

The Conundrum of Israeli-Arab Citizenship

by **Mordechai Nisan**

Issued in the midst of a sustained attempt by the Palestinian Arabs to destroy it at birth, Israel's 1948 declaration of independence urged them "to participate in the upbuilding of the state on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."¹ The invitation to these inveterate foes to be fellow citizens was based on the belief that once their aggression had been defeated, they would resign themselves to a minority status in the nascent Jewish state.

Seventy-two years on, the fulfillment of this assumption seems as remote as ever. Not only has Arab integration in Israeli society not led to general acceptance of the legitimacy of Jewish statehood, but the more affluent and more established the Arab population has become, the stronger its Palestinian identification to the point of openly challenging the fundamental principles underpinning Israel's existence.



¹ "[The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel](#)," Provisional Government of Israel, Tel Aviv, *Official Gazette*, no. 1, May 14, 1948.

This seemingly unbridgeable gulf between Israel's Arabs and Jews raises the need for a profound redefinition of the concept of citizenship in a way that would satisfy the Arabs' national identification and protect their civil and religious rights without enabling them to undo Israel's Jewish national character.

Israel's Arab Citizens and Their Political Leadership

Since Israel's establishment, its Arab citizenry has grown twelvefold—from 156,000 people in 1949 to just over 1.9 million in 2019 although its relative size has remained virtually unchanged (growing from 18 to 21 percent of the total population).² In line with the declaration of independence's commitment to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex," the official, state-financed Arabic language educational system promoted both literacy and the communal identity and cohesion of the Arab minority. Some 16 percent of the total university population is Arab.³ Arabs constitute 38 percent of the pharmacists in Israel, a third of the doctors, and 20 percent of the nurses.⁴ The number of Arab members of the Knesset jumped from two in 1949 to

eight in 1992 to fifteen in 2020, confirming the general trend of Arab progress and participation in Israel's public life.

These major advances notwithstanding, opinion polls, despite their fallibility, offer a more complex picture. Since the late 1970s, and all the more so after the launch of the Oslo "peace process" in 1993, Israeli Arabs have increasingly self-identified as Palestinians and revealed their emotional and ideological distance from the Jewish state. A survey from May 2001 found that 46 percent of Arabs rejected Israel's Jewish identity, while a 2006 survey claimed that 56 percent of the Arabs were not proud of their Israeli citizenship with twice as many of the respondents feeling greater attachment to the Palestinian people than to Israel.⁵ A 2012 survey by Sami Smooha of Haifa University found that 70 percent rejected Israel's right to maintain a Jewish majority, preferring a binational state over a Jewish one,⁶ which the Israel Democracy Institute corroborated in 2017, reporting that 67 percent opposed Israel's Jewish character.⁷ A recent survey from 2020 shows a growing Arab acceptance of their "Israeli" identity and a decline in their "Palestinian" identification; yet this finding is compromised and complicated by

² "[Population, by Religion](#)," Population: Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, no. 70, Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), Jerusalem, Sept. 26, 2019.

³ "[Students in Universities, in Academic Colleges and in Academic Colleges of Education](#) among Persons Aged 18-29, by Sex, Age, Population Group and Degree," Population: Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, no. 70, ICBS, Sept. 26, 2019.

⁴ *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), Aug. 24, 2015; *Israel21c* (San Francisco), Oct. 31, 2018.

⁵ Asher Arian, "Israeli Public Opinion on National Security," Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, memo. no. 60, Aug. 2001, p. 19; Uzi Arad and Gad Alon, "Patriotism and Israel's National Security Survey 2006," Institute for Policy and Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, "Key Findings."

