Between nation and state: ‘fractured’ regionalism among Palestinian-Arabs in Israel

Oren Yiftachel*

Department of Geography, Ben Gurion University, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel

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Abstract

Theories of nationalism have often overlooked variations in ethnic spatial settings, and have too easily subsumed nation and state. But nationalism surfaces in a variety of dynamic forms, such as among homeland ethnic minorities ‘trapped’ within states controlled by others. In such cases ‘ethnoregional’ identities often emerge, combining ethnonational and civic bases of identity with attachment and confinement to specific places or territories. Ethnoregional movements denote spatial and political entities which mobilise for rights, resources and political restructuring within their states. This is the case in the Israeli Jewish ‘ethnocracy’, where an oppressed Palestinian-Arab minority resides in stable but confined enclaves which make up an Arab ‘fractured’ region. The spatial, socioeconomic and political characteristics of the Arab struggle in Israel provide early signs for the emergence of an ethnoregional movement. This movement is creating a new collective identity, situated between Palestinian nation and Jewish nation-state. The ethnoregional interpretation challenges existing accounts which perceive the minority as either politicising or radicalising, and points to a likely Arab struggle for autonomy, equality and the de-Zionisation of Israel. Arab mobilisation also resembles other ethno-regional movements, whose persistent struggles expose embedded contradictions in the global ‘nation-state’ order. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

A recent surge of interest in collective identities has seen the emergence of two central debates in the social sciences, one addressing the nature of nationalism (see
Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1995), while the other exploring the concepts of civil society and citizenship (see Dahl, 1989; Habermas, 1996). Notably, the two debates have developed in parallel, without sufficient cross-fertilisation (Bishara, 1995). This chasm has hampered the understanding of identity dynamics among minorities ‘trapped’ in nation-states which are governed by other ethnic groups.

In this essay I aim to analyse the collective identity of one such minority: the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel. I present a political-geographical perspective which synthesises knowledge from both the nationalism and civil society literature, and introduces the vital influence of space, so often overlooked by leading theories. I also aim to review and critique literature on both nationalism and ethnicity in general, and on the Arab minority in Israel in particular.

My central contention is that the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel are reshaping their identity by forging a (sub-state) ethnoregional community which is shaped by both Jewish and Palestinian nationalism, and by their marginalised civil incorporation in Israel. The identity construction process is framed by the Arabs’ ‘fractured region’: a divided homeland territory within Israel. Arab ethnoregionalism in Israel thus illustrates the expression of ethnonationalism in constraining political and territorial circumstances.

In this paper a ‘region’ denotes a spatial and sociopolitical entity positioned between local and state levels. It provides a territorial basis for group formulation and existence, as well as a platform for mobilisation, solidarity and identity. The ‘Arabs in Israel’ and the ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’ are interchangeable terms, with ‘Arabs’ used here in order to unequivocally include groups such as the Druze and the Bedouins.

**Nationalism, ethnicity and regionalism**

*Conceptualising nationalism*

In a recent review of the development of nationalism, Anderson (1996: 1) comments:

There is no disagreement that nationalism has been ‘around’… at the very least for two centuries. Long enough, one might think, for it to be readily understood. But it is hard to think of any political phenomenon which remains so puzzling and about which there is less analytic consensus.

This lack of consensus is reflected by three leading and competing interpretations of nationalism: instrumentalist, historical-ethnic and constructionist. The instrumental approach perceives the reorganisation of human society into nation-states as a most efficient mechanism to govern the transition of pre-modern societies into a new industrial order (Gellner, 1983). The historical-ethnic approach conceptualises nationalism not as economically driven, but as a broad societal transformation into modernity, resting on persisting attachments to ethnic, religious and cultural heritage.
These are tied to beliefs in common origins, territories, shared texts and communal meanings (Smith, 1995). The third leading approach focuses on the dynamics of identity construction, and the notion of ‘imagining’. It portrays nationalism as a constant process of building ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ collective ‘imaginations’ about the commonality, unity and legitimacy of the nation. The emphasis thus shifts to the on-going process of identity-building and social construction (Anderson, 1991, 1996).

All three interpretations have agreed on one feature of nationalism: its hegemonic dominance as a modern global order, which has rendered the issue of individuals’ national identity ‘banal’ (Billig, 1995). National ideology has thus been diffused to all spheres in contemporary society and culture, as exemplified by the common use of terms such as ‘international relations’, ‘United Nations’, or in global sporting events such as the Olympics or the World Cup which are automatically organised to represent the existing ‘nation-state’ order.

Deficiencies

Yet, despite this hegemonic status, and despite the brilliance and appeal of most nationalism theories, they display several key deficiencies, often due to their grand global scale and the slighting of spatial considerations. First, ‘ethnicity’ is frequently used without careful definition or examination. I have previously pointed to a critical (but often ignored) geographical difference between ‘homeland’ and ‘immigrant’ ethnicity (Yiftachel, 1992a). ‘Homeland’ ethnicity characterises groups who reside in the territory they believe to be their ‘cradle’ of identity, while immigrant ethnicity is based on a critical distance from that territory. The two ideal-types of ethnicity lead to different paths of mobilisation, aspirations and collective identities, with homeland ethnicity being often the legitimising source of exclusionist, autonomist, separatist, or national movements, while immigrant ethnicity usually leads to demands of civil equality and economic opportunity, and to a process of assimilation into a reconstructed immigrant nation.

