Arab Jews in Israel: the struggle for identity and socioeconomic justice

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This article is based on a study in Arabic by author that formed the final chapter of the book Yahud al-bilad al-‘arabiyyah (The Jews of the Arab Countries) by the late Palestinian historian Khairiyyah Qasimiyyah. It examines the problem of identity among Jews of Arab origin in Israel and the resurgent use of the term ‘Arab Jew’ used by Jewish academics and activists in Israel. It also considers the issues of discrimination and socioeconomic injustice against the Arab Jewish community since the early history of Israel. Finally, it discusses the potential for joint action by Arab Jews and Palestinians for the cause of social justice and pluralism in Israel.

Keywords: Arab Jews; Ashkenazi; Mizrahim; Sephardim; Palestinians; Israel; Zionism; Jewish identity

Introduction

“I am an Arab Refugee” (Ani Palit Aravi, 2004) is a poem that appeared online in July 2004 (Wurmser 2005). It speaks of the feelings of its author on hearing Fayruz, an outstanding female Arab Lebanese singer, singing of Palestine that she will never forget. Despite what the title and the lines of the poem evoke, its author is not a Palestinian or Arab refugee thrown out of his ancestral homeland to live the life of a refugee in a refugee camp, but a university professor at a prestigious university in a country always presented as the holy, historic, God-promised land for the millions like him.

The name of the poet is Sami Shalom Chetrit, a Jew by religion, who had emigrated from Iraq, his ancestral home, to Israel, most probably under the influence of Zionist organizations that contrived to persuade many Iraqi Jews to migrate to Palestine, a country these organizations claimed to be for all Jews. Chetrit, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem – one of the oldest Jewish universities in the world – feels, while listening to the singer, Fayruz, singing about Palestine, that it is as though her voice were speaking to him about the fate that has become his – the physical and spiritual estrangement from his home, culture, traditions, history etc. All at once, Chetrit feels he is like a Palestinian refugee, unable to forget his homeland, and all that it meant to him, or an Arab refugee in a country to which he, regrettably, had emigrated in response to the claim that it, and no other, was the homeland of the ingathering; a place to which he should return and where he would find his religious, historical and

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cultural inheritance. Yet, what he really feels himself to be is an Arab Jew uprooted from his ancestral homeland, Iraq. In the last lines of his poem, he swears to the truth of his feelings and prays for punishment if he were not telling the truth.

Chetrit’s Jewishness coexists with him, and it is with him. However, there is that other component of his identity: he is an ‘Arab Jew’ or a ‘Jewish Arab’. Should there be a difference between the two terms? Other Jews call him a Mizrahi, an ‘oriental’ Jew, without giving recognition to the fact that his affinity is with the Arab Middle East. Rather, they relegate him to another space, the West, where he is transformed to become a European Jew, whether or not he accepts it.

Yet though he is a Jew like other Jews, in the ‘promised land’ he is still a refugee. Immigrants like him from the ‘Orient’ were relegated to camps and places for which the name ‘development towns’ was invented; places where development existed only in name. These were empty border areas, far from towns and cities, where workers were mostly Jewish, and where the only educational opportunities were programmes that prepared students for manual labour and not for social advancement through academic means. In this way, the economic, social and educational backwardness of the Mizrahi Jews in these towns constituted a factor of discrimination of which other immigrants were spared. In other words, except for a few rare examples, there was discrimination and intolerance against them from the outset.

The fate of historical Palestine is now going through a new stage in which aspects of ‘Orient’, the ‘East’ and ‘West’ are converging. The ‘East’, in this stage, is represented by the original Arab Palestinian inhabitants within Israel, Muslim and Christian, as well as Mizrahi Jews, i.e. immigrants who were made to leave their countries of origin in the ‘Orient’, including the Samaritans in Nablus, Palestine. The ‘West’ is represented by the European Jews, the ‘Ashkenazim’ who now decide the fate and destiny of Arab Jews and Palestinians in Israel. This scenario raises two questions. Will the outcome of this encounter result in a clash of civilizations and culture where the stronger will dominate and control the life and destiny of the weaker – as is the case today, and is what has inspired the poem of the Iraqi Arab Jew? Or can there be coexistence, interaction and mutual acceptance between all concerned within a pluralistic and diverse society?

Implicit in both questions are issues of identity and discrimination.

The problem
European racism, essentially inherent in the Zionist movement, is at the heart of the problem. This movement, founded and rooted in the West, came into being primarily to confront the critical conditions of the Jews in Europe and the West, and was developed naturally within a European cultural, political, discriminatory, racist and colonial framework. Its conceptual approach to non-Europeans was and still is ‘Orientalist’. Zionism received Western acceptance and support, and put into effect the western Orientalist philosophy of discrimination in rights and opportunities not only against Palestinians in the country of their origin but also against Arab and other Mizrahi Jews, such as Ethiopians, Iranians and Indians, who have immigrated to Israel under the slogan of ‘Israel for all Jews’.

Ein-Gil and Machover (2008) define the fundamental aspect of the problem, in recent years, as being the very simplistic way in which the relationship between Mizrahi and Zionism is being presented by the Mizrahi and the ideologues who oppose Zionism, especially by some sociologists and Palestinian leftists. It has been claimed
that Zionism is intrinsically an Ashkenazi movement. Therefore, the Mizrahim in Israel should not only not bear part of the blame for Zionism’s actions against the Arab Palestinians but also were, in fact, along with the Arab Palestinians, its victims. On this basis, the main dividing line in Israel/Palestine is between the Ashkenazi Zionists who oppress the ‘Orientals’ and the oppressed ‘Orientals’ who include the Mizrahi Jews and the Arab Palestinians (Ein-Gil and Machover 2008, 1).