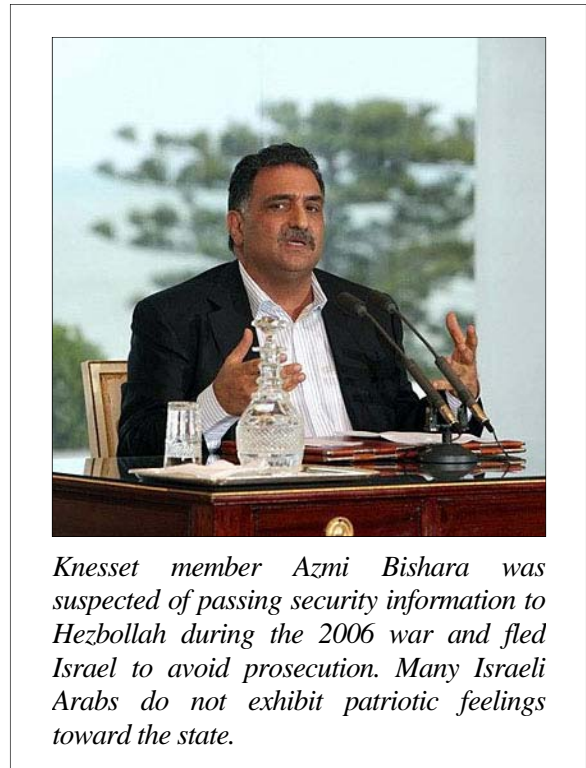
⁶ Sami Smooha, *Lo Shovrim Et ha-Kelim: Madad Yahasei Arvim-Yehudim be-Israel 2012* (Haifa: Haifa University, 2013), p. 14.

⁷ Tamar Hermann, Or Anabi, William Cubbison, Ella Heller, and Fadi Omar, [A Conditional Partnership: Jews and Arabs](#) (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2017), p. 64.

the majority denying the existence of a Jewish Temple on Jerusalem's Temple Mount, and by implication—the millenarian Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel.⁸

When on March 9, 2020, Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz promised to form a “patriotic government,” Knesset member (MK) Ahmad Tibi censured this use of words as “unfortunate.”⁹ Israel clearly does not inspire patriotic feelings among its Arab citizens though most of them have indicated over the years that they would rather be in Israel—with its educational opportunities, social benefits, personal and political liberties, and material advances—than elsewhere.¹⁰ A personal utilitarian consideration coexists with an Arab nationalist conviction.

Arab students and politicians are as a rule stridently anti-Israel. University campuses in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa experience boisterous Palestinian nationalist demonstrations with participants waving Palestinian flags and denouncing Israel and the Israel Defense Forces.¹¹ Intellectuals and public figures from the community issued the Haifa Declaration in 2007 that called for Palestinian refugees to “return”¹²—the Arab euphemism for Israel's destruction via demographic subversion. For its part, the “national committee of the heads of local



Knesset member Azmi Bishara was suspected of passing security information to Hezbollah during the 2006 war and fled Israel to avoid prosecution. Many Israeli Arabs do not exhibit patriotic feelings toward the state.

Arab municipalities in Israel,” the effective leadership of the Israeli Arabs, issued a lengthy document outlining its “Future Vision for the Palestinian Arabs in Israel.” The document rejected Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state and demanded its substitution by a system that would ensure Arab “national, historic and civil rights at both the individual and collective levels.”¹³ MK Azmi Bishara, founder of the ultranationalist Balad party, proposed to redefine Israel as a “state of all its citizens”—yet another euphemism for Israel's transformation into an Arab state in which Jews would eventually be relegated to a permanent minority. Bishara was later suspected of passing security information to

⁸ Pluralism Index 2020, The Jewish People Policy Institute, in *The Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 21, 2020.

⁹ “[Tibi Meuchzav me-Gantz: ha-Bitui ‘Memshala Patriotit’ Lo Mutslah.](#)” Galei Zahal (IDF radio, glz.co.il), Mar. 16, 2020.

¹⁰ Daniel Pipes, “[The Hell of Israel Is Better than the Paradise of Arafat.](#)” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2005, pp. 43-50.

¹¹ See, for example, *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 29, 2008, Nov. 14, 2019.

¹² “[The Haifa Declaration.](#)” Mada al-Carmel, Haifa, 2007.

¹³ “[Ha-Hazon ha-Atidi la-Aravim ha-Falestinim be-Israel.](#)” Ha-Vaad ha-Artzi Shel Roshei ha-Rashuyot ha-Arviyot be-Israel, Nazareth, 2006, p. 9.

Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War and fled Israel to avoid prosecution.