Second, nationalism theories often collapse, confuse or ignore, the differences between state-building and nation-building. As such, they take for granted the ‘hyphen’ in the term nation-state, although rich literature attests to the problems associated with multi-ethnic states (see Keating, 1996; Newman, 1996). This is echoed by Anderson (1996: 8) who anticipates “an impending crisis of the hyphen that for two hundred years yoked state and nation”. The growing fragility of many multi-ethnic states therefore exposes a contradiction embedded in the global nation-state order: the success of national self-determination ideology made it widely diffused and legitimised. But the same ideology is often used by minority leaders to campaign against this very ‘nation-state order’! This occurs mainly as a result of ethno-centric nation-building projects which tend to marginalise or exclude the minorities. Emerging ethnic movements are thus likely to contest the political-territorial order achieved by previous nationalists, thereby creating a cycle of potential instability. To date, nationalism theories have failed to sufficiently address the ‘crisis of the hyphen’,...
and the impact of nationalist discourse on on-going tensions and divisions (but see, Chatterjee, 1993; Connor, 1994, for exceptions).

Third, and related, leading accounts of nationalism rarely refer to a rich geographical literature. Such knowledge could alleviate the typical treatment of states as contourless backcloth for social processes (Taylor, 1996), and help explain the emergence of national and ethnic tensions, particularly in settings marked by incongruity between nation and state (e.g. Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Mikesell and Murphy, 1991; Penrose, 1994; Taylor, 1993). Geographical knowledge is particularly important for considering group ‘spatiality’ as part of the generation and reproduction of collective identities. Group spatiality marks the meaning and impact of geographic settings which include the degree of ethnic concentration or mix, the proximity of brethren across borders, peripherality or centrality, or degree of ideological territoriality. These factors usually exert a decisive influence on many ‘components’ of ethnic and social identity, such as collective memory, cultural norms, accents, social networks, accessibility to material and symbolic resources, socioeconomic status, and position vis-à-vis all ‘others’. Hence, the division of space reflects, but also shapes, the ethnic and social landscapes of most societies (see Keith and Pile, 1993).

Finally, as mentioned, leading theories of nationalism have given only sporadic attention to the growing debate on civil society and democratic citizenship (for notable exceptions, see Greenfield, 1992; Habermas, 1994). Yet civil considerations too have shaped the development of national and ethnic identities (Shafir, 1995). The creation of ethnic bonds and the governance of any polity are intimately related and mutually implicated. Put differently: ‘civil’ rights and policies which are at the basis of any political organisation, influence, and are influenced by, national motives and the existence of ethnic boundaries.

**Minority mobilisation and ethnoregionalism**

The gulf between the ethno-national and civic approaches has also been apparent in studies of minority movements and mobilisation. On the one hand, civic interpretations are premised on notions of generic ‘relative deprivation’ (Gurr, 1993), or resource mobilisation by ‘new’ social movements (Melucci, 1989; Tilly, 1984). On the other, scholars coming from a ‘national’ perspective usually point to the drive of ethnic minorities to achieve self-determination in an ethno-nationalist global order, as the root cause of their struggles (Connor, 1994; Smith, 1986). Here again, these two fields of inquiry have remained somewhat detached, hampering the study of ‘trapped’ minorities. Because of cross-border locations, such minorities often find themselves marginalised within a state dominated by others. Their political campaigns, therefore, are necessarily composed of intertwined ethnonational and civic components.

Several studies have, however, endeavoured to accord causal power to both national and civil considerations. This brought some scholars to arrive at an ‘ethnoregional’ interpretation of minority struggle and identity. The groundbreaking work of Hechter and Levi (1979), and later contributions by Keating (1988, 1996), Markusen (1987), McCrone (1993), Mikesell and Murphy (1991), Newman (1996), Shafir

(1995), and Williams and Kofman (1989), have demonstrated that under certain circumstances, the most likely result of minority politicisation is the emergence of ethnoregionalism. The term has been used in a variety of ways, but here I wish to define it more rigorously to mean:

The mobilisation of ethnic struggle within a nation-state, aiming to channel resources to specific ethnic territories, attain ethnic rights, preserve or rebuild ethnic identity, and challenge the state’s political structure.

Ethnoregionalism is thus one dynamic expression of a hegemonic ethnonational discourse superimposed over the existing grid of citizenship rights and group spatiality. It usually forms a reaction to the often exclusive, expansionist or exploitive nature of majority ethno-centric nationalism which propels ‘trapped’ minorities to campaign for goals such as: territorial or cultural autonomy, devolution of government functions, de-ethnicisation of the state, power-sharing, and socioeconomic equality (Keating, 1996; Mikesell and Murphy, 1991).

Ethnoregionalism is different from both ethnonationalism and civic mobilisation on a number of counts, making it a distinct, durable and meaningful political movement. It is distinct from ethnonationalism by its lack of drive for ethnic sovereignty, by the self-perception of ‘its’ territory as constrained, ‘fractured’ or divided, and by its attempt to reconcile ethnic and civil bases of identity. It is distinct from civil group mobilisation by its emphasis on the protection of specific homeland spaces, and by its steadfast demands to restructure the foundations of the polity and not merely redistribute its material resources. An ethnoregional campaign thus reflects a new ‘hybrid’ group identity which emerges after a period of living in a state controlled by another ethnic group. This identity synthesises ethnonational and civil motives, as illustrated by a growing number of such groups, including, for example, Catalonians in Spain, Tyroliennes and Slovenians in Italy, Flemish in Belgium, Hungarians in Romania, Chinese in Malaysia, or Welsh and Scots in Britain. This ‘hybrid’ entity also appears likely to proliferate under the current world-order of increasingly assertive minorities operating in a democratising world.