Ein-Gil and Machover explain that there are those who oppose this classification, considering it to be based on class and not specificity. Zionism seeks to exclude the Arab Palestinians on the basis that they are the absolute ‘other’ but may tolerate some of them as long as they remain as second-class citizens and a docile minority. However, the Palestinians are all permanently threatened by ethnic cleansing whenever the opportunity presents itself, whereas the Mizrahim in comparison, even the underprivileged among them, are fortunate to be members of the dominant oppressor community.

This, in the opinion of Ein-Gil and Machover, is the logic of colonialism and occupation. They comment that it is somewhat correct to say that Zionism is (European) Ashkenazi. The Ashkenazim initiated the Zionist project, and for a long time the Zionist movement’s leadership has been predominantly and almost exclusively Ashkenazi. It is also true that the Ashkenazi leaders’ view of the Mizrahi Jews was obviously inclined toward racism and exploitation. They saw them as merely ‘human material’, ‘human dust’ or ‘colonization fodder’ to use to populate the areas they occupied after expelling the Palestinians, especially near the Armistice lines of 1949 (Ein-Gil and Machover 2008, 3–4), in the small towns at the far corners of the country which were called ‘development towns’. These had only a weak economic base and few resources for genuine growth. Sometimes these ‘towns’ were close to an industrial agricultural cooperative association. At times the Mizrahi Jews were used side by side with Palestinian workers, but they did not meet the Jewish Ashkenazi members of the cooperative associations. The result was that the members of these associations exploited the difficult living conditions and political weakness of the Mizrahim, and the Mizrahi women had to work as servants in the homes of the members of these associations.

Farjoun (1983) notes that when the Mizrahi Jews, both Arabs and non-Arabs, attempted to integrate into Israel’s economic life, they were always faced with an Ashkenazi Jewish boss who despised and bullied them, but on whom they were forced to depend for their livelihood. In most cases, their boss and direct class enemy was a bureaucrat in the Labour Party or trade union (Histadrut). The Mizrahim depended on these Ashkenazim for their employment, housing, social welfare, healthcare and education. Due to the Ashkenazim’s dominance, the opportunities were limited, if not impossible, for the Mizrahi Jew to advance on the socioeconomic ladder in the governmental sector, including the armed forces and the education sector. There are few Mizrahi Jews in universities, and in any case the primary and secondary education granted to them follows a curriculum for manual or technical work and is not a preparation for university study. The shortage of those in university education is used as a barrier to administrative positions. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish workforce – especially those in non-administrative manual jobs – are Mizrahi Jews and they are the sole labour used for state institutions and projects, with the exception of workers in construction. While the salaries and wages are low, the work is largely guaranteed, and the working conditions are good; as a result, there are some side benefits. Although the status of Mizrahim is better than that of the Arab workers, it is, nevertheless, lower than the status of the Ashkenazim who occupy
most of the administrative and professional positions. Furthermore, though it is true that a few Mizrahi Jews have reached high positions in the army, and one became president of the Knesset, this is still a negligible percentage and not a single Mizrahi has become a candidate for or head of government.

Shohat (1988) points to the fact that ‘Sephardi’ Jews (here meaning Jews from Arab and Muslim lands) were first brought to Israel for specific European–Zionist reasons, and once there were systematically discriminated against by a Zionist policy which deployed its energies and material resources differentially, to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent detriment of Oriental Jews (Shohat 1988, 1).

Reactions

The protests

There have been demonstrations and protests against the poor conditions imposed on Arab Jews right from the very beginning of Israel’s early history. The first protest took place in the Ain Shamr camp for refugees from Yemen on 14 February 1950. The unrest spread to other camps and continued sporadically to the end of May when it developed into an uprising which was only quelled by a large police squadron. On 8 April, one of the camp guards killed an immigrant from Yemen. On 25 October 1952, major unrest took place in Wadi al-Hawarith camp and the police searched the houses individually and arrested 450 men, detaining 39 of them – mostly Yemeni and the others Iraqi and Iranian Jews (Ein-Gil and Machover 2008, 6, n. 16). In 1971, an Israeli movement emerged calling themselves ‘The Black Panthers’, and subsequently no further mass movements appear to have taken place. Shenhav and Hever believe that the protests and the discourse, prior to the 1990s, were practically limited to issues of socioeconomic inequality and remained committed to the cause of Zionism. A broader Mizrahi dialogue did not publicly emerge until the start of the 1990s. This included greater participation by the second and third generations of Arab Jewish immigrants who had begun to challenge the paradigm of the dominant Israeli identity. They founded political organizations, movements and published magazines, all of which demanded major changes in three interrelated spheres of action: culture, politics and social justice. These activities thereby set the foundations for wider development (Shenhav and Hever 2012, 106).

The academics’ response

At the beginning of the 1990s, Arab Jewish academics in Israel started an activist movement to confront the institutional conditions that snubbed the Arab identity of the Arab Jews and classified them, from the outset, as ‘Mizrahim’ or merely ‘Orientals’. The Ashkenazim had removed them from their roots, origins, values, culture and civilization, and refused to acknowledge their complementary and integral identity of Arab Judaism. This identity was in harmony with the youth of the Mizrahi community who were becoming more educated and felt the injustice and discrimination against them for no reason other than the fact that they were Arab Jews and had attributes that were different from other Jews.

