

# Palestinian-Israelis in a Jewish State: Dilemmas of Identity and Politics

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*This is a condensed transcript of a conversation hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel on 13 June 2019.*

**Dr. Anwar Mhajne:** Hello everyone in the US, Israel, Palestine and other places in the world. Welcome to this latest installment of Conversations with Israel and Palestine hosted by Partners for Progressive Israel. Conversations with Israel and Palestine is a series of informational webinars that brings voices from Israel and Palestine to an American audience. My name is Dr. Anwar Mhajne and I'll be the moderator for the next 60 minutes. I'm originally from Umm al-Fahm, a town in the northern part of Israel. I'm currently working as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Stonehill College in Massachusetts.

*Thair Abu Ras is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Government and Politics at the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. All are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Fadi Shbitta holds an MA in conflict resolution and is currently co-directing the Equality Policy Department of Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.*

First question: How do you identify in relation to the state of Israel?

**Thair Abu Ras:** I personally identify as a Palestinian citizen of Israel. On the one hand, I feel an ethnic and cultural tie to the Palestinian people in general, but at the same time, I also have what we can call a civil tie to the State of Israel, contemporary Israeli culture, whatever that means. That's who I am. It's also one of our problems. Our ethnic community has been in a continuous war, what you could call an existential conflict, with the country that we are citizens of and that we contribute to in many different ways. So yes, I'm a Palestinian citizen of Israel, I guess.

**Fadi Shbitta:** *We can start to answer this question administratively. Obviously, we have these Israeli IDs. We are Israeli citizens. We are different from our Palestinian brothers in the West Bank and Gaza or Palestinian refugees by our civil status, but for me, this is administrative. My family comes originally from a village destroyed in 1948. Our lands were confiscated. Part of my family remained within what became Israel, part of it is in Qalqilya and Tulkarm in the West Bank, another part is in Jordan as refugees. The Palestinian people were divided into different groups after 1948 which is the base, that's the starting point to understand the reality today. Most of the Israeli public doesn't like it, but I define myself as a Palestinian citizen of Israel.*

**Anwar:** You said that sometimes the Jewish community doesn't like it when you identify as a Palestinian. Do you also encounter resistance when you identify as an Israeli citizen? For me, I noticed that if I'm around like Arabs in the United States and I mention Israel, everyone gets upset with me. If I'm around the Jewish community and say Palestine, everyone gets upset with me. I feel that when I tell my students where I come from, they look at me as if I'm a unicorn.

**Fadi:** Sure. In Arab countries, I think it has changed a little bit in the last years. There is more and more awareness about the Palestinian minority within Israel. But it's still more complicated than saying "I'm French." or "I'm German." Saying "I'm a Palestinian citizen of Israel" is an answer that requires an explanation.

**Thair:** Without a doubt, but I also feel that there's much more understanding today. I remember, going back maybe 15 or 16 years ago, I was in high school in the United States. It was an international high school and many Arab students said things like, "You're the Arab Jew" whatever that is supposed to mean. I think it mainly has to do with the media revolution in the Arab world, hearing people in Arabic from Haifa, Jaffa, or Jerusalem on television.

**Anwar:** What are the challenges that are facing the Palestinian community in Israel today?

**Fadi:** For me, my identity is clear. The problem is how Israelis perceive us. After 1948 we became outsiders in our own land. We are not treated as the indigenous population in Israel. And while there is discrimination within Israel it's not comparable with the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza, living daily with the reality of conflict.

**Thair:** We are at a crossroad. I feel that there is greater economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural integration within Israel, especially among Arab youth. The youth are more important because about 60% of the population is under the age of 30. At the same time, we're witnessing greater exclusion from the public sphere and more acceptance of racism within Israeli society. Of course there was racism before, but it wasn't as highlighted as it is today. This is our oxymoron. On the one hand, greater integration, greater personal, and even community success stories on the one hand, but a political atmosphere that is more unwelcoming towards the community on the other.

**Anwar:** What specific policies have influenced the political engagement and the status of the Palestinian community in Israel?