Ethnoregionalism is thus both a territorial reality and a political process, whereby a homeland ethnic minority ‘re-imagines’ its collective identity as forming a ‘region’; that is, a specific sub-state territorial and political community. The region forms the basis from which the minority challenges the privileged access of other groups to state power and resources, and the legitimacy of dominant power-structures. It may evolve over time into fully-blown separatist ethnonationalism or into gradual integration into the general political community, depending on the political circumstances. However, in most cases it is a distinct and lasting group identity which presents a notable challenge to the current nation-state order. These characteristics are evident in the case of Palestinian-Arabs in Israel, to which we now turn.
Palestinian-Arabs in the Israeli ‘ethnocracy’

The Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel (within its pre-1967 borders) includes all Arabs with Israeli citizenship but not their brethren in the occupied territories. It is a homeland non-assimilating community, which in December 1996 numbered some 910,000 people, or 16 percent of Israel’s population. Arabs in Israel belong to three main religions: Moslems are 76 percent, Christians 14 percent and Druze 10 percent; and reside in three principal concentrations: the Galilee, the ‘Triangle’ and the Negev, as well as several scattered villages and six mixed cities (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The geography of Palestinian-Arabs in Israel.
The historical and political background to Arab-Jewish relations in Israel is covered extensively elsewhere (see Lustick, 1980; Rouhana, 1997; Yiftachel, 1992a).

In brief, the evolution of these relations has been strongly influenced by the construction of an Israeli-Jewish ‘ethnocracy’ (Yiftachel, 1997b), and by the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian-Arabs who reside in Israel remained in the country following al naqba (‘the disaster’): the devastating Palestinian loss to the Jews in the 1948–49 war, and the subsequent expulsion or escape of some 700–750 000 Palestinians (Bishara, 1993; Morris, 1987). They still reside on their historical homeland, but have been marginalised and disempowered in the Jewish state.

The plight of the Arab minority was strongly affected by a rapid process of Zionist-Jewish nation- and state-building. The Zionist project was a reaction to centuries of Jewish persecutions in a hostile (mainly European) diaspora, where ethno-nationalism was taking root alongside democratisation and emancipation—all threatening the survival of a Jewish people. Thus, a prevailing goal of ‘Jewish survival’ in its historical homeland was a fundamental driving force behind the Zionist movement, endowing it with striking levels of resilience, vigour and intransigence (Yiftachel, 1997b). Jewish-Palestinian relations in Israel/Palestine must therefore be first and foremost understood as an on-going conflict between two homeland ethnic communities vying to control a common territory (see also Portugali, 1993).

A central Zionist goal was to ‘indigenise the Jews’. This prompted concerted efforts to Judaise regions previously dominated by Arabs, and caused the eradication of Arab memory from much of the country’s landscape (Falah, 1996b). Israeli policies have continuously attempted to ‘de-Arabise’ the land and restrict Arab territorial control, causing a virtual ghettoisation of the Arab minority (Yiftachel, 1996).

Israel has thus evolved quickly into a Jewish ethnocracy, where nearly all state resources, energy and programmes—with significant assistance from world Jewry—were aimed at furthering Jewish control. This ethno-centric orientation can explain the public legitimacy accorded to severe policy measures such as the 1949–66 imposition of military rule over the Arabs, and the widespread confiscation of their land (Lustick, 1980). The state capitalised on the scarring legacy of past Jewish traumas, on the enormous challenge of absorbing large numbers of Jewish refugees, on continuing security problems, and on genuine Jewish yearnings for forming a physically, culturally and politically safe nation, and proceeded to implement its ethno-centric nation-building policies, largely at the expense of Palestinian-Arabs.

The Israeli ethnocracy also cemented during the 1950s patterns of ethnic domination within the Jewish community, by favouring the agendas and interests of Ashkenazi (western) Jews over their Mizrahi (eastern) brethren. The inferior incorporation of both Arabs and Mizrahi Jews into Israeli society is intimately linked to the Jewish-Palestinian conflict under the influence of which Arab culture was marginalised and stigmatised. This affected adversely most Mizrahi communities (whose cultural origins were Arab), while strengthening the dominant position of the Ashkenazi Jews (Yiftachel, 1997b).

In later years, Arab-Jewish relations have of course not remained static. Tied with a limited process of democratisation, Israel has relaxed some of its control policies and practices over the Arabs, allowing their partial incorporation into Israeli society.
(Smooha, 1992). However, despite this (slow) trend, the Arabs are still the least mobile, and the most politically, economically, spatially and culturally marginalised sector in Israeli society.

In parallel, other forces have been at work, most notably Palestinian nationalism and Arab awareness of their civil status as Israeli citizens. Palestinian nationalism which emerged in full force following Israel’s 1967 conquest of the West Bank and Gaza has never explicitly embraced the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, but still left a marked influence on their identity and status (Rekhes, 1989). It legitimised the contacts between the Arabs in Israel and national Palestinian leaders, and caused the minority to voice strong support and demonstrate in favour of the Palestinian national issues. The Palestinian-Arab community in Israel thus ‘nurtured’ some of the most well-known Palestinian authors and poets, such as Emil Habibi, Mahmud Darwish and Samih al-Khasem. As Rouhana (1997) shows, the Arabs in Israel were and are Palestinians, and the construction of their own identity is framed within their Palestinian past and present.

However, the Arabs’ Israeli citizenship has also been significant. It has been gradually but steadily introduced as a political, socioeconomic and cultural foundation of the Arab community. Nearly all Arabs are bilingual who consume Israeli media and culture, and most professional Arabs attend Israeli universities. Repeated surveys show that even if an independent Palestinian state was established in the territories, the vast majority of the Arab minority (80–95 percent) would prefer to stay in Israel (al Haj, 1993b). The Arabs’ increasing awareness and use of political rights draws heavily on Israel’s open political conventions, and their social economic practices and perceptions have also been influenced by the prevailing norms of Israeli society (Smooha, 1992). Although Rouhana (1997) argues strongly that the ‘Israeli’ part of their identity has remained devoid of any emotional bond, even he concedes that it has had a significant impact on their collective identity and patterns of political mobilisation (see Rouhana and Ghanem, 1993).