Some commentators think that the poorer class has, so far, not moved to support those academics. This could be regarded as normal, even now, given the climate imposed on them. Some of those academics emigrated to the United States or Europe where they hold positions in universities while continuing their struggle for
Arab identity for all the Arab Jews who immigrated to Israel. They became the ‘other’, according to the Iraqi Arab Jewish activist Ella Habiba Shohat (Shohat 1988), adapting the term used by the late Edward Said who wrote that the Palestinians were the ‘other’ in the Zionist lexicon.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge the other academics whose positions uphold the trustworthy accounts about their original homelands. They testify to the pluralism that prevailed, whether in terms of religion, national origins, language or cultural heritage. This pluralism was experienced for centuries in an environment that was largely distinguished by its peaceful coexistence, harmony and unity, and the building of a common cultural heritage handed down to diverse generations. These activist academics include Ella Habiba Shohat (see above), professor at New York University, who identifies herself as an Arab Jew or Jewish Arab; Daniel Shasha, Director of The Center for Sephardic Heritage; Jordan Elgrably, Director of the Levantine Cultural Center; and Ammiel Alcalay, university professor and pioneer of the Arab Jewish movement. In 1990, Alcalay began emphasizing the importance of the dual Arab Jewish identity and was followed in that by others. Another activist is André Azoulay, a Moroccan Jew and adviser to King Mohammed VI of Morocco who also calls himself an Arab Jew.

Identity: Jewish-Arab, Arab-Jewish or Arab Jew

The hyphen placed in or omitted from the two terms ‘Jewish-Arab’ and ‘Arab-Jewish’ has been the object of much discussion, analysis, deconstruction and construction among researchers in Israel, after the term ‘Arab Jew’ came back into use in the early 1990s after its long absence since the 1950s. From a political viewpoint, for some the term was, at the very least, the evidence and result of the failed efforts to impose a European Zionist identity on the Arab Jewish or Mizrahi Jewish community and to erase other identities. Among other researchers, two Arab Jewish university professors, Yehouda Shenhav and Hannan Hever, dedicated a lengthy study to the subject of dissecting and analyzing this term in view of its high academic and political interest (Shenhav and Hever 2012).

The use of a hyphenated identity is common in the United States and Europe to highlight the two identities to which an individual wishes to show his or her affiliation. Individuals may define themselves, for example, as African-American, American-African, Jewish-American, American-Jewish or German-Jewish, and no one objects to that. More specifically, no one in Israel dislikes or opposes this usage. However, if individuals describe themselves as Jewish-Arab or Arab-Jewish, it is considered reprehensible and unacceptable, especially in Israel and the United States. Shenhav and Hever say that when the form of a binary opposition between Arab and Mizrahi Jew is presented, a form of non-binary opposition appears that prevents the combination of the two into one identity which is ‘Jewish-Arab’. It is an extraordinary form that comes from racist Western–Orientalist–colonialist thinking. However, from behind this form emerges the memory of generations and eras in which harmony, coexistence and integration prevailed in a culture that was the product of all the composing elements of society, and a common heritage where mutual understanding, without antagonism, prevailed. The two professors imply that Arabism acknowledges religious diversity as well as ethnic pluralism within one society, and that Arabs do not regard the Mizrahi Arabs as enemies since they were not involved in the Zionist project, either in its conception, planning or execution. They see the Mizrahi Jews as being mostly among this project’s victims when they were taken away from their ancestral homeland,
language, heritage and history to a European society that wants to impose its own heritage, language and traditions onto them and to wipe all the past from their memories.

The process of separating the Arab inhabitants of Palestine from the Arab Jews in the same city has aimed at avoiding any communication between the two in order to prevent any direct Arab Palestinian influence on the immigrants. This fact is indicative of a profound existential issue that the Zionist institution feared would be awakened (Shenhav and Hever 2012, 108). Shenhav and Hever (2012) state that replacing the term ‘Arab Jew’ with ‘Mizrahim’, meaning Eastern or Oriental, was a European practice that aimed at the elimination of any suggestion of relationship in identity between Jews and Arabs. The term ‘Oriental’ carries within it questions that will restore the individual to his origin, whereas ‘Mirahim’ signifies neither Jewish nor Arab.

The word ‘Mizrahim’ deletes any hyphenated identity, while negating previous generations who identified themselves as Arab Jews and lived agreeably with these two identities. At the same time, however, this word, Mizrahim, is reminiscent of European colonialist discourse, anti-Semitic phrases and anti-Arab anti-Muslim politics. But to the Zionist, it keeps alive the vigilant Zionist project to recover Judaism. However, whenever politically motivated attempts are made to exclude, strike out or erase this hyphen, the memory of what it was to look like, to live together, either in the Arab homeland or in Europe is awakened. Most of the references recall the history of the Jews in the Arab countries, given that their own identity is under contention.

In this context, some go back to the relatively recent history of the last century, while others go back even further. In the early part of the last century, the situation of the Arab Jews was ascertained by Zionist delegates who were sent to the Arab countries in order to assess the circumstances of these Jews and the extent to which they were prepared to immigrate to Palestine in order to implement the Zionist ideology which propagated the idea that all the world’s Jews were one people with a single ethnicity. Shenhav and Hever and other researchers have noted that in the period between 1920 and 1950, the term ‘Arab Jew’ enjoyed widespread use by Jews and non-Jews in the Arab press. Similarly, this term was used by Jews in some Arab countries for political purposes to express their support for the Palestinian cause. Likewise, many Jewish intellectuals, writers and poets in the Arab world published their work in Arabic and contributed to Arab culture, thereby crossing the lines of separation between the two categories of their identity.