**Thair:** Over the last generation we have witnessed a new and very dangerous phenomenon, the rise of violence within the Arab community. I believe that in 2017 over 70 people were killed by internal violence in the Arab community. That has to do mainly with the lack of law and order within Arab towns, villages, and cities. We use these terms, villages and towns, even though a lot of what we call villages and towns have become cities nowadays, and that's part of the problem.. It also has to do with what I would call land planning, or the lack of land planning, in the Arab community.

The Arab population is about 21% of the overall population of Israel but yet we only own about 3% of the land. From 1948 up until the late 1970s, there was massive land confiscation; over 70% of private Palestinian land was confiscated. Around 700 new towns have been built for Jews; zero for Palestinians. Israeli officials never call us Palestinians. They always refer to us as the minorities or as a bunch of ethnic groups. But we are the indigenous population.

We've seen on the one hand, greater economic integration; you have a right-wing government which has actually increased budgets, which has allocated money for more economic development, but no attention has been paid to the development of the Arab community at the political level or for greater integration within the political echelons of society. The Arab community itself has to take the lead on these issues.

**Fadi:** I completely agree. The Israeli police ignore crime in Palestinian neighborhoods. We do not shape the policies in Israel; we are subject to the policies in Israel. We do have parliament members; we had 13 Knesset members out of 120 after the 2015 election, but Arab parties have never been in the government historically because "non-Zionist" parties have never been allowed in any Israeli government. If Israel continues to define itself as a Jewish State remains in that way, we cannot achieve civil equality.

**Anwar:** Why do you think Palestinian participation declined in the recent election [April 2019; from 13 to 10 Knesset seats]?

**Fadi:** Palestinians lost hope in the system. The right-wing government and high officials, including the Prime Minister, said very racist things about their own Palestinian citizens. On the other hand, there was a unique experience, the first time the Palestinians managed to unite in one list was in 2015. When the Joint List didn't run as a unified slate in the April 2019 election a few months ago, that was a big disappointment for the voters, and we saw that reflected in the percentage that reflected in the percentage that voted.

**Thair:** I think the Palestinians citizens in Israel, and particularly the youth, simply don't believe this system works for them. Nobody among the Jewish political elite in Israel really cares about the Arab community. You can see it not only in the policies of the political parties, be it the center, or left, or whatever you want to call it. When the media talks about the Arab community, they make vague statements that don't mean much. You can tell that all these political reporters don't really understand what they're talking about. They don't have an interest in understanding what's going on. We are there, but at the same time, we are not there. There's also this huge disappointment with the Arab parties and the Arab political elite in Israel. First of all, they're seen as ineffective. They cannot produce what we would call in America "pork" for their own community. At the same time, as Fadi said, the dissolution of the Joint List angered a lot of people. Many people thought that the Joint List was a new beginning, that finally the Arab community was able to unite under one political umbrella. [Note: The Joint List was reassembled for the September 2019 election.]

There has always been this demand for political unity. People simply do not understand why all these Palestinian political parties are unable to unite, at least at the Knesset level because, if you go back and look at the data, these parties vote the same way 97% of the time. When people saw the petty politics and each party fighting over one extra seat or one less seat; that angered a lot of people. All these calls for boycotting the election started to rise. If you look at the data, actually Arab citizens voted almost in similar numbers as Jewish citizens up until 1999. What happened after 1999? Well, the Second intifada.

Many people in the center-left were very angry with the Arab community—"Why aren't you voting? Because of you Netanyahu is going to win another term." I think that shows that the real problem here is that even the center-left in Israel doesn't understand the Palestinian community in Israel.

Why is it for Palestinians that somebody like Gantz is not really different than Netanyahu? Well, simply put, Gantz didn't even campaign in the Arab community. People like Gantz would usually go to the usual suspects from a Zionist perspective, the Druse or the Bedouin villages in the north, those being the Palestinians that go to the army. These represent maybe 15% of the Arab community. They did not even try to talk to 85% of the Arab population, and then they were surprised why people did not come out and vote. It's a mixture of all these things: lack of belief in the system, the fact that the center-left did not try to reach out to the Arab community, and a huge, huge disappointment with our own political leadership.