Three main factors have thus framed the identity and struggle of the Arabs in Israel: Jewish nationalism, Palestinian nationalism and Israeli civic affiliation. However, research on the subject has rarely attempted to synthesise these factors as they are played out in the specific political-geographic settings of the Arabs in Israel (see Yiftachel, 1997a). Two leading interpretations of Arab orientation have dominated: (a) ‘politicisation’: which claims that the growing assertion and militancy of the minority reflects, first and foremost, a struggle for Arab civil equality within Israel, and an acceptance of life as an ethnic minority within a Jewish ‘ethnic democracy’ (Smooha, 1990, 1992; Ginat, 1989; Lehman-Wilzig, 1993); (b) ‘radicalisation’: which argues that the strengthening Arab struggle for civil rights masks a deeper process of Palestinian nationalism, implicated with profound disloyalty to the Israeli state; this is likely to lead towards Arab separatism and irredentism (Landau, 1993; Regev, 1989; Soffer, 1988, 1991). However, as argued elsewhere (Yiftachel, 1995), the politicisation-radicalisation debate presents a false dichotomy, since there is little evidence to suggest that the two are mutually exclusive (Yiftachel, 1992b). Further, the analysis below shows that neither politicisation nor radicalisation can adequately explain the political mobilisation of the Arab minority. Both approaches are too rigid,
and like most theories in the field fail to treat seriously the nuances and intertwining of nationalism and civic concerns, as well as the impact of Israel’s ethnic geography.

**Palestinian-Arab identity in Israel: ‘fractured’ regionalism**

My central claim is that the impact of both Zionist and Palestinian nationalisms, and the civil affiliation of the Arabs with Israel, have combined to cause a discernible redefinition of Arab collective identity in Israel. Whereas before 1948, they formed an integral part of a fledgling Palestinian nation, and between 1948 and 1967 were isolated as ‘Israeli Arabs’, since 1967, they have been in the process of collective ‘re-imagining’ into a *distinct ethnoregional community*. This community is caught in a fixed geography, positioned in a ‘double periphery’ in both Israeli and Palestinian societies (al Haj, 1993b). It reformulates its identity by using the main ‘identity building blocks’ at its disposal: linked homeland localities, Palestinian attachment, and a recent history of political and economic struggles, events and places within Israel.

Why should this process be interpreted as ethnoregionalism and not simply a drive for “better terms of co-existence” (Smooha, 1992: 3); or a movement whose “next step means an attempt to secede… from Israel and be annexed to the Palestinian entity across the border…” (Soffer, 1991: 198)? I will show below that a third ‘ethno-regional’ path has emerged among the Arabs, and focus on four key dimensions which point to this new identity: a geography of Arab enclaves, a socio-economic niche, political mobilisation and electoral polarisation.

**Geography**

Ethnic regionalism is premised on a stable territorial base for minority mobilisation and identity-construction (Newman, 1996). A most striking feature of Arab geography in Israel has been its (forced) *enclavement* and stability. The ‘Palestinian-Arab’ areas shown in Fig. 1 have been virtually unchanged since 1948, marking a stable Arab ‘region’. This is noteworthy given Israel’s dynamic history of settlement and rapid geographical change among all other population sectors (Gonen, 1995). The original Arab villages have of course grown, urbanised and suburbanised, but there has been only scant Arab migration into non-Arab parts of Israeli cities (Ben Artzi, 1996; Falah, 1996b). As also shown in Fig. 1, the Palestinian-Arab region is spatially ‘fractured’—a feature to which we shall return later.

Since we have noted that ethnic regionalism denotes both a geography reality and a political process, we must elaborate on the way in which this exceptionally stable geography was created and maintained. Here we have to turn back to the Zionist project and to Jewish state-building practices which have been consistently characterised by a persistent drive to Judaise the country. Territory—above all else—has been the prime resource sought by the Zionist movement (Kimmerling, 1983), generating an elaborate *system of Jewish territorial control* (see Newman, 1989; Yiftachel, 1996).
As a result, about 60 percent of Arab land in Israel was expropriated by the state (Kimmerling, 1983), and Arabs now control less than 2 percent of the country’s local government areas—an eighth of their proportional share. Following the transfer of land to the state, over 400 Jewish settlements were constructed in all parts of the country. The upshot was the penetration of Jews to most Arab areas, the encirclement of most Arab villages by exclusively Jewish settlements (where Arabs are not permitted to purchase housing), and the segregation and virtual ghettoisation of the Arabs. In the process, Arabs have not only lost individual property, but have also been dispossessed of much of their collective territorial assets and interests, since nearly all land transferred to the state (ostensibly for ‘public purposes’) was earmarked for Jewish use (Yiftachel, 1991).

In response, the Arabs staged an intense struggle against land expropriation (as further discussed below), and have rallied to enlarge their local government areas and improve housing conditions, both with limited success (Khameissi, 1992; Yiftachel, 1992b). Individual Arabs, especially in recent years, have also begun to move to Jewish towns and neighbourhoods, at times demonstrating ability to overcome intense Jewish opposition, but usually being contained within Israel’s urban areas by a combination of uneven public policies, social practices and prejudice, and by their limited capital resources (Ben Artzi, 1996; Rabinowitz, 1997).

Some of the Arab geography has been voluntary, born of a commonly found isolation tendency among distinct ethnic groups (Peach, 1996). It is also a result of a strong bond of Palestinians to their ancestors’ land, embodied in the age-long custom of summud: ‘steadfastly staying on the land’ (Doumani, 1995). Yet, the creation of a constrained and fragmented ‘Arab region’ was, as shown, equally the result of Israeli policies of minority containment and Jewish expansion.