One of the richest contexts where this choice of two identities took place was in Iraq. Here, the Jewish intellectuals saw no contradiction between their Jewish religion and their Arab culture and supported the duality of religion and nationalism based on the motto ‘Religion is for God and the homeland is for all’. (This slogan is still very much in vogue in all Arab countries to emphasize unity of belonging to the homeland.) In the late 1930s, the Iraqi Jewish writer Ezra Haddad wrote ‘We are Arab before we are Jews’ (Rejwan 2004, 107). The Israeli author Sami Michael, born in Baghdad, said, ‘We perceived ourselves as Arabs of Jewish descent. Just as there are Christian Arabs, we were Arab Jews.’ Moreover, Arab historians did not usually refer to Judaism or the religion of their subjects as being distinct or unusual, but treated them as Arabs as a matter of assumption (Shenhav and Hever 2012, 102–104). This is what worried the Zionist delegates who visited Iraq in the early 1940s, since they categorized the Jews whom they met as ‘Arab Jews’ but who differed from those they usually met in European societies. As one report stated, ‘They are the bearers of an Arab culture that is entirely incompatible with the premises of Zionist ideology.’ Nevertheless, these Zionists urged the emigration of the Arab Jews since a Jewish
workforce was needed to take the place of the Palestinian workers whom the Zionist plan intended to dispense with.

Thus, relatively modern history points to the fact that there is no contradiction between the two identities for Arab Jews, the Jewish religious identity and the Arab nationalist identity. However, this position, adopted by the intellectuals and academics, challenges the existing system in Israel, and specifically the colonialisit Zionist European ideology and values which the dominant Ashkenazim are working to impose on Israeli society. Moreover, the adoption of this latter position by the Ashkenazim may lead to imposing a solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict based on the single bi-national state. This is a solution that Ashkenazi Israelis in particular may regard as a nightmare or national suicide, whereas others see it as being the solution that may lead to peaceful and fruitful coexistence between Arabs and Jews. In accordance with that solution, Shenhav and Hever (2012) have continued to use the term ‘Arab Jew’, which is mainly an opposite discourse that must be maintained, and was, in fact, maintained for a very long period. Therefore, any attempt to eliminate the term, or to refuse its relationship with the politics of identity, reintegrates it once more into the language of the discourse, despite the fact that the process of refusal in itself has the same effect. Indeed, this process of refusal reconfirms its existence and not its elimination.

Finally, it must be said that the reality of the situation in Israel is that the term ‘Arab Jew’, and its inherent possibilities, still provokes angry, if not violent, reactions on the part of other Jews inside Israel and outside it. Furthermore, some Jewish Arab academics in Israel claim that there is, in fact, no such term. Shohat (1988) writes that:

The Sephardim, when not ignored by the Israeli ‘left’, appear only to be scapegoated for everything that is wrong with Israel: ‘they’ have destroyed beautiful Israel; ‘they’ are turning Israel into a right-wing anti-democratic state; ‘they’ support the occupation; ‘they’ are an obstacle to peace. These prejudices are then disseminated by Israeli ‘leftists’ in international conferences, lectures and publications.

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Dual identity: two features – one validated, the other denied

Some recent scientific studies have added a further challenge to the basis on which Zionist ideology is founded, both to itself and to the historical narrative that it fabricated. The gist of these studies is that the European Jews did not descend from the Jews who were allegedly expelled from Palestine by the Romans, as is also the case with most of the Jews from Arab countries. Consequently, these European Jews are at pains to uphold their alleged ‘right of return’, no matter how the question is approached. There is, however, a difference between the European Ashkenazi Jews and the Arab Mizrahi Jews insofar as the latter’s ‘Arabness’ grants them rights in the greater Arab nation. Moreover, the Mizrahi include those who may possibly be descendants of the Jews who stayed in Babylon (Iraq) and who did not go back with those who returned from captivity to Palestine. As for the European Ashkenazi, they are the descendants of those who converted to Judaism because of Jewish missionaries – not the descendants of the Jews of Palestine – as they are purported to be by Zionist propaganda and the spurious reading of history.

These facts have been asserted by some modern Israeli historians. At the forefront of this group is Shlomo Sand whose bestselling book on the origins of the Jewish people was first published in Hebrew in Israel and later translated into English in
2009 as *The Invention of the Jewish People* (Sand 2009). Sand arrives at the conclusion that, from a historical point of view, there is no truth in the account of the Jews’ expulsion and Diaspora from Palestine at the hands of the Romans. In fact, this did not take place at all. The majority of the Jews of Palestine remained there and did not leave, but over time many of them embraced Christianity and then Islam, while some others remained Jews (including the Samaritans in the city of Nablus).

The significance of these studies is that there is no basis in historical fact for the claim that the world’s Jews are of the same descent as those who allegedly have been expelled from Palestine and that they are returning to the land of their forefathers. There remains the question of where those Jews did indeed come from. The answer, as corroborated by Sand and other historians, is that the ancestors of those Jews were converts to Judaism in their own countries at the hands of Jewish preachers. Judaism, in contrast to what is widely stated, is a proselytizing religion like Christianity and Islam, which had preachers and missionaries in different parts of the world. Due to this, conversion to Judaism occurred outside Palestine and by people who had no relation to that land or those living in it. Those who converted to Judaism in this way included tribes in North Africa and other Arab lands, and the same conversions took place elsewhere in Europe, Asia and Africa. Jewish converts came from the indigenous populations of those countries and were unrelated to the Israelites of ancient times or Palestine and were not descended from them. Hence, they were like those who convert to any religion which does not entail any political or other rights for them in the country where the religion they converted to originated.

