

The Palestinian Arabs in Israel: Reconceptualizing the Past

Arik Rudnitzky

“Israel felt the danger reflected in the *al-Ard* movement. It saw the rising tide of nationalism and the nationalist symbols that emanated from ‘Abd al-Nasir, which began to ignite and mobilize national sentiments. It saw them [members of the *al-Ard* movement] as the beginning of unrest and the revival of the Palestinian national movement (*al-harakah al-qawmiyyah al-filastiniyyah*) which rose from the ashes of the *Nakba*; the start of a renewed issue of the Palestinian people, which had been considered a closed case. In hindsight we understand that the *al-Ard* movement wasn’t an isolated phenomenon. It represented the start of the Palestinian awakening and a renewed gathering of the pieces of Palestinian national identity (*al-hawiyyah al-wataniyyah al-filastiniyyah*), which had been shattered by the *Nakba*. These attempts began to be made simultaneously in both the homeland and in the diaspora. Israel managed to suppress the *al-Ard* movement and to keep it away from the homeland for a prolonged period.”¹

These are the words of Sabri Jiryis, a Palestinian lawyer in Israel, who described the historic role of the *al-Ard* [“The Land”] movement in a recent interview. Jiryis, now 80, was one of the movement’s founders. *Al-Ard* was established in 1958 under the influence of the Egyptian president Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s pan-Arabist ideology, on the basis of an Arab nationalist outlook that rejected the political order established after the war of 1948. In 1964, *al-Ard* was outlawed by the Israeli authorities. A number of its members attempted to run in the 1965 Knesset elections but their application was rejected.² In 1970, several of the movement’s members, including Jiryis, were deported. Jiryis contacted the PLO in Lebanon and for several years was a member of the Institute for Palestine Studies (*mu’assasat al-dirasat al-filastiniyyah*). In 1994, following the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians, Jiryis returned to his home, the village of Fassuta, located in the Upper Galilee.

¹ Interview with Sabri Jiryis, “[The *al-Ard* movement – A Palestinian Experience After the *Nakba*](#)” [Arabic], [arab48.com](#), August 11, 2017.

² For further information, see: Ron Haris, “Jewish Democracy and Arab Politics: The *al-Ard* Movement in the High Court of Justice” [Hebrew], *Plilim* (2002), pp. 107-155.

Jiryis's account attributes historical importance to the *al-Ard* movement as a harbinger of the new Palestinian nationalism in the post-*Nakba* era. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the first Palestinian attempt to organize on a national basis after the *Nakba* was the establishment of Fatah in 1959 in Kuwait (outside of the Palestinian homeland), Jiryis attempts to equate the "experience of the homeland" to the "experience of the diaspora" in the late 1950s by explaining *al-Ard*'s role in reviving the Palestinian national movement. Jiryis was interviewed by Sulayman Abu Ershid, who is a veteran on the Palestinian nationalist current in Israel. He takes Jiryis's comments even further when he concludes that the *al-Ard* movement "was aware of its role in rebuilding the Palestinian entity that was destroyed in the *Nakba*. It saw the Palestinian people and its problem as one indivisible unit and believed in all its rights. Despite the movement's sweeping support for 'Abd al-Nasir, it believed that the Palestinian people had the right to self-determination within the framework of the greater aspirations of the Arab nation."³

The argument that the *al-Ard* movement was one of the pioneers of the Palestinian national movement in the first generation after the *Nakba* is not new. Jacob Landau, in a 1971 study of Arab society in Israel, concluded that the primary purpose of the *al-Ard* movement was "to strive for Arab Palestinian nationalism, by ignoring the wishes of the Jewish majority in Israel and the state authorities."⁴ However, the new perspective tendered by Jiryis and Abu Ershid touches on an important dimension of the Palestinian character, which they attribute in hindsight to the *al-Ard* movement – the notion of "resistance" (*muqawwamah*), which is derived from the principle of "Palestinian independence of decision-making" (*al-qarar al-filastini al-mustaqill*). This core principle of modern Palestinian nationalism, which was introduced by the Palestinian armed organizations that sprouted in the 1960s and 1970s, was expressed in a proactive and revolutionary approach that ignored the political constraints on the ground. In this respect, it is not surprising that the Palestinian scholar Yezid Sayigh defined the years between 1967 and 1972 – that is, the years following the Six Day War – as the "revolutionary years."⁵ During these years, Fatah dominated the PLO under the leadership of Yasir 'Arafat, and the Popular Front (PFLP) and Democratic Front (DFLP) organizations were established. The doctrine of armed struggle, which was adopted by these organizations, expressed the new revolutionary approach and gave concrete meaning to the concept of "Palestinian independence of decision-making."

