

Sunday, May 30, 1999 **Haaretz** (Israel)

Published again as op-ed in the Daily Star (Lebanon, 3 June 1999)

Are Arabs included in 'everyone'?

By Gideon Levy

While everyone is arguing about whether to bring Shas into the new government, and the prevailing argument is that 540,000 voters must not be "disqualified," the fact that Israel's political map has nearly an equal number of voters who are disqualified for another purpose has been forgotten. The approximately 500,000 Arabs who have the right to vote, of whom 75 percent cast ballots this time around, are condemned in advance to being shunned. All the arguments offered by those supporting the inclusion of Shas - not to leave its voters excluded and with a feeling they are being discriminated against - are even more applicable here. But toward the Arabs, it's all right.

Thus, there are many advocates for the Shas's inclusion in the coalition for social reasons and they have a fair chance of success, but no one is seriously considering bringing an Arab faction into the coalition.

The National Religious Party (NRP), the second-most extreme right-wing and nationalist party, already has one foot inside the the "leftist" coalition; the ultra-Orthodox, who are opposed to Zionism and to serving in the Israel Defense Forces, and who explicitly prohibit any women from representing their faction, are also natural candidates. Only the Arabs are beyond the pale, the lepers.

In this respect, quite astonishingly, there is no difference between the left and the right, between a Likud government and a Labor government. Abdulwahab Darawshe as environmental minister? Inconceivable.

But the sky will not fall if, finally, a leadership arises that will at least consider bringing Arab representatives into the

government. Joining the government is a challenge for more than the Arabs: It is a challenge to a state that has pretensions to being not just Jewish, but also democratic.

No less democratic and loyal to the state than the ultra-Orthodox parties, with a potential for harming the security of the state that is no greater than that posed by immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the Arabs of Israel have long been worthy of government representation in their country. Their loyalty to Israel was proved long ago, and sometimes even seems to be exaggerated, considering the way the state behaves toward them and toward their brothers and sisters beyond the Green Line.

Was there any sector more loyal to Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak than the Arab voters? Support from 94 percent of a population is a phenomenon that merits recompense. If there is a gaping chasm between them and their country, it derives above all from the Jewish state's alienation from them and denial of them, not the other way around.

True, it is problematic for any independent Arab party to join a government that - like all the governments of Israel - promotes continuing the Israeli occupation in East Jerusalem, considerable portions of the West Bank and also in the Golan Heights, and that does not freeze the Jewish settlements beyond the Green Line and is not planning to evacuate them.

The collective responsibility of the government is off-putting for a party like Hadash or Balad, which is headed by MK Azmi Bishara and MK-elect Ahmed Tibi. "How can we take part in a government," asks Tibi, "when it decides on bombings in Lebanon or a closure of the territories?"

But it would have been possible to hold serious talks with them about the conditions under which they might join the government, and it could have been accomplished with no more difficulty than that occasioned by talks with the NRP, a settlers' party. Moreover, the United Arab List, the largest of the Arab factions, has declared its willingness to join the government.

This could be a golden opportunity. In a government likely to prove more diverse than all its predecessors, there is room for Arab representation. This would signal a new Israel inside the country, and abroad it would signal encouraging winds of change to the Arab countries with which we seek reconciliation. The situation is not encouraging.

Not only has there never been an invitation extended to any Arab list to hold serious discussions on joining the government, in

other government institutions the situation is more disheartening.

There are only 15 Arabs among the 1,059 members of the boards of directors of government companies. The electric company has only six Arab employees out of 21,000. El Al is completely free of Arabs. An Arab flight attendant? No way.

In the government bodies that manage the affairs that most directly concern the Arabs, the situation is no better. On the national building and planning board, only one out of the 13 members is an Arab. On the regional boards in the Galilee, where the number of Arab residents is equal to and in some cases exceeds the number of Jewish residents, their rate of representation is similar.

There is at least legislation to protect women, for example, in respect to their representation in government companies. No one thinks of passing similar legislation for Arabs. Because that is how we are: a country consisting of one nation only, democratic and egalitarian only for Jews.

Because that is how they are: refugees in their own country, a minority living in the crushing shadow of the majority, cut off from and alienated against its will from its own state.

A party with a banner that says One Israel and whose head promises to be "everyone's prime minister" must remember that "everyone" also includes a large minority of Arab citizens