In terms of the reconstruction of collective identity, the spatial confinement of the Arabs has had some important effects. While being obviously restrictive and painful, it has provided a unifying experience, distinctive to that community, and has spawned what Rabinowitz (1994: 117) terms a ‘collective memory of loss’. This spatial reality has erected visible and almost impregnable boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘in’ and ‘out’. Schnell (1994) documents the translation of this stark reality into attitudes and community formation. In his fascinating study of Arab territorial perceptions he uses interviews, surveys and the drawing of mental maps, to find Arab sentiments of solidarity and comfort towards other Arab spaces, localities and regions within Israel. Conversely, Arabs are usually indifferent, uncomfortable or even hostile towards Jewish localities and spaces.

The result is the creation of a ‘fractured Arab region’, which can be likened to a chain of beads, connecting segregated spaces and localities by common perceptions, experiences, affinities and functional agendas. Therefore, a fractured Arab ethnic-region already exists in Israel, functioning to a large extent as one political, cultural and social unit, rooted in its own (constrained) homeland enclaves.

Class

Ethnoregionalism is tied to socioeconomic disparities between region and state which generate a mobilisation of discontent, rooted in what Shafir (1995: 16) terms
“the diminished value of the state for further economic development”. The ethnocentric practices of the Jewish ethnocracy have been highly visible in the economic sphere. Israel constructed a hierarchical dual system of separate Arab and Jewish labour, termed by Grinberg (1991) ‘split corporatism’. This system derived its logic from the Jewish colonialist strategy of separating Jewish and Arab workers, dating back to the beginning of the century (see Shafir, 1989; Shalev, 1992). Following independence, the system’s first and foremost objective became the provision of employment to Jewish immigrants, in order to avoid social upheaval among potentially unemployed Jews. Arabs were thus kept under military rule for 18 years, during which their daily movement was controlled and restricted, effectively locking them out of the Israeli labour market. Further, their membership in the Histadrut—then Israel’s all-powerful labour organisation—was only granted (to ‘loyal non-Jews’) in 1959 (Shalev (1992: 49). Even in the 1990s, Arabs remained under-represented in most rungs of Israel’s labour organisations, despite their concentrations among the country’s working classes and the poor.

As analysed by Zureik (1979), the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel were subject to a regime of ‘internal colonisation’, whereby the majority exploits minority resources (such as land and labour), and uses the state apparatus to further its own economic position. The pervasive state expropriation of Arab land, and the construction of Israeli industry have caused class transformation among the Arabs, from peasantry to a commuting ‘proletariat’ (Haidar, 1991).

The late incorporation of the Arabs into the Israeli labour force and the practices of ‘internal colonialism’ meant that their occupational opportunities were severely limited, not only by their stigma as Arabs in a Jewish state, but also by the fact that they had to enter the labour market from its lowest strata. This disadvantage was amplified by their low levels of professional qualification, paucity of capital resources, peripheral location and exclusion from many of Israel’s security-related industries. As a result, Arabs have been incorporated into the Israeli economy mainly as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 1987), and are concentrated in low skill and menial labourers, especially in agriculture, manufacturing, transport and local public bureaucracies.

Since 1967 the incorporation of mass disenfranchised labour from the occupied territories (and most recently also temporary foreign labour) ‘pushed’ Israel’s Arab citizens up the occupational ladder, placing them in better paid and more managerial positions, albeit mostly in their ‘traditional’ branches of the economy. However, despite the pervasive incorporation of non-citizens into the Israeli economy, and despite the Arabs’ rapidly rising levels of education and skills, their occupational mobility remained highly constrained in an economy still stratified according to ethnic and national affiliations (Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov, 1993; Smooha, 1993).

Needless to say, this economic stratification has been translated into social polarisation, with Arabs and Jews generally occupying different class positions within Israeli society. Data on poverty, for example, have shown that in 1989, 39.8 percent of Arab households and 48.7 percent of Arab children lived under the poverty line, as opposed to 12.8 percent of households and 18.6 percent of children among Jews. This polarisation has worsened in the following years, and in 1995, 44 percent of
Arab households and 56 percent of Arab children were under the poverty line, as opposed to roughly half these proportions among Jews. Income data, too, show, that for the last 15 years, Arab household income has consistently been around 60–70 percent of that earned by Jews (Sikkuy, 1996; Social Security Institute, 1996). Likewise, a recent survey of socioeconomic characteristics (CBS, 1996) found that all 63 Arab localities are ranked in the bottom 40 percent of Israeli localities, and over half are in the lowest 25 percent.

The material reality of Arab deprivation is not abstract, but visibly grounded in ‘their’ spaces which form a central component of their identity construction. Thus, Khalidi (1988) claims that the Arabs have become a restricted economic ‘region’, directing most of their resources, entrepreneurship and transactions into a confined Arab sector. This was largely supported by a recent industrial study (Schnell et al., 1995) which found that although most Arab firms attempt to expand their trade into the Jewish industrial sector, they have remained constrained to specific menial niches, and still perform some three-quarters of their transactions within Israel’s Arab localities. Therefore, the situation of the Arabs in Israel resemble the minorities studied by Hechter and Levi (1979), who show that the overlapping of economic niche, relative deprivation and ethnic territory constitute a firm foundation for ethnic regionalism.

Protest

Public protest generally reflects the changing nature and emphases of ethnic demands vis à vis the central state. As such, it is an especially useful prism through which to study ethnic political mobilisation. Beyond the public announcement of demands and problems, ethnic protest also acts as a symbol and a generator of collective identity. As noted by Lofland (1985), key protest events often find their way into the group’s collective memory, thereby forming a key role in the shaping of its communal identity.

Arabs have become increasingly organised politically since the mid-1970s, and have staged a prolonged anti-government protest campaign. Fig. 2 displays the intensity and key issues of that protest. We can note that the intensity of Arab protest steadily increased from the mid-1970s until about 1990, reflecting the growing political awareness and self-assertion of the Arabs, and their more proficient use of extra-parliamentary politics in the highly politicised Israeli environment.