The "revolutionary years" left an impression not only on the external Palestinian sphere but also on the internal one (within the boundaries of pre-1967 Israel). In the summer of 1972 the "Sons of the Village," *Abnaa al-Balad*, was established in Umm al-Fahm. The organization saw itself as an inseparable part of the Palestinian national movement, even if it was forced to adapt to the political circumstances in which it operated and could not ignore state laws. From the very beginning, the founders of "Sons of the Village" emphasized that the organization was inspired by the

³ Interview with Sabri Jiryis (see note 1 above).

⁴ Jacob M. Landau, *The Arabs in Israel: Political Studies* (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, and the Ministry of Defence, 1971) [Hebrew]. See reference to the objectives of the *al-Ard* movement, pp. 120-121.

⁵ Yezid Sayigh, *Al-Harakah al-wataniyyah al-filastiniyyah, 1949-1992: Al-Kifah al-musallah wal-bahth 'an al-dawlah* (mu'assasat al-dirasat al-filastiniyyah/The Institute for Palestine Studies, 2003), pp. 227-462.

Palestinian doctrine of armed struggle. They stressed that it was the first “internal” revolutionary organization to be established after the *Nakba*, and thus could not be seen as the historical continuation of the *al-Ard* movement. The inference is that the idea of “resistance” wasn’t actualized among the Palestinian population in Israel until the post-1967 era, and that it drew its inspiration from the Palestinian organizations outside of Israeli-controlled areas.

But were the components of “resistance” truly absent among the Arab population at the end of the 1950s? For many years the dominant approach in the scholarly discourse on the nature of the Arab population that remained in Israel after its establishment in 1948 was that it was a weak and backward population, which barely tried to challenge the existing political order. Azmi Bishara opined that “the Palestinian population in Israel after 1948 was a defeated remnant of a defeated society,” and that this fact was expressed in its attitude towards itself and towards the Israeli government and the military administration.⁶ “The generation of survivors” from the 1948 war, as Khawla Abu Bakr and Dan Rabinovitz referred to the Palestinians in Israel in their 2002 book, was characterized as a passive population group, which submitted to the yoke of the military administration.⁷ Critics of Israel’s 18 year military administration (1948-1966) use to claim that there was no security justification for the government’s policy, and argued that the weakness and submissiveness of the Arab minority in Israel was definitive proof. Therefore, according to those critics, the only motivation for keeping it in place was political: to apply policies of tight supervision and control over a weak minority group.⁸

In recent years there has been a reversal of this notion in the historiography of Arab society in Israel. The new historiographical approach highlights the elements of resistance that prevailed among the Arab population in the years following the establishment of the state. In a 1997 article, Ahmad Sa’di argued that “the Palestinians [in Israel] developed a form of cultural resistance, through which they strove to influence the course of their lives.” One means of resistance was the effort made by displaced persons and their descendants to maintain the historical memory and local culture of the villages that were destroyed in 1948. Such a stance, argues Sa’di, expressed the resistance to the realities that were imposed by the political establishment.⁹ A broader expression of this new approach that emphasizes the dimension of resistance can be found in Hillel Cohen’s book, *Good Arabs*, which was first published in Hebrew in 2006. One of its principle conclusions is that “the 1948 generation” (those who became a minority in the new State of Israel) was not as cowed and submissive as previously thought, but actually exceeded the pre-1948 generation in the scope of its resistance. Cohen surmises that their level of opposition to the state or to its actions was far higher than is commonly held, and that this opposition even achieved considerable success, including the protection and

⁶ Azmi Bishara, “On the Question of the Palestinian Minority in Israel” [Hebrew], *Teoriya Uvikkoret*, No. 3 (1993), pp. 7-20.