The Islamic Movement in Israel is religiously and rhetorically militant, inciting against the state and discrediting any sign of “Israelization” within the Arab community. The leader of its northern branch, Raed Salah, was imprisoned for aiding Hamas in 2003 and yet again in 2020 for encouraging and supporting terror attacks by his followers. The spirit of incitement undoubtedly contributed to the July 2017 murder of two Druze police officers in Jerusalem by two Arabs from Umm al-Fahm, Salah’s home town. He also accused Israel of conspiring to destroy al-Aqsa Mosque and to deny free Muslim worship on the Temple Mount (even though the Muslim waqf or endowment has administered this most sacred religious site for the Jewish people since 1967).¹⁴

For their part, the Arab MKs, speaking as the predominant political class for the Israeli Arabs, have behaved disloyally in a variety of ways. For example:

- Ahmad Tibi served as a political adviser to Yasser Arafat, visited Libyan dictator Mu’ammarr Qaddafi in violation of Israeli law and praised Palestinian “martyrdom terrorism” against Israel.¹⁵

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- Hanin Zoabi joined the armed pro-Palestinian Mavi Marmara ship to Gaza in 2010, whose “peace activists” violently attacked Israeli soldiers.¹⁶

- Ayman Odeh was scheduled to meet with the presidents of Jewish organizations in Manhattan in 2015 but refused to enter the appointed room adjacent to the Jewish Agency offices because of its Zionist mission and the display of the Israeli flag.¹⁷
- Basil Ghattas was apprehended in 2016 and sentenced to two years in prison for attempting to smuggle cell phones and SIM cards to incarcerated terrorists whom he visited.¹⁸
- Jamal Zahalka of the Balad Party pledged solidarity with Hamas and Hezbollah. In August 2018, in response to the new Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People, he posted a map of Israel covered with a Palestinian flag, later adding that no Arab would ever recognize a Jewish state.¹⁹
- Yousef Jabareen participated in an anti-Israel, pro-boycott-divest-sanction event in London in July 2019, declaring that “we [the Arabs] have the willingness and persistence as the owners of the land.”²⁰

¹⁴ Shaul Bartal, “[Sheikh Raed Salah and His Endless Struggle against Israel](#),” *Perspectives*, no. 1492, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Ramat Gan, Mar. 22, 2020.

¹⁵ PA TV (Fatah), Palestinian Media Watch, Jerusalem, Jan. 9, 2011; Efraim Karsh, “Israel’s Arabs: Deprived or Radicalized?” *Israel Affairs*, Jan. 2013, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Arutz Sheva* (Beit El and Petah Tikva), May 30, 2014.

¹⁷ *The Times of Israel*, Dec. 11, 2015.

¹⁸ *Middle East Monitor* (London), Dec. 22, 2016.

¹⁹ *Israel Hayom* (Tel Aviv), Aug. 2, 2018.

²⁰ *World Israel News* (Lawrence, N.Y.), July 8, 2019.



As Israel marked its 70th Independence Day, Israeli Arabs chanted, “This is our land. ... We’ll continue our struggle at any price.”

In May 2018, Mansur Dahamshe, secretary-general of the Hadash Party on the Joint Arab List, sallied forth in a television debate, saying, “I don’t recognize the legitimacy of the state of Israel” and lambasting it as racist, fascistic, and apartheid-like.²¹

On “Nakba Day” in 2018, anticipating and countering Israel’s Independence Day, Arabs came to the town of Atlit south of Haifa, chanting, “This is our land. ... We’ll continue our struggle at any price.” Palestinian flags fluttered in the air. In May 2019, Sami Abu Shehadeh, chief executive officer of the Jaffa Youth Movement, said, “This [Palestine] is our homeland. ... We are the indigenous community.” He added that the Jews had emigrated from Europe and that the decades after the 1948 war had turned a “bent generation” of Arabs into an “erect generation.”

Israel’s ostensible binational and bi-

denominational fabric is real. Jews have their own national history, memory, identity, and experience, possessing a language, religion, and culture unto themselves. The Jewish state is central to a collective narrative that has shaped Jews into an extended family with strong bonds of trust, obligation, and unity. Across the divide are the Arabs, some 83 percent of whom are Muslims,²² with their own sense of rootedness, faith, language, and culture. They have been grasping for recovery since their 1948 defeat, forgetting and forgiving nothing and believing that justice demands returning Palestine to its Arab inhabitants.

