live in packed towns and villages often next door and remain barred from resettling the vacant areas, while Jewish communities around them are urged to expand.

One recent warm afternoon, Jamal Abdulhadi Mahameed drove past kibbutz fields of wheat and watermelon, up a dirt road surrounded by pine trees and cactus, and climbed the worn remains of a set of stairs, declaring in the open air: "This was my house. This is where I was born."

He said what he most wanted now, at age 69, was to leave the crowded town next door, come back to this piece of uncultivated land with the pomegranate bushes planted by his father and work it, as generations have before him. He has gone to court to get it.

Mahameed is no revolutionary and, by nearly any measure, a solid and successful citizen. His children include a doctor, two lawyers and an engineer. Yet, as an Arab, his quest for a return to his land challenges longstanding Israeli policy.

"We are prohibited from using our own land," Mahameed said as he stood in the former village of Lajoun, now a mix of overgrown scrub and pine trees surrounded by the fields of Kibbutz Megiddo. "They want to keep it available for Jews. My daughter makes no distinction between Jewish and Arab patients. Why should the state treat me differently?"

The answer has to do with the very essence of Zionism - the movement of Jewish rebirth and control over the land where Jewish statehood first flourished 2,000 years ago.

"Land is presence," remarked Clinton Bailey, an Israeli scholar who has focused on Bedouin culture. "If you want to be present here you have to have land. The country is not that big. What you cede to Arabs can no longer be used for Jews who may still want to come. Israel is here as a haven for them."

A Palestinian state is widely seen as a potential solution to tensions with the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank, but any deep conflict with Israel's own Arab citizens could prove much more complex.

Antagonism runs both ways. Many Israeli Arabs express solidarity with their Palestinian brethren under Israeli occupation, while others praise Hezbollah, the anti-Israel group in Lebanon, and some Arabs in the Parliament routinely accuse Israel of Nazism.

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