**Anwar:** During the election campaign, we heard calls for a Palestinian boycott and then we heard calls for Palestinians to vote. What will happen in September?

**Fadi:** I wrote an article about this in Arabic, about this discussion of boycotting or going to vote. The title was "The Knesset is Not Our National Parliament." The parliamentary tool is important, and we are part of the system whether we like it or not. We are advocating to change it from a system that represents one ethnic group with colonial mechanisms. Most Israelis are still living in complete ignorance of the consequences of 1948 for the Palestinian people. As for the 2017 nation-state law, it didn't change anything or bring anything new; it all was there in terms of the current system. Israel has always been a Jewish state, and there are real consequences of this. It's not a symbolic issue; it's a very practical issue on the ground.

**Thair:** We don't have the privilege or the luxury to boycott the elections. It's not as if we have other alternatives. It is important to be part of the system, to influence the system. I think we are approaching our demographic peak; the Palestinian population should rise to about 27% of the population by 2035, and then it might go down. The state of Israel going to have to rely on the Arab community. Up until one generation ago, it was the other way around.

But I understand the position of the boycotters. It's clear that nobody really cares about us. One argument obviously that came up in April was,

"Well, you have the nation-state law. You guys keep on telling us to vote, to participate but every single time we get another slap on the face. What we need to do is basically leave this system, expose Israel's true face to the world.

There is a famous saying in Arabic, "'iidha lm yanmu falan yataqalas maratan 'ukhraa", which means if it doesn't grow, then it won't shrink again. Boycotting shows Israel's true face to the world, we need to grow this boycott and only then Israel would have learned. That more or less is the arguments of both sides.

Let me say a few words about the nation-state law, and this might be controversial. I'm pretty sure many people and circles around Partners for Progressive Israel have been against this nation-state law. In reality, I think that the nation-state law is not as big of an issue as people really think it is because it didn't really change a lot on the ground. That said, there are some difficult issues with the law, such as the fact that Arabic is no longer an official language, but in reality Israel never cared about Arabic anyway. Do you know how many traffic signs contain grammatical mistakes in Arabic? On how many public institutions never included Arabic on their signage at all? Et cetera, et cetera. That said, the nation-state law more of an internal Jewish cultural war than something that directly affects the Palestinian citizens in Israel. It has much more to do with populist tendencies among the new political elite in Israel and a cultural war going on among Israeli Jews about what does it mean to be Israeli.

**Anwar:** Fadi, would you like to address the indigenous and non-indigenous argument? The question was raised when referred to Jews as non-indigenous, which both denies our own history and puts an unnecessary wall between us. Can we see each other as indigenous, and see a win-win for us all?

**Fadi:** First let me say the danger of the nation state law is that the next government can use it, and pass legislation based on its spirit, openly racist legislation. I don't like to argue about indigenous or non-indigenous. I do believe that Jewish people were part of the space of historic Palestine under the Ottomans and before. But I just don't think it's a legitimate claim of any nation or any people to come and say, "I want to expel other people living in a certain space because I lived here 2,000 years ago." I think this is the source if the problem but after that I don't care. Jews are now here, they see this place as their possession. This needs to be fixed. We can argue about the process, which type of state it's going to be, what is its name or its flag. This is minor, this is symbolic. The main issue here is: who does this space belongs to? For me, it belongs to Palestinians and Jewish-Israelis. When I say Palestinians I mean the Palestinians who were in Palestine in 1948.

**Anwar:** I think it's important to clarify when we say non- indigenous, or it's the Palesti-nians who are indigenous, we also consider as Palestinians the Jews who lived there before the establishment of the state of Israel. What do panelists think of Palestinian citizens standing for seats in Zionist parties, such as Issawi Frej, a member of Knesset for Meretz?