Two Peoples, Two Solitudes

At the interstices of society, there are plenty of contacts and exchanges between Jews and Arabs. They shop in the same malls, work in the same enterprises, drive on the same roads, eat in the same cafes, and receive medical treatment in the same hospitals. There are Israeli Jews who feel strongly that the Arabs are well-meaning fellow citizens who should be more generously welcomed and integrated into all areas of national life. Other Israelis believe that any further Arab political gains will radicalize the demand for the “return” of Palestinian refugees and the nullification of the law of return that allows Jews to receive Israeli citizenship upon settling in Israel. That said, it is highly unlikely that friendships and acquaintanceships, for all their humanity, can mitigate the political polarization separating

²¹ i24 TV (Tel Aviv), May 27, 2018.

²² “[Population, by Religion](#),” ICBS; “Christmas 2019: Christians in Israel,” ICBS, [Dec. 23, 2019](#).

Jews and Arabs. A shared citizenship does not guarantee a shared vision of Israel's *raison d'être*.

Polling data have shown a certain symmetry—with a marked degree of mutual rejection and exclusivity—coloring Jewish views of Arabs and Arab views of Israel. Surveys have shown a discernible Jewish preference to deny Arabs equal rights with as much as half of Israeli Jews, according to a 2016 Pew Research poll, actually favoring Arab transfer or expulsion from the country.²³ The Israel Democracy Institute reported in 2017 that 58 percent of Jewish respondents—mostly among those on the political right—support revoking Arab citizenship due to Arab rejection of Israel's Jewish character.²⁴

A revealing anecdote illustrates the Arab position. In the July 2019 Knesset election for national ombudsman, the center-left candidate was Giora Romm, a retired army general and former deputy commander of the Israeli Air Force (IAF). In his civilian career, Romm had made a point of including Arabs in significant posts. He canvassed parliamentarians, including Arab MKs, asking for their support in the Knesset vote. But he heard from Arab members that they were uneasy with his IAF career. He was shaken when he heard this, having assumed that he would win their support against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's favored candidate. To no avail.

Romm later said that when he flew over Damascus on bombing runs during the 1973 war, he thought he was doing so on behalf of Israel's Arab citizens as well as Jewish

Many Israeli Arab citizens prefer to identify as “Arabs in Israel” or as “Palestinians in Israel.”

citizens. All Israelis would be safer if his mission succeeded against the enemy. Now he was discovering that Arab citizens, members of the Knesset no less, did not

value his service to the country but rather identified with the Syrian enemy. Romm insisted that the subject of Arab Israeli citizenship demanded a reappraisal.²⁵

Citizens or Quasi-Citizens?

Arabs in Israel are often uncomfortable calling themselves Israeli Arabs, preferring to identify instead as Arabs in Israel or—as has been the case over the past few decades—as Palestinians in Israel. When they received citizenship as an automatic right in the wake of the 1948 war, they had a hard time appreciating what it meant, and in part, for good reason. They enjoyed political, educational, religious, and cultural freedoms and resources, yet many were subjected to military rule until 1966 that restricted them in many practical ways—as when the authorities were ratifying or rejecting mayors and school principals—in order to ensure they were not agents of subversion or violence.

The Israeli government exempts Arabs from military service with general approval of the policy on both sides. Some Bedouins, however, volunteer and do serve, and Druze (and Circassian) citizens, unlike most Muslim Arabs, transcend their group identity in bonding with Jews as proud Israeli patriots who serve in the army. It is perhaps unreasonable to force the Arab citizens to face their Arab brothers on the battlefield in the defense of the Jewish state. It would be an

²³ *The Forward* (New York), Mar. 8, 2016.

²⁴ *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), Nov. 7, 2017.

²⁵ *Israel Hayom*, July 19, 2019.