The relative decline in protest level since 1990 (except for 1994) may be linked to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and to the policies of the 1992–96 Labor government which increased state financial support to most Arab localities (Sikkuy, 1995). Further, there is a prevailing feeling among Arabs (see Bishara, 1993) that under its current political structure, the Israeli–Jewish ethnocracy is unlikely to make substantial policy changes, except for financial matters (which accounted for the 1994 wave of protest). Hence, mass anti-state protest may be losing its appeal, while other modes of operation gain favour, including the strategic use of the Arabs’ growing electoral clout (Lustick, 1989), or the channelling of Arab energies into a quiet construction of a political, social, economic and cultural enclave within Israel.
Analysis reveals three dominant issues behind Arab protest: land and planning policies, socioeconomic conditions, and (Palestinian) national rights (Fig. 2). What is striking is the continuing prevalence of all three issues in almost equal intensity: in the 1975–96 period, 33 percent of the total number of protest events were about land control and urban planning issues (such as boundaries, house demolitions and zoning), 42 percent were on socioeconomic issues (such as budgets of Arab local governments, services and infrastructure), while 25 percent addressed Palestinian national issues (mainly responding to events in the occupied territories and Lebanon). If we measure protest by intensity, however, land and planning issues were the basis for 33 percent of Arab protest, socioeconomic grievances 28 percent, and Palestinian national issues 38 percent.

The three protest topics have thus jointly and evenly dominated the mobilisation of Arab mass politics. This lends support to the ethnic regionalism thesis: if Arabs were ‘radicalising’ and moving towards secession, the national cause would gradually prevail; conversely, if they were striving for full integration into the state as an ethno-class the socioeconomic strand would dominate. The continued concern of the Arabs for all three issues, and especially their persisting rallying to protect and expand their rights and power over land, indicate a regional level campaign grounded in Arab spaces and localities. In short—a campaign of a budding ethnoregional movement.

Another indication to the regional-level characteristics of Arab protest can be found in the nature of its communal leadership which includes organisations positioned between local and state levels. Most prominent has been the ‘National Committee’ (of the Heads of Arab Councils), supported by the ‘Follow-Up Committee’ (composed of the National Committee, Arab parliamentarians and other prominent leaders), and—most recently—the Moslem Movement. These are all voluntary bodies which receive their support from a growing Arab focus on grassroots and village-based politics, illustrating a process of ‘Arab political encapsulation’ (al Haj, 1993a: 84).
The minority has thus rallied behind these voluntary organisations, often in open defiance to the state which has attempted to ignore or even disallow their activities (al Haj and Rosenfeld, 1990; Lustick, 1989). In some respects, Arab political organisation and institution-building is thus by-passing the formal procedures and institutions of state and local governance. The explicit representation of Arab localities in the National Committee, and the Committee’s goals of municipal equality and the restructuring of the Zionist nature of the state, demonstrate that the Arabs are carving themselves a distinct geographical and political niche (region) on the margins of the Israeli polity.

**Voting**

Electoral analysis can complement the examination of protest by further illuminating its evolving grievances and agendas. The main trend has been gradual polarisation between Arabs and Jewish voters, particularly since the main Arab protest campaign began in the mid-1970s. Fig. 3 displays that, despite some fluctuations, there has been a steadily growing level of Arab support for ‘non-Zionist’ parties which have continuously posed a challenge to the existing Zionist nature of the state. While the level of non-Zionist vote hovered around the 20 percent until the 1970s, it rose to twice that rate during the 1980s and early 1990s, and reached 68 percent in the 1996 elections.

To be sure, other factors affect the vote of the large and diverse Arab population. Yet a genuine chasm is developing between the near total majority of Jews who support Zionist or Jewish parties (some 98 percent in the 1996 elections), and over two-thirds of the Arabs who prefer to vote for Knesset members who challenge—implicitly or explicitly—the Israeli ethno-centric regime. The gradual shift to the political left is more striking when we consider that for decades the political organis-
ation of Arabs in Israel was under strict surveillance, that Arabs were not allowed
to run in all-Arab parties until 1988, and that the dominance of Zionist parties has
been so pronounced, that many of the most prominent Arab political leaders actually
still represent Zionist parties. Despite these mitigating factors, the Arabs are now
increasingly supporting predominantly Arab parties whose platforms reflect a desire
to restructure Israeli society.

Analysis of the 1996 elections lend further support to the ‘regionalisation’ argu-
ment, by illustrating the emerging distinct political identity of the Arabs within, but
also in opposition to, the Israeli state. The increasing non-Zionist vote obviously
indicates growing opposition to Israel’s character as a Zionist-Jewish state. However,
several other indicators point to a growing Arab drive to change the system from
within. First, the electoral turnout reached 79 percent for the first time in 20 years
(Fig. 3), indicating a growing will to participate and influence change. Second, the
platforms of three predominantly Arab parties explicitly voiced, for the first time,
their desire for a ‘new political order’ in Israel. They all used varieties of the slogan
‘a state of all its citizens’, which challenges Israel’s self-definition as ‘the state of
the Jewish People’, and the structural preference given to Jews over the country’s
Arab citizens.

Further, all three main non-Zionist parties called for the first time for a recognition
of the Arabs as a ‘national’ minority, opposing their current classification as
‘religious minorities’. Parts of the leftist electoral front (chiefly the Communists and
the Democratic National Union) went even further by making a ground-breaking
demand for ‘Arab cultural autonomy’ in its platform. While this demand was not
binding for the other partners in this leftist bloc, it remained associated with some
of its candidates, who continued to promote the idea even after the election (Osatzki-
Lazar and Ghanem, 1996: Appendix. 1).

