

Israel is an Arab state as well

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by Chibli Mallat

In May 1996, I sent my friend and colleague Abd al-Wahhab Badrakhan at Al-Hayat a short article entitled: "An Arab minister for Israel." With the article was an emphatic note on the usefulness of its publication only in case Shimon Peres won the general election in Israel.

Even for Peres, I thought the proposal was perhaps too radical, but his success was premised on the Arab vote in a way which would have made it difficult for him to avoid considering the ministerial position for 20 percent of Israel's population. Peres, despite the massive Arab vote in his favor, lost against all poll predictions.

The article was wastefully published, and the Netanyahu parenthesis started. Having heard Netanyahu addressing some of the best lawyers in America in 1985 as if he were speaking to schoolchildren, I had no illusion that the whole peace process was coming to a grinding halt. And it did for everyone, including Palestinian Israelis. Palestinian Israelis is indeed what we should start calling our fellow Arabs in the self-styled Jewish state. First because with a fifth of its population not being Jewish, one should insist that "the Jewish state" is a misnomer. Israel is no less Arab than Somalia, which is part of the Arab League.

This is not to say that the Arab League would be greatly enhanced by Israel joining it, or indeed vice-versa, considering the inefficiency and empty rhetoric still prevailing at the league. But we must adapt to the fact that Israel is also an Arab state.

In recent weeks, unlike in 1996, the Arab vote was discussed extensively, inside Israel and outside. The role of Azmi Bishara should also be saluted, as he put, at least in theory, the right of a non-Jew to be voted in as prime minister of Israel.

The picture is not all rosy, however. As results keep coming in, we shall probably see the continued inadequacy and fragmentation of the Arab parties inside Israel, who should have been able to force at least 20 Arab deputies onto the Knesset, and can hardly reach the two-digit bar.

Still, the prospect of one or two Arab ministers in the next Cabinet is seriously on the agenda, for the first time ever.

This is no ordinary question. I had argued in a book published three years ago that the most important voice in the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict should be that of the Palestinian Israelis. As this easy prediction is coming true, we must tell our brethren inside Israel, whom we have forgotten in their solitude for the past five decades, that the future of the region is in their hands.

They have started assuming it in ways we ignore. Here is one: Last week, I met at a law conference in Morocco Sheikh Ahmad al-Natur, who is the head of the Sharia appellate court in Israel. Here is a man who is fluent in Arabic and Hebrew, and commands a unique respect in both Arab and Jewish communities. He teaches at the school of law of Tel Aviv University, and, despite his young age for a judge, he has made some of the most remarkable advances this century in the renewal of Islamic

law.

Natur is not a man of politics. But I like to imagine him sitting with his alter ego in the judicial hierarchy of Israel, Aharon Barak, who is one of the most remarkable judges this century in the world.

Not surprisingly, Barak, Natur told me, has paid him a courtesy visit a few weeks ago, and the judicial exchange is intense, if not yet totally satisfactory from Natur's point of view.

The point should be clear now: The future of equality in Israel, among all its citizens, will happen when we see the likes of Natur on Israel's Supreme Court. This will come, slowly, as in all judicial processes, and there is already an interim Arab judge on the bench.

Politically, the process of equality can start immediately with the appointment of one or two Arab ministers in the new Cabinet. Nor should one think of the process as window dressing: The Arab community is sophisticated, and knows it lags behind economically and socially because of the discrimination it has been subjected to for half-a-century. But it can break the discrimination politically, and it should start now. Ehud Barak, yes to "One Israel." But that means first and foremost yes to "One Israel-Palestine." The rest, including the Palestinians on the West Bank, and those in the camps, will follow. So too will the rest of the Arab world.

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