Sand supports his position by mentioning the Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and the tribes in North Africa who converted to Judaism, just as was the case with Europe, especially in the Kingdom of Khazaria in Eastern Europe where the Zionist movement began. Arthur Koestler, an eminent Zionist personality, dealt with Khazaria in his *The Thirteenth Tribe* (1976 quoted in Sand, 2009, p. 239), although in it he warned of the possibility that the book “may be maliciously misinterpreted as a denial of the State of Israel’s right to exist”.

Sand says that the first evidence of the Kingdom of Khazaria appeared in the early 1950s, but even today, any mention of it in Israel by academics, religious scholars or leaders has become an unspoken taboo and no serious studies have appeared in Hebrew on the subject. Sand adds that Ben Gurion was aware of these facts about Khazaria, but he nonetheless continued to implement his plans for a Zionist state in Palestine (Sand 2009).

It is worth mentioning that Ahmad al-Shuqairi, first Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), referred to the Khazar origins of the founding Jews of Zionism and Israel in many of his addresses to the United Nations long before modern Israeli historians granted their authority to the subject. He did so in order to refute the Zionist claim to the right to return to Palestine. Al-Shuqairi, of course, had realized the danger of this fact to the alleged legitimacy of Israel, as noted above, and explains Israel’s continuing demand that the Palestinian people and Arab governments recognize its right to exist. Its founders knew that the historical right they claimed had no basis in truth. Such is Zionism.

**Interaction with the Palestinians inside Israel**

Ein-Gil and Machover (2008) note that there were practically no attempts to connect the social protests by the Arab Mizrahi Jews with the struggle of Palestinian Arab citizens
of Israel for social equality. The only partial exception to this was the movement of the Israeli Black Panthers in 1971 whose protest slogan ‘for the sake of all the downtrodden’ was inclusive of both groups. Ein-Gil and Machover believe there is no doubt this slogan was raised under the influence of the socialist movement in Israel which had adopted an anti-Zionist position. One strange aspect, in their opinion, is that many Arab Jewish immigrants gave their support to the Israeli right and religious movements rather than directing it to the parties of the left. Another odd aspect seems to be that the Israeli right and the religious parties are the strongest parties and movements most hostile, hateful and oppressive towards the Palestinian people and their rights. It would be expected that the Arab Jews would refrain from supporting them, or if nothing else, would demand a change in their position. However, their motives become less strange for at least two reasons. First, the Israeli left, as represented by the Labour party, was controlled by the Zionist European institution and the state institutions and has been racist in its policies and practices with regard to the Arab Jews since the very moment of their arrival in the ‘land of return’. Second, the poverty suffered by the Arab Jews drove them to search for an escape without clashing with the Ashkenazim who controlled all the state facilities and the sources of their livelihoods. Here, we agree with Azmi Bishara’s view that the decision to support the Israeli right and religious parties was not a decision based on class. Bishara states:

Having been overpowered by the ideology of Likud, there was no expression in terms of class but through the parties of the religious right. The religious right did not wish or propose social justice as much as it wanted endowments from the state by means of these movements and the ministries that would be controlled by them, or by means of their institutions so as to strengthen their political influence among the circles of the Eastern Jews.

(Bishara 2011, 22–23).

Yochanan Peres from Tel Aviv University says that the study carried out in Israel between 1966 and 1968 demonstrates that while there was great prejudice by the European Jews against the non-European Jews, the latter’s view of the European Jews was mostly positive. He says that the bias of the Mizrahi Jews and their hostility toward the Arabs (which was found to be stronger than that against the European Jews) seems to be an expression of their desire to be completely accepted into Israeli society (Peres and Yuchtman Yaar 1992). This is an old study and was superseded by the Black Panthers movement in 1971 and later, after a period of stagnation, the response of the Arab Jewish academics since the 1990s. It did, nonetheless, contradict the reality of discrimination suffered by the Arab Jews. It was easier for Israeli studies to say what they liked to believe rather than confront the reality. As for the bias, was it conceivable that the oppressed would favour the oppressor against another oppressed more than the oppressors themselves? The bias, if it existed, was in this case one of the phenomena of the dependency that afflicted the non-European Jews. Bishara quotes Israeli thinker Shlomo Swirski’s opinion on Ashkenazi policy:

This applied almost automatically to the concept of dependency on the relationship between the Ashkenazi class that owns the means of production as the centre and the periphery subordinate to it, the poor Oriental Jews as its parts. Similarly, we find here a vision of the development of the Oriental Jews as a subordinate development because it is at the periphery of the Ashkenazi core, or as a periphery to an advanced capitalist centre at the expense of the Oriental Jews as if they were the ones colonized.

(Bishara 2011, 22).
Conversely, the unrest that occurred after the date that Peres uses to reach his conclusions and the return of the protest spirit in the second and third generations of Arab Jews all indicate the dissatisfaction with the current situation inside Israel, characterized by the Ashkenazi control of the institutions and policies of the state. These conditions are equally rejected by the Arab Jews and by the Palestinians. In this, Palestinian Arabs and Jews come together, both oppressed by the dominant European Ashkenazi institutions.