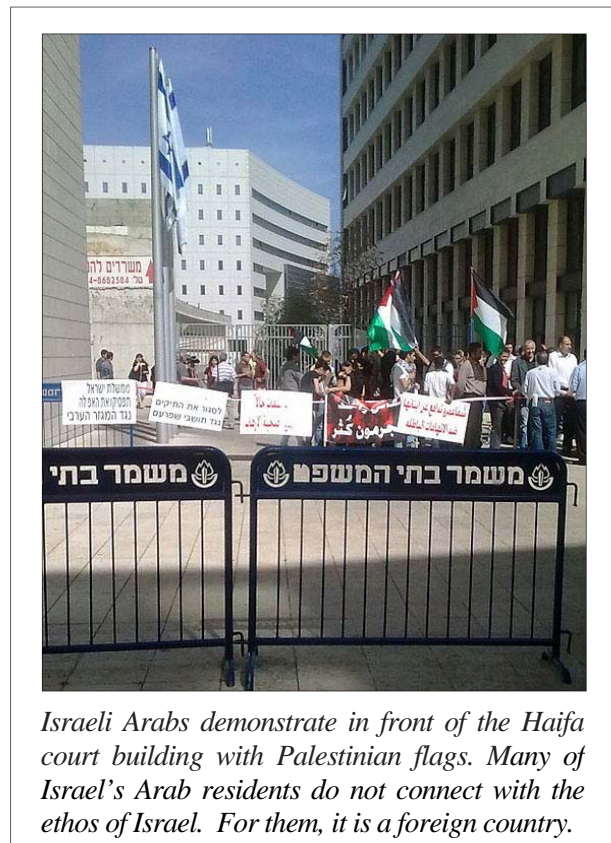
agonizing task if Israeli Arabs in the army had to conduct security operations against Palestinian residents in the West Bank or Gaza.

Hence, the concept of “quasi-citizenship” could offer an appropriate resolution to this awkward situation—one that accords with the notion of “different logics of citizenship” for residents unable or unwilling to identify fully with the state while enjoying civil liberties apart from voting rights.²⁶ The notion of citizenship as a continuum would also be consistent with the Middle Eastern social tradition of “tribal citizenship.” Using the term loosely as applied to Kurds in Iraq, Alawites in Syria, and Kabyle in Algeria, it likewise applies to the Arabs in Israel, focusing on a collective ethnic-religious profile. The Western concept of universal suffrage based on “state citizenship” for all has exceptions in the West as in the cases of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Pacific island territories. Limitations on full citizenship exist in the case of co-ethnic communities beyond the nation state borders, as for quasi-citizens of Russia residing in the Crimea; so too in the case of transnational European citizenship allowing participation in EU elections, but not in national elections. British political discourse actually conceived at times of citizenship and voting rights as two separate items.²⁷ These various permutations of citizenship can stimulate thinking on the Israeli conundrum of the Arabs’ status in the country.

Worth mentioning, in addition, is the

²⁶ For more on this, see Elizabeth F. Cohen, *Semi-Citizenship in Democratic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Daniel Naujoks, “Free Rider or Trailblazer? Atypical Citizenship and the Meaning of Membership,” 2014 Citizenship Studies Conference, Wayne State University.



Israeli Arabs demonstrate in front of the Haifa court building with Palestinian flags. Many of Israel's Arab residents do not connect with the ethos of Israel. For them, it is a foreign country.

differentiation between citizens, all of whom enjoy full rights before the law, and permanent residents denied voting rights in national elections (as for non-citizen Jews and most East Jerusalem Arabs). Lacking an authentic identification with the ethos of Israel, this is a foreign country for many of its Arab residents.

In 2002, Israel revoked citizenship in the mode of felony disenfranchisement from two Arabs, one of whom affiliated with Hamas, the other with Hezbollah. Both had shown a “breach of allegiance” as delineated in the law to justify revocation.²⁸ MK Avigdor Lieberman proposed in 2010 a succinct

²⁸ Shai Lavi, “Punishment and the Revocation of Citizenship in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Israel,” *New Criminal Law Review*, Spring 2010, p. 418.

slogan—“No loyalty, no citizenship”—that would obligate all Israelis to pass a loyalty test or give an oath of allegiance.