An equally significant aspect of the 1996 elections was the participation, again
for the first time, of two previously rejectionist organisations: the Moslem Movement
and the ‘Sons of the Village’ group. The Moslem Movement, after a damaging split,
joined with the Arab Democratic List under the new banner of the United Arab List,
and assisted the doubling of its representation from two to four members of Parlia-
ment (Knesset). The ‘Sons of the Village’ group, for long one of the most national-
istic organisations among the Arabs, was the leading element in the newly formed
Democratic National Union which created a political bloc with Hadash. The new
bloc received a sizeable 37 percent support among the Arabs (as compared with 23
percent in 1992), resulting in five Knesset seats.

The decision of these two organisations to contest the Israeli elections is highly
significant, mainly because: (a) from their own previous rejectionist perspective, this
step and its associated rhetoric amount for the first time to a recognition and accept-
ance of an Israeli state; and (b) their decision to run was accompanied by a widely
expressed agenda of restructuring the state from within. This agenda, and its links
to both Israeli and Palestinian concerns, was articulated by Dr A. Bishara, leader of
the Democratic National Union in a May 1996 pre-election rally:

… by running in this election we are of course accepting the existence of Israel,
thus toeing the line with the Palestinian people who did the same by endorsing
the Oslo agreement and by electing Arafat as President… our project addresses
the next urgent goal: restructuring the Israeli political system which is totally
based on the definition of the state as belonging to the Jewish people more than
to its Arab citizens… only by working to change the system can we achieve our
status as a national minority, our need for cultural autonomy, and our fundamental
right for genuine collective equality.

The 1996 elections also showed that a growing distance is developing between
the Arabs in Israel and the main Palestinian national leadership (now in Gaza and
the West Bank). This was reflected by the low support given to a party led by Dr
Ahmad Tibbi (Arafat’s close advisor) who was strongly associated with the Palestin-
ian Authority and the PLO, but eventually withdrew from the race. Another indi-
cation to this distance was the low profile kept by the Palestinian leadership during
the campaign, contrary to previous elections. Thus, the Arabs are distancing them-
selves at the same time from both the Zionist parties and from the Palestinian leader-
ship.

Finally, the electoral divisions among the Arabs are declining. Although there is
still a variety of political orientations expected in any large community, a growing
consensus was evident among all Arab parties of the minority agenda: equality and
peace with total Jewish withdrawal from the occupied territories. This was reflected
by the voting of the two sectors traditionally closest to the Israeli state: the Druze
and the Bedouin. In both sectors vote for non-Zionist parties doubled (to 19 and 79
percent, respectively) indicating a drift of these sectors away from alignment with
Jewish concerns. Whereas the Druze community and leaders still express loyalty to
the Israeli regime, growing voices among the Bedouins have distanced this com-
community from the state and its Zionist goals. Overall, then, the Arabs are carving a
separate but increasingly unified political niche between their Palestinian nation and
Israeli state.

**Internal dynamics of division and cohesion**

To complete the picture of political mobilisation and identity formation among
the Arabs, we should return to two key and related factors discussed earlier: the
impact of nationalism on their cohesion and fragmentation, and the construction and
‘imagination’ of a regional collective identity in a ‘fractured’ territory. Our analysis
points to a dual impact of nationalism on the Arabs. It did, as noted, exclude them
from effective participation in the Israeli nation- and state-building projects (Peled,
1992). Yet, the national rhetoric also defused among the Arabs with powerful conse-
quences on their mobilisation. Since political circumstances prevent them from fully
articulating their nationalism (due to the enormous cost likely in the current geopoliti-
cal setting), the national sentiments find their expression in new (and constrained)
‘regional’ ways.

Here also lies a main difference between Palestinian-Arab regionalism within
Israel and the full expression of Palestinian nationalism in the occupied territories.
Palestinian nationalism in the West Bank and Gaza aims to achieve full sovereignty over the totality of ‘its’ territories, and replace Israeli with Palestinian sovereignty. In contrast, the Palestinian minority in Israel has now developed an identity which accepts its existence within the Israeli state, combining national (Palestinian) and civil (Israeli) building-blocks in building its collective identity and political campaign. Palestinian-Arab regionalism in Israel aims to ground its civil, cultural and ethnic rights in the fragmented (but linked) Arab places, aiming to increase the share of resources and autonomy of the Arab ‘region’ vis-à-vis the Israeli state.

To be sure, divisions among the Arabs are also pronounced, and will continue to retard the crystallisation of a unified Arab identity within Israel. The Israeli state has traditionally attempted to widen and exploit these divisions (Lustick, 1980), particularly between Druze, Christians and Moslems, nomads and peasants and traditional clans. But Arab mobilisation during the last two decades has increased communal unity by establishing numerous new regional linkages. For example, there are now hundreds of voluntary associations in the Arab sector working across traditional boundaries (al Haj, 1993a). Arabs have forged a range of inter-village regional organisations in the fields of urban and regional, industrial and environmental development (Yiftachel, 1995). The recent 1996 Knesset elections too demonstrated a convergence of electoral trends among all Arab sectors. Hence, a statement by Hanna Moyas (the first Chair of the Arab National Committee) in a 1978 Land Day rally, appears prophetic:

We, the Arabs in Israel, are like one body; our limbs are Arab lands from north to south. When parts of our body are confiscated in the Negev, we all hurt; when parts are taken in the Galilee, we all hurt again... Only if we act together, as one, we can perhaps overcome the pain of further land losses and rebuild ourselves in the lands, villages and towns that have always been ours... (Land Day leaflet, Archives of National Committee, Shfa‘amar)

Finally, let us return to the ‘fractured’ nature of the Arab region. Here ‘fraction’ denotes not a voluntary process of ethnic dispersal, but a state-led penetration and fragmentation of minority homeland territory on behalf of the ethnic majority. Clearly, this is a specific political-geographical setting which requires theorisation and contemplation beyond our scope here. Suffice is to point out here that other ethnoregional movements have mobilised support and reformulated their identity from a ‘fractured’ territorial base, including the Basques and Catalonians in Spain, Turks in Cyprus, Catholics in Northern Ireland, Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania, Slovenians in Italy, Corsicans in France, or Welsh in Great Britain. Despite important local variations, all these movements perceive themselves as ‘homeland’ ethnic groups, who attempt to channel resources to specific spaces within their states, while protecting these spaces from threats to their identity and rights (see Williams and Kofman, 1989).