It appears that some still hesitate to declare their Arab affiliation as part of their identity since it seems most of the Mirzahi Jews now living in Israel do not define themselves as ‘Arab Jews’ and reject being labelled as such. Despite this, it has been noticed that in focus groups there is a clear position that if an individual’s Israeli nationality is secured, then his Arab identity is considered an advantage. According to the theories of some researchers, this position must be seen as a positive possibility that allows a choice of political coexistence in the region (Shenhav and Hever 2012, 107). Furthermore, this position on individuals declaring their Arab identity confirms the hidden fear of the known threat that such a declaration will lead to being expelled from the country, and that the risk is less after acquiring nationality.

Shenhav is an example of the Jewish Arab activist who is opening the way for a rapprochement between the Palestinians inside Israel and the Arab Jews. This academic was born in Beer Sheva in 1952 and is of Iraqi origin. In 1996, he and a group of refugees from Arab countries established the movement called the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition. He is one of the pioneers of the movement to recognize the duality of Jewish Arab identity for those who are likewise calling for an end to the injustices against the Palestinians in Israel. In late 1996, one of Shenhav’s first actions in this respect was to publish an article entitled ‘The Bond of Silence’ (Shenhav 1996). By this title he meant the attitude of successive generations of the Israeli left, the ‘salt of the earth’, who had inherited the injustice against the Palestinians in Israel and their silence towards the ‘Mizrahi problem’. In his article, Shenhav writes, ‘Denouncing the injustice done to the Palestinians does not endanger the status of our contemporary Ashkenazi intellectuals. It does not endanger their position as a hegemonic cultural group in Israeli society or as an economic class.’ Rather, he believes their condemnation of the injustice taking place against the Palestinians will earn them the ‘laurels of humanism, the esteemed roles of slaughterers of sacred cows’. However, they describe the Palestinians as ‘the other’ who can be kept on the other side of the fence. Yet the Mizrahi Jews ‘cannot be turned into an “other”, nor can they be cast beyond the fence; at most, one can construct detours to bypass development towns and poverty neighbourhoods’. Therefore, acknowledging the injustice against the Mizrahim means that the Israeli left must also reform itself and relinquish its hegemonic position. Shenhav adds that while the Jews certainly have the right to collective self-determination in Israel, the state must come to an agreement with the Palestinian citizens over their collective representation as a national minority within the state.

**Scope for joint action**

Yifat Bitton, the human rights researcher and activist, published an article in which she proposes mutual cooperation between the Palestinians and Arab Jews in Israel based on the demand for justice against the discrimination suffered by both (Bitton 2014). The starting point for her research is that the preoccupation with bilateral Arab–Jewish relations distracts from another discrimination, within Jewish society, between the Ashkenazim and the Mizrahim. She believes that the Mizrahi community – the Arab
Jews – has the greatest potential to generate a meaningful Jewish–Arab link that would permit the establishment of justice between the Jews and Arabs in Israel in the form of equal civil rights, and outside Israel in the form of peace between two nations, Arab and Jewish. This is to be achieved with a joint call for the principle of equality before the law, since this principle is the main legal means to achieve social justice between two different groups of the population. The author claims that the Arabs have succeeded, to some extent, in preventing discrimination against them by reason of the fact that this discrimination is based on nationalism; the Israeli legal system, in her view, prohibits discrimination on this basis. However, Arabs always face the risk that their claims to the court will be seen as political, as in the case regarding signs in Arabic, despite Arabic being stipulated as an official language. Another example is the case of the Bedouin of the Negev and their resistance to the Prawer Plan.

The discrimination against the Arab Mizrahi Jews, in her opinion, is based on ethnicity and discrimination which is not prohibited by the Israeli legal system, in contrast to all modern democracies. This is what makes it difficult for the Mizrahim to obtain their rights against discrimination by resorting to the courts, since their applications are seen as political or subversive. The courts have failed to recognize the distinct conditions of the Mizrahim as a social group that suffers discrimination in Israel. In the sole case in which the court ruled in favour of a Mizrahi Jew, the ruling concerned discrimination against Mizrahim in the labour market only and not in general. Therefore, the Arabs in Israel and the Mizrahim are in a similar position. However, by joining forces they will both be able to avoid difficulty and undertake the fight for equality where the results are in the interest of both parties.

Bitton explains that examining the methods of discrimination reveals that it occurs at two levels: overt and covert. This means that traditional biases and racism against the two groups are being activated and are the basis for it. Recognition of this basis would make it possible to carry out a joint fight against the discrimination suffered by both parties and would be more effective. What is this basis? The answer is simply ‘Arabness’, not in the national sense but in the cultural sense. This is the Middle Eastern Arab culture that, in Israel, threatens the hegemony of the European culture that is seen as enlightened, desirable and essential for the progress and strengthening of liberalism. The Arab culture, however, is regarded by the West as an inferior and barbaric culture and a danger to human progress (Bitton 2014, 181).

In this respect, Bitton highlights two viewpoints. The first is that of the late Edward Said who described this discrimination as an expression of Israeli Jewish colonialism against the Palestinians. This means that the discrimination against the Arabs in Israel is restricted to the framework of the nationalist struggle. The second viewpoint is that of Ella Shohat who describes the Mizrahim as the targets of the Orientalism and Eurocentrism which Zionism expresses. Thus, she reemphasizes the Arab cultural context of the discrimination. Shohat argues that Mizrahi Jews are discriminated against because they are from Arab countries and their cultural identity is like that of Arabs, even though they are Jews from the perspective of their national identity (Bitton 2014, 181–2). This argument has become more wide-ranging with Yehuda Shenhav’s position that Zionism uses Eurocentric characteristics. As a result, it is based on three notions: Jewish–national, Jewish–religious and European–ethnic, and not Jewish-Arab or Arab-Jewish. The overt and covert discrimination is based on this foundation.