**Thair:** I would distinguish between Meretz and the rest of the parties that identify as Zionist because Meretz, whether you agree with them or disagree with them, has gone a long way in recognizing that there is a massive problem here, and that we need to fix that problem. Personally, I do not vote for Meretz, but I think that needs to be recognized.

**Anwar:** Do you think creating some Jewish-Arab partnership that goes beyond the Joint List is possible? Do you think that could work or would it be problematic and not get any support?

**Fadi:** I think we should look at it sociologically. Up to the 1980s, around 50% of the Arab population was voting for Zionist parties. This was practical. If I go to somebody in the Labor Party, he can help me with this and that because he has access to state power. This has changed. We are more ideological.

Meretz still defines itself as a Zionist party and a Palestinian representative in Meretz would be part of a Zionist Jewish party, the way it defines itself. Of course, it's much more liberal than other parties. It has some progressive positions that I share and other Palestinian parties share with Meretz, but still they didn't cross that line. For me, we need something more.

**Thair:** Regarding an alliance between Joint List and Meretz, I think that it might get some traction amongst the Arab population, but I don't think it would get a lot of traction among the Jewish community. That's why I think it's not the best of ideas. It's a bit too soon. The differences are still there. I don't really see it as long as the conflict and the occupation continue. It would create a lot of problems both for Meretz and for the Joint List itself. KAN

Clearly, there are still issues that divide us. The fact is that Meretz is still a Zionist Party and it defines itself as such. I think one of the issues that made Meretz move a little bit more to the left is the fact that Meretz itself does not – perhaps cannot – identify with this new form of Zionism that's happening in Israel, which is much more ethno-religious and focuses much more on conservative values. If this continues, and looking at demographic trends, it looks like it's going to continue maybe 5, 10 years down the road. I don't think it makes a lot of sense for Meretz to unite with all the elements within the Arab community. But there are elements within the Arab community that are not on the same page as Meretz. Let's put it that way.

**Anwar:** Aside from a comprehensive peace plan, what would be the single most important step the Israeli government could take now to help or fix some of the problems you listed among the Palestinian community in Israel?

**Fadi:** In terms of specific policies, as we mentioned before, are organized crime and the question of land.

**Thair:** I would still focus on the fact that without a comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestine, it would be very, very hard to achieve anything meaningful.

**Anwar:** Is it getting harder to mobilize Palestinian citizens of Israel to engage in the work of civil society groups trying to build a shared society?

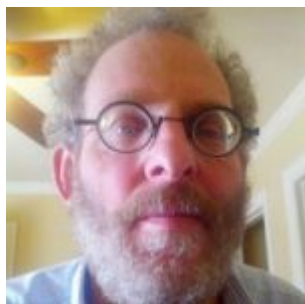
**Fadi:** The simple answer is, yes. It is harder. There is a belief within the Palestinian community that there is no partner on the other side. Many are suspicious that working in a joint group or in a joint project with Jewish Israelis you are just normalizing the injustice, and allowing Israel to show the world a better face than it actually has, There is a growing discourse within the Palestinian community that you need to work unilaterally and you need to build yourself internally and to empower the community from within before going to work for joint projects and so on.

**Thair:** To conclude, since we're back in election season again for the second time this year, I guess one thing to look out for on Arab- Jewish relations in Israel is, first of all, whether the Joint List does well. I am pessimistic, but we might be witnessing something new in Arab-Jewish cooperation at the political level in Israel. That's definitely something worth looking at. Thank you.

**Fadi:** In the short term I am not very optimistic. In the long term we are looking at the death of the two-state solution and some of comprehensive sovereign solution for Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. I am optimistic that this will become clearer for both Israelis and Palestinian.

**Anwar:** Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Israel and Palestine. I want to thank our panelists and the staff of Partners for Progressive Israel for their work in making this discussion happen.

*Thanks to Peter Eisenstein for editing and condensing this discussion. The full video is available on the Partners' website [here](#).*



*Peter Eisenstein is a historian and a member of Partners' Board of Directors.*