⁷ Khawla Abu Bakr and Dan Rabinovitz, *Ha-Dor Ha-Zakuf (The Upright Generation)* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2002) [Hebrew], pp. 31-37.

⁸ Arik Rudnitzky, “The Contemporary Historiographical Debate in Israel on Government Policies on Arabs in Israel During the Military Administration Period (1948–1966),” *Israel Studies* 19:1 (2014), pp. 24-47.

⁹ Ahmad Sa’di, “Culture as a measure of political resistance: The Palestinian citizens of Israel” [Hebrew], *Teoriya Uvikkoret*, No. 10 (1997), pp. 193-202.

concealment of Palestinians who made their way back across the newly established border into sovereign Israeli territory. This enabled the Arab population to increase by 15 percent during the first five years after Israel's establishment. Cohen also mentions the Arab success in preserving their particular narrative and collective memory, despite efforts by the education system and security forces to prevent its development. According to Cohen, "this was not a power relationship in which one side held all the power and the other side was totally helpless."¹⁰

Another example of the "resistance thesis" is Maha Nassar's article from 2011. The article describes how between 1948 and 1958, following the establishment of the Israeli state, there was already a discussion of the charged issue of Palestinian refugees' return in the Communist Party's newspaper, *al-Ittihad*. This fact, Nassar argues, refutes the commonly held notion that the Arab minority was quiet and obedient in the period prior to 1967.¹¹

The emergence of this new historiographical approach is not a coincidence. It stems from the change in the self-perception of the Arabs in Israel in the post-Oslo era. Since then, the Palestinian national movement has been in crisis, which has been expressed in the absence of a comprehensive Palestinian national vision following the failure to implement the two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority, which was established two decades ago on the basis of this solution, failed to fully realize the Palestinian people's right to self-determination in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Worse still, for the past decade it has been split between the Fatah government in the West Bank and the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip.

In light of this current state of affairs, it appears that if anything, the Palestinians in Israel, who from the outset have found themselves in a situation (in the words of Majid al-Haj) of "double periphery," following the Oslo peace process – that is, on the margins of the Palestinian national movement and on the margins of Israeli society – have recovered from the crisis that had gripped them, reorganized themselves, and have today become the bearers of the nationalist torch. A landmark in this process was the publication of the four "Future Vision" documents in 2006-2007. These documents presented a comprehensive collective vision for the Arab minority in Israel, and effectively attempted to draw general lines, from the point of view of the minority, for a "permanent settlement" between the state and its Arab citizens. Another indication of this new proactive approach is that during the past decade, Arab leaders in Israel have expressed harsh criticism – even more than is heard from the Palestinian leadership in the territories – of Israel's intention to define itself as a "Jewish state" in negotiations on the final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.¹²

¹⁰ Hillel Cohen, *'Aravim Tovim – Ha-Modi'in ha-Yisraeli ve-ha-'Aravim be-Yisrael: Sochnim ve-Maf'ilim, Meshat'fim ve-Mordim, Matarot ve-Shitot* (Hebrew Edition, Jerusalem: Hotsaat Ivrit, 2006); Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Services and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2010), translated by Haim Watzman.

¹¹ Maha Nassar, "Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Discourse on the Right of Return, 1948–59," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Summer 2011), pp. 45-60.

¹² Arik Rudnitzky, *The Arab Minority in Israel and the Discourse on a "Jewish State"* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2015).

Even if the *al-Ard* movement didn't necessarily embody the Palestinian notion of resistance in the classical sense, Jiryis's words in his latest interview denote an additional tier in the process of reconstructing the past. This process emphasizes that the Palestinians in Israel, despite the crisis of the first decade after the *Nakba*, played an active role in shaping their history within Israel. The conclusion is clear: if the historical continuum of modern Palestinian national thought, which was first represented by the Palestinians "outside," has hit a dead end, the Palestinians "inside" have now risen and are proving, even if in retrospect, that the historical continuum of Palestinian nationalism unfolded (and continues to take place) in their homeland.

Arik Rudnitzky is a PhD candidate and serves as Project Manager of the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation at the Moshe Dayan Center (MDC) for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.

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