Bitton proposes that members of the two groups who have been harmed directly or indirectly because of their Arab identity should undertake a dialogue to identify their
mutual interests. After that, the two groups should work together to defend these common interests that have been damaged. She believes that this is possible from a legal standpoint, and through this on the Palestinian side the ‘veil’ of nationalism may be removed as a basis for discrimination such that the dialogue is restricted to the civil, not political, framework. On the Mizrahi side, this struggle may expose the fact that there is discrimination against them and result in exposing the discrimination against both groups.

The benefit of this is not limited to the legal aspect, as the unity between the two sides in this matter will change the public feeling and create contacts between the two groups that will lead to better relations within Israeli society. Bitton provides examples of the potential for this joint demand for equality and justice that can be undertaken by Palestinian and Mizrahi groups in mixed cities like Jaffa, Acre, Ramla, Lod and the development towns. Moreover, they can collectively demand cultural rights such as teaching the Arabic language and practising traditional heritage activities, such as music. These are the natural rights of these groups of citizens since it is not required that they assimilate or adopt another identity. By demanding equality and justice, all they are asking is to preserve their Arabness which is being excluded from the Israeli context. In conclusion, Bitton believes that the Mizrahi–Arab relationship is Israeli society’s most important key to achieving the potential for real and feasible peace with the Palestinians.

There is no doubt that it will be beneficial for the two sides to cooperate in eliminating the discrimination against them through peaceful and, if possible, legal means. They must do this in a country that claims to be a democracy and has voluntarily signed up to international human rights conventions, particularly those that prohibit racial discrimination in all its forms and decide on the rule of law and equality before the law. However, Israel does not have a good record in this regard since it faced direct criticism from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its ruling over the separation barrier that Israel is building in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Bitton suggests reasons for the overt and covert discrimination and this implies that there is no assurance that the Israeli judiciary applies the law in a sound manner, as is required. Accordingly, it seems there is a necessity for continuous popular movements against discrimination and for equality and justice. However, a joint popular movement is still anticipated. The resolve to make this happen is discouraged by factors that include the Arab Jews’ worry about the possibility of expulsion and forced migration. This is the same concern that preoccupies Palestinians inside Israel, and Israel is waiting for a suitable opportunity to implement. Shenhav and Hever (2012) refer to this and recommend that, aside from a joint movement, there should be an Arab Jewish movement with an understanding and awareness of the situation experienced by Arab Jews and their struggle to break free of the Ashkenazi political and economical hegemony as well as the educational curricula and the Western cultural values that are imposed on them, while striving at the same time to maintain their Arab heritage and values.

Conclusions

I began this article by describing the background to the current identity confrontation in contemporary Israel. Pluralism as it now really exists in historical Palestine and the nature of the hegemonic power require some consideration. A third party that had, up to now, not been active in the Zionist colonization has since entered the equation. This party is Jewish Arab and demands for recognition of the dual identity that Arab Jews had from time immemorial. Although these Arab Jews were not active partners
in the production of Zionist philosophy, nor in its implementation, they have, nonetheless, begun to sense the danger that threatens them and the sources of it, beginning with the change in describing them as ‘Mizrahim’ instead of Arab Jews. This change intends to impose a European classification, the significance of which is that it will erase their history and culture, and eliminate any suggestion, let alone recognition, of an identity relationship between these Jews and the other Arabs who have shared the dual identity as Arab Jews. In the Arab countries an individual can declare himself as an ‘Arab Christian’ or an ‘Arab Muslim’. So why not an ‘Arab Jew’?

In the face of such danger to their historic identity and its accomplishments, Arab Jewish academics are assuming the initial position they inherited, in trying to change a pretence that has been imposed on them by emphasizing an alternative philosophy. This philosophy allows for the possibility for all to live in peaceful and tolerant coexistence under the principle of pluralism in all its ethnic and religious forms, and to maintain, develop and pass on their linguistic and cultural heritage to their children and future generations. In this philosophy and societal practices, they have sought inspiration from the culture and practice that Arab Jews experienced and contributed to create over several centuries of sharing life experience with their Arab Moslem and Arab Christian compatriots. None of the events in Arab history, no matter how great they were, such as the Arab-Islamic conquests, caused this culture to be annulled, exterminated or uprooted. Nor did these events cause the expulsion of people from their homeland, or force them to relinquish their religion and embrace another, or adopt a different ethnicity, or deny them their cultural heritage or civilization. All this has withstood time and the hazards of history, as is proven by the continuing existence of all aspects of this phenomenon, from ancient times to the present day.

The dominant Ashkenazim knew the truth in this from the reports sent by representatives of the Zionist movement who visited Arab countries prior to the creation of Israel. These reports included, for example, one from Iraq in which they stated that the Iraqi Jews saw no contradiction between their Jewish religion and Arab culture. In their address to the delegation they said, ‘Religion is for God and the homeland is for all.’ This slogan was very common in all Arab countries in the period in question, and still is. It was a slogan that I shouted, as a school boy, in demonstrations in Palestine. In the case of this interconnected and coexisting pluralism, no identity was imposed or excluded. Nor was anyone, for whatever reason, asked or forced to choose a single identity from his pre-existing identities. Forcing a choice is what is happening now with regard to Arab Jewish identity in Israel stemming from the logic of European Ashkenazim and Zionist ideology.

