

The Liberal's Lament Over Israel

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I find it exceptionally irritating when I hear liberals worry about whether Israel will be able to remain a "Jewish and Democratic State" if it retains control of occupied Palestinian lands. It's irritating because Israel is not now a democratic state nor has it ever tried to be one.

A state that prioritizes rights for one group of citizens (in this case Jews, who comprise 80% of the population) over the rights of another group (Arabs, who are 20% of Israel's citizenry) cannot be democratic. Israel discriminates against its Arab citizens in law, social services, funding for education, and in everyday life. So although the concerns of liberals in the West are about the future of Israeli democracy, what they ignore is the reality of Israel, in practice.

As I document in my book, [Palestinians: the Invisible Victims](#), from its inception in 1948, Israel has guaranteed rights and opportunities for Jews at the expense of the indigenous Palestinians who remained after the Nakba. Instead of experiencing democracy, these Arabs were subjected to harsh military law, as a result of which they were denied fundamental human and civil rights. Their lands and businesses were confiscated. And they were even denied the opportunity to join the labor movement, or form independent political parties.

During the past 70 years, these Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel have made significant advances as they organized and fought to expand their rights. But as two stories that have appeared recently in the Israeli media make clear, the contradiction inherent in being a democracy and a Jewish state continues to plague Israel.

In the first story, the leadership of the Knesset disqualified a proposed piece of legislation offered by a group of Arab legislators. The bill "Basic Law: Israel, a State of All Its Citizens" sought to guarantee equal rights for all Israelis—Jews and Arabs alike.

Apparently the Knesset leaders were so threatened by this bill that they were unwilling to even allow it to be introduced and debated. At the same time, however, Jewish members of the body are advancing another piece of legislation that defines Israel as the "national state of the Jewish People," making it clear that Arabs are at best, second-class citizens.

In another story, Jewish residents of Afula, a town in Northern Israel, demonstrated against the proposed sale of a home in their community to an Arab family. The flyer, mobilizing Afula residents to come to the demonstration, criticized "the sale of homes to those who are undesirable in the neighborhood." The former mayor of the community is quoted in the story saying "the residents of Afula don't want a mixed city, but rather a Jewish city, and it's

their right.”

This is the impact of the apartheid system that Israel established to govern the lives of its Arab citizens. Since 1948, Israel not only confiscated lands surrounding Arab towns and villages to make way for Jewish agriculture and development, it denied Arabs the right to purchase land and homes in Jewish communities. Reflecting how this history has led to the demonstration in Afula, the leader of the Arab bloc in the Knesset said,

“It is not a surprise that in a country that has founded 700 towns for Jews and not even one for Arabs, the idea that Arabs should be pushed aside does not shock citizens...our hope of living together is crumbling due to hatred and racism fueled by the government.”

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Israel appears to be preparing a similar fate for the Palestinians living under occupation. Continuing the practice the Israelis instituted in the Galilee region, they have been slowly and steadily concentrating captive West Bank Palestinians into enclaves, denying them access to their land and in some cases, evicting them from their communities. One recent case reported in the Israeli press involves a Supreme Court decision allowing the state to demolish the West Bank community of Khan al Ahmar and to forcibly relocate “its citizens to a site near a dumpster in Abu Dis”—a Palestinian community near occupied East Jerusalem. At risk are Khan al Ahmar’s 173 residents and the community’s school that serves 150 youngsters from there, and neighboring villages. This is one of four recent forced evictions to clear areas of Palestinians in order to consolidate Israeli control.

These three stories combined have two things in common. On the one hand, they establish that it is a contradiction in terms to consider that Israel can be both Jewish and democratic at the same time. Liberals therefore can stop fretting about the danger facing Israeli democracy in the future. It already is, in practice, an apartheid state.

Next to consider is the fact that none of these stories made it into the U.S. press and so I suppose I can almost understand the Western liberal’s lament. Since they just don’t know how Israel behaves, they have no idea that the future they fear, is already here.

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