Struggles by ethnic groups which reside in ‘fractured’ regions are almost always directed against the expansionist and exploitative consequences of majority ethno-nationalism (see also Keating, 1996; Shafir, 1995). The forced geographical fragmen-
tation of the minority has usually provided a setting for protracted conflicts, as the cases of the Basques or the Catholics in Northern Ireland attest. This is because the very mix of majority and minority creates overlapping demands for land control. The demands receive added strength from the dominant nation-state order, which legitimises absolute and ‘pure’ ethnic territoriality (Taylor, 1994).

Conclusion: Palestinian-Arabs, ethnoregionalism and the nation-state

Any collective ethnic identity, and particularly that of the Palestinian-Arabs in the contradiction-riddled Israeli environment, is ‘slippery’, dynamic and often difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, the paper analysed four major dimensions in the political geography of the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel—geography, class, protest and voting—which point to the emergence of ethnoregional struggle and identity. Let us reiterate here our definition of a ‘region’: a spatial and social entity between locality and state, which provides a basis for mobilisation, solidarity and identity. Given this definition, we can note that an Arab region already exists in Israel, even if its political articulation is still in the making.

Scholarly interpretations of Arab mobilisation have been dominated by two rival positions: an explicitly national, separatist and ‘radicalising’ explanation (Soffer, 1991), and a more civil ‘politicisation’ account, portraying the Arabs as an ethno-class within Israel’s ‘ethnic democracy’ (Smooha, 1992). I maintain that these leading approaches—despite their major contributions to the debate—fail to capture the essence of the reconstruction of Arab identity: the emergence of a Palestinian-Arab ‘region’ within the Israeli nation-state. This region denotes both a territorial condition and a political process, whereby a homeland ethnic community is mobilised within a state system, combining both ethnonational and civil causes and goals.

To be sure, the regionalisation process among the Arabs is still embryonic, implicit and only rarely discussed. It may take years before it becomes the explicit goal of Arab organisations. However, it is already in train, through the dynamics of local Arab governance, state-wide Arab networks, the patterns of Arab economic activities, and daily Arab practices. In the process, they are beginning to forge a quiet, yet profound, challenge to the Israeli nation-state.

Arab struggle for defining, protecting, developing and empowering their region provides a strategy of resistance the ethno-centric policies of the Israeli Jewish ‘ethnocracy’. The Arab region has provided a collective core around which a newly defined ethnic identity has been formulated and ‘re-imagined’ within the totally new circumstances prevailing since 1948. This identity is premised on the Arabs’ national identity as Palestinians, and their particular ‘fractured’ politico-geographical situation within the Israeli (Jewish) state—where the options of irredentism or separatism bear intolerable costs. It builds on the Arabs’ Palestinian past, on their involuntary but firm civic inclusion into the Israeli political system, on the grievances generated by socioeconomic deprivation, and on their remarkably stable geography of contained segregated ‘homeland’ spaces.

The beginnings of Arab ‘regional articulations’ have started to appear in political
discourse, academic research and the arts. For example, a 1989 poem by Tuwafik Zayad (the then mayor of Nazareth) expresses the salience of land, place, dispossession and memory in identity formation, and the Arab hope, patience and persistence emanating from living in a homeland:

We guard the shades of our figs
We guard the trunks of our olives
We sow our hopes like the yeast of bread
With ice in our fingers
With red hell in our hearts…

If we are thirsty, we shall be quenched by the rocks
And if we are hungry, we shall be fed by the dust…
And we shall not move
Because here we have past, Present
And Future.

The understanding of Arab political mobilisation in ethnoregional terms and a comparison with similar international cases also allows us to anticipate the likely shape of future Arab-Jewish politics. Arabs are likely to heighten the push for gaining recognition as a ‘national’ minority, with associated cultural and (later) territorial autonomy, press for land rights, and campaign for the closing of Arab-Jewish social and economic gaps (see also al Haj, 1993a: 85). This will probably be combined with a drive to devolve the functions of the highly centralised Israeli state.

However, the Arabs will not accept the ethno-centric Zionist character of the state, nor confine their struggle merely to ‘better terms of coexistence’ (Smooha, 1992). Using the ethnoregional framework, we can also anticipate that the Arab struggle in Israel will intensify following Arab-Jewish reconciliation in the Middle East, and not subside as many assume. Arab regionalism is thus likely to pose a serious challenge to the Israeli Jewish ethnocracy, by intensifying the drive to democratise its exclusive ethnic (Jewish) character, and by applying pressure to devolve its highly centralised structure.

This brings us back to our initial critique of nationalism theories. The case here further exposes the contradictions embedded in multi-ethnic ‘nation-states’: the domination of an ethno-centric majority works to marginalise the minority, but this generates minority struggles and identities which often challenge state unity and authority. Nationalism theories have underplayed for too long variations in geographical and political settings, and have too easily substituted nation and state. But ethnonationalism surfaces in a variety of forms and shapes including ethnoregionalism, which attempts to rebuild a homeland collective identity while co-existing with a majority in ‘its’ state. The case of the Palestinian-Arabs in Israel may provide useful insights in the quest for a better understanding of this phenomenon.
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