It is true that the Arab Jewish academics in Israel are striving to regain their culture, heritage and history in reaction to the denial of their historic and cultural identity. This is natural. It is natural for every people to demand respect for and preservation of their identity and culture, particularly if it is one that is capable of universal acceptance and application. Pluralism and diversity coupled with freedom of choice and equal opportunity for all seem to be part of the philosophy for which these academics appear to be looking. To them, this philosophy has been proved worthwhile and amenable for adoption by all.

Through the position taken by the Arab Jewish academics, a rapprochement can be developed with the Palestinians – the real party in the current conflict – who would not have suffered so extensively had these natural human rights been safeguarded and respected, Arab and other ethnic Jews suffer from various forms of discrimination.
In the case of Arab Jews they share with the Palestinians the heritage of peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity and pluralism. These values form part of their common heritage and were respected in their culture. What is missing is effective cooperation between the two communities to regain these rights and ensure respect for the principle of equality in humanity and equality in dignity and rights.

Some Israeli researchers regard as a fantasy the idea of building an alliance between Mizrahim and the Palestinians on the basis that they are fellow ‘Oriental’ brothers, facing the Ashkenazim whom they blame for Zionism. These researchers claim, furthermore, that this alliance ‘is not based on any reality that exists or is ever likely to exist even under greatly changed regional conditions’ (Ein-Gil and Machover 2008, 15). They make this claim whilst recognizing that the difference in treatment between the Palestinians and the Mizrahim exists, and that can be gauged by the discrimination and racism each party suffers. They also persist in ignoring the initial movement which was advanced by the Arab Jewish academics.

These researchers point out differences between the position of the Mizrahim and that of the others, such as in the claim by an Israeli academic who stated:

For the mass of the Mizrahim, socio-economic deprivation is increasingly the central issue. Issues of cultural discrimination, being subjected to contemptuous or patronizing Ashkenazi attitudes, while still very much alive, are gradually becoming less relevant as a distinct issue, and tend to become an aspect of class-based cultural antagonism. Moreover, even the most deprived Mizrahi is hugely privileged, as member of the dominant oppressing nation, compared to a Palestinian Arab of similar socio-economic status in Israel – let alone in the West Bank or Gaza. The Mizrahim in Israel are indeed an under-privileged group – but only in the sense of being a relatively under-privileged part of the oppressor settler nation. There is a qualitative difference between their position and that, say, of the descendants of the African slaves in the US, who really had no share whatsoever in the responsibility for the settlers’ oppression and genocide of the native Americans.

(Ein-Gil and Machover 2008, 15)

No comment is needed on this if attention is focused on the reference to the situation of descendants of African slaves in America. The similarity between USA and Israel is that both states were founded in similar ways in terms of their history, philosophy, attitude towards the rights of the indigenous population and basic considerations of justice in dealing with them. These similarities can hardly be irrelevant to the nature of the relations between the two states and the influence they exercise.

Based on the above, what will unite the Palestinians and the Arab Jews is not only their sharing of a single heritage but also the valuable experience of living and building together. In contrast to the misconceived impossibility of their alliance, the circumstances revealed by the Israeli academics cited above will make them both expand their sphere of cooperation and pursue common activities, attitudes and pressures in order for society to respect and adopt the basic philosophy of pluralism and cultural diversity and equality in humanity.

Israel has to honour and give full effect to the international human rights conventions to which it is a party, particularly those that criminalize racial discrimination and apartheid, instead of the racist arrogant claim made before the ICJ, no less, in the Separation Wall hearing, that these treaties and international conventions are not applicable to the Palestinians. Full recognition should be given to the Arab identity of Arab Jews and the resulting recognition of their undeniable cultural and historical
rights, such as the inclusion of Arabic—an official language in Israel—and Arab history into the education system.

Moreover, Arab Jews have an essential and important role to play in advancing the cause of peace through justice and respect for the rule of law in historic Palestine and in the area in general. So far, Arab Jews do not seem to have fully exercised their rights or possibilities in the decision-making process that would reflect an effective productive role for them or for the others who are disadvantaged. It is true, as quoted above, that they are not like the black slaves brought to America, but should they wait for that future before claiming and enjoying their full rights as equals in determining government policies and actions?

Arab Jews know fully well that they were not forced at the point of the gun by their fellow Arab citizens or even the regimes themselves to leave their Arab homeland, whereas in the case of Palestinians they were subjected to fully documented massacre after massacre in a cleansing process that was premeditated and implemented utterly ruthlessly to force them out of their homes and villages and property inside what has become Israel. Why not join hands at least with the Palestinian internal refugees in their struggle to go back to their own villages, homes and property that are inside Israel? Why not support the right of return for Palestinian refugees as a prelude to the exercise of such right by Arab Jews who may wish to return to their Arab homeland now or in future should developments call for that? Historically, throughout history Arab countries have been the refuge for Jews when they faced oppression in other countries.

Among the Arab Jews, there are supporters of solutions to the Arab–Israeli conflict, but up to now they have not exerted the necessary efforts to achieve the results that they may expect. We are confident that their now awakened identity will grow in strength, and that the activists will not be satisfied to remain marginalized in the policy planning and decision-making that affects their fate and the fate of their fellow Palestinian brothers, both inside Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These Arab Jews account for almost half the population, and together with the Palestinians they may become the majority. It is certain that they will form their own political parties and professional groups, with Arab Jewish membership only or with the mutual agreement with their fellow Arabs inside Israel.

What is regrettable is that the present conditions in the Arab world do not help in offering any meaningful ideas relevant to the subject of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. The English translation of this poem is taken from Wurmser (2005).

References