Arabs in Israel are admittedly not naturalized citizens but native-born who acquire citizenship at birth without qualifications, conditions, or delay. However in some countries—Belgium and Lebanon, for example—the principle of *jus soli* (birthright citizenship) is neither unequivocal nor categorical. The working assumption that a person born in a country naturally identifies with its ethos, history, language, and culture has been disproven in some places. For instance, among Muslims born in European countries, some of these native-born citizens have committed murderous terrorist acts against their non-Muslim neighbors. Israel, too, has experienced, in addition to acts of treason, Arab-Muslim violence directed against Jewish fellow-citizens. Some version of quasi-citizenship reform would accord with the words of the great libertarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, who advocated universal suffrage with “no persons disqualified, except through their own default.”²⁹

The anti-Jewish-state Arab citizenry is a constant and not circumstantial political-ideological datum. Measures might be taken, nonetheless, to incentivize loyalty or, alternatively, to exact a price for its absence. For example:

- a military service exemption tax (as functions in Switzerland) for males

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who refuse recruitment by deducting a percentage of personal income;

- compulsory civilian service for citizens who refuse military service;
- a differential scale of child allowance payments by privileging families where at least one member served in the army or did civilian service.

Israel’s Basic Law of Government, Article 7a (1), demands that any party or person seeking to participate in general elections and contending for parliamentary representation must recognize Israel “as a Jewish and democratic state.” Nonetheless, the activist, liberal Supreme Court upheld the right of Arab parties and politicians—as in the case of the Joint Arab List—to run for election though they manifestly do not accept Israel as a Jewish state. Were the law to be enforced, many Arab citizens would likely have refrained from voting as a form of self-disenfranchisement in the 2019 and 2020 elections.

Regarding Israel’s ultra-orthodox Jews, the fact that they overwhelmingly do not perform military service cannot justify revoking their citizenship as this has nothing to do with rejection of Israel as a Jewish state but with subordination of practical aspects of civil duties to immersion in religious study—a fact deemed by Israel’s founding prime minister David Ben-Gurion as sufficient justification for exempting them from military service. While the original exemption applied to a small number of students (to be substantially expanded since Likud’s rise to power in 1977), this does not obscure the national identity of the ultraorthodox as Jews living in the state of the Jewish people rather than a distinct

²⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), p. 169.

national group rejecting the existence of this very state.

Conclusion

In a September 2019 post-election meeting with President Reuven Rivlin on the Joint Arab List's preferences for a future prime minister, MK Tibi unambiguously stated his and the party's national Palestinian creed: "We did not immigrate here [unlike the Jews] ... We are the owners of this land."³⁰ No political decorum or conventional respect dissuaded Tibi from brazenly brandishing his Palestinian Arab ideological credentials in the Jewish state and against the Jewish state—directly to its Jewish president. He was even more blatant after another round of elections (in March 2020) when the Joint Arab List won an unprecedented tally of fifteen MKs. In a radio interview, Tibi stated "the Land of Israel is a [Zionist] colonialist phrase"³¹ For this Israeli MK, the Palestinian narrative was the only legitimate one.

This open defiance underscores the brazen and hypocritical conduct of Israel's Arab leadership, which seeks to have its cake

and eat it too: to subvert Israel's Jewish identity while enjoying their democratic freedoms and while deriding any suggestion of making some Arab-Israeli border communities citizens of a would-be Palestinian state as part of an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The sustained effort of the Palestinian Arab leadership from the 1920s to 1948 to subvert the Jewish national revival rather than to coexist peacefully with their Jewish neighbors led to the collapse and dispersal of Palestinian society. In a similar way, the steady radicalization of the Israeli Arabs by their elected leaders over the past decades might lead to an unbridgeable schism with their Jewish compatriots—a division whose severity is often beguilingly obscured by visible signs of social integration in various spheres of life.

Mordechai Nisan, retired lecturer in Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, recently authored *The Crack-Up of the Israeli Left* (Canada: Mantua Books, 2019).



³⁰ *Arutz Sheva*, [Sept. 23, 2019](#).

³¹ Efraim Karsh and Gershon Hacoen, "The Struggle for Israel's Jewish Soul," *Perspectives*, no. 1486, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Ramat Gan, Mar. 16, 2020.