

War on Palestinian Memory: Israel Resolves Its Democracy Dilemma

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Palestinian citizens of Israel must have been proud of the fact that their collective tenacity always proved stronger than any Israeli attempt at dislocating them from their rightful historical narrative. Now, they are being told to cease and desist from commemorating al-Nakba, the Catastrophe of 1948, which saw the brutal seizure and depopulation of most of Palestine in order to construct the Israeli 'miracle'.

Currently estimated at a fifth of the population of today's Israel, Palestinians with Israeli citizenship have endured appalling treatment for decades. As Muslims and Christians, they have been regarded as an anomaly in what was meant to be a perfect Jewish utopia governed by the laws of democracy. This is the quandary that Israel has never mastered, as the non-Jewish citizens of Israel have represented a major obstacle to that vision.

The question of what to do with Palestinian citizens of Israel has long haunted Israeli politicians. Discriminatory laws, unlawful seizure of land and even violence have all failed to deter Palestinians from demanding equality and exposing the moral inconsistency of Israel's selective democracy and dubious history. More, all attempts at fragmenting Palestinian national identity – through different sets of laws for Palestinians in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and millions in Diaspora – were hardly enough to disfigure the innate sense of solidarity and belonging that Palestinian communities felt towards one another. When Palestinian activists gather in Jerusalem, Algiers or London, one fails to trace borderlines, the details of identity cards, or any other desperate forms of classification used by Israel. When Palestinians meet, Israel's divisive laws prove frivolous.

Israeli politicians have "lost sight of a basic concept in democracy," claimed the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) in a recent statement, as cited by the BBC. The statement was a response to the Israeli parliament's approval of a bill that "allows courts to revoke the citizenship of anyone convicted of spying, treason or aiding its enemies." Like scores of other bills introduced to the Knesset, many of which have been approved, the most recent amendment of the Citizenship Law of 1952 targets the Palestinian population of Israel.

The bill, passed on March 28, was sponsored by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, the proud sponsor of nearly two dozen other discriminatory bills. Lieberman's 2009 campaign was largely based on the slogan: "no loyalty, no citizenship." The latest bill is another manifestation of this idea.

But it was hardly the only bill targeting Palestinian citizens of Israel. Another had been passed only a few days earlier. The "Nakba Bill" passed its final reading on March 22 and was sponsored by Alex Miller (Yisrael Beiteinu). This bill can be understood as a war on the

collective memory of Palestinians, as it targets those who mark and commemorate the Catastrophe of 1948.

“We are ready to go to jail,” was the response of MK Jamal Zahalka, of Balad party, who warned of “civil rebellion” against recent bills. “Nakba law won’t stop Arabs – we’ll just increase our protests.”

Haneen Zoabi, also of the Balad party, told The Electronic Intifada: “This is a kind of law to control our memory, to control our collective memory. It’s a very stupid law which punishes our feelings. It seems that the history of the victim is threatening the Zionist state.”

A stupid law maybe, but one rooted in Israel’s historical fear of Palestinian memory. Indeed, the war on memory has its own convincing, albeit cruel logic. From Vladimir Jabotinsky’s ‘Iron Wall’ of 1923 – aimed largely at sidelining the ‘native population’ from the ‘Zionist colonization’ of Palestine – to Uri Lubrani’s desire to “reduce the Arab population to a community of woodcutters and waiters”, attempts at forcefully removing or reducing the Palestinian population is the cornerstone of Zionist reasoning. The reasoning, which was essentially predicated on presenting Palestine as a “land without people”, is often challenged by the fact that the Palestinian people are too stubborn to terminate their historical, intellectual and very personal relationship to their land. Their persistence has made a mockery of Israel’s first Prime Minister Ben Gurion’s faulty prediction in 1948 that “the old will die and the young will forget.”

Palestinian steadfastness cannot bend natural phenomena. Yes, the old will continue to die. But the young are far from forgetting. So how do you now exact forgetfulness from Palestinians? Israel has always enjoyed a broad definition of ‘democracy’, which purported to reconcile ethnic and religious exclusivity on the one hand, and the inclusive parameters of true democracy on the other. Outside Israel, those who dared question this wisdom were labeled anti-Semites. Palestinians in Israel, who fought against the iniquitous and dehumanizing definitions, were often labeled a ‘fifth column’ and were designated ‘enemies’ of the state. It is they who now risk losing their citizenship or being fined for the supposedly sinful act of remembering the tragedies that have befallen their people.

Although racist and discriminatory laws have defined the Israeli parliament for years, the unmistakably bigoted nature of these laws and the frequency at which they are being passed reflect the level of fear in the Zionist project. The major obstacle to this project remains a people who refuse to be defeated or to be relegated as “woodcutters or waiters.” Israel seems to be resolving its quandary of being a Jewish and democratic state, and it has decidedly chosen to be the former. There is nothing democratic about the most recent bills that have passed in the parliament. Israel is now officially an Apartheid state, and all the Hasbra in the world cannot resolve the moral crisis that is now at the core of Israeli politics.

Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported on March 2 that veteran diplomat Ilan Baruch had quit his post as he was no longer able to defend Israeli policy. It seems Mr Baruch made his decision in the nick of time, as it would be a truly arduous task now to try and justify Israel’s war on Palestinian memory.

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