



JERUSALEM'S ARABS: A LAND-LOCKED ISLAND

Over the past nearly 60 years since Israel liberated the entirety of Jerusalem and united the city under its sovereignty, an interesting phenomenon has sprouted up there. The Arabs of Jerusalem have developed a unique identity, different and separate from that of the other Israeli-Arabs, and from those of Judea and Samaria, and of course from those of Gaza.

Arab Jerusalemites have changed over the decades from bearing the title Maqdisi (residents of al-Quds - the Arab name for Jerusalem, derived from the same root as the Hebrew "Mikdash," as in Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple), indicating their physical connection to the holy places). As the years passed, they have become more and more Israeli - if not in genuine identity, then in their daily practical affiliation, especially in terms of economics, welfare, and health services.

Quite Used to Israel

"We have no interest in changing places and identity," said one well-known Jerusalem Arab, while another said, "We don't see ourselves as separate from Israel." The latter is a blue-collar worker from

just outside Jerusalem. A third source, owner of a small business, added, "It doesn't matter what government Israel has; we grew up under Israeli rule, and we can't get used to something else."

It's more than a question of adaptation, however. Jerusalem Arabs are busy with their own struggles, detached from those of their cousins in Judea and Samaria – whom they view as inferior to them politically: they [the latter] are under PA control, as opposed to the Israeli government under which the Jerusalemites live. This is true despite not-insignificant family ties and sometimes also business connections between the two locales. Their attitude towards the Israeli-Arabs is even more acute. The first source cited above said about them, "The Arabs of the north [i.e., Israeli-Arabs] are more hostile to us than even Jews who don't like us."

No Solidarity

Another approach expressed in the Arab street holds that the issue is not necessarily one of hostility, but rather a lack of identification and solidarity between the two groups. This stems from their different interests, and from the tendency for everyone to look out mainly for their own immediate concerns.

For example, one of the main points of contact between Arabs of Jerusalem and those of the north [Israel] is the Israeli-Arabs who come to Jerusalem to fill senior positions in the Arab

neighborhoods. These include school principals, inspectors, community-center directors, and various municipal roles. Those who come from the "north" generally leave behind their homes and families, and are forced to rent a second set of [expensive] quarters for the sake of their job and careers. Their solidarity with Jerusalem Arabs and their needs, not surprisingly, takes second place to these concerns.

Two Social Tiers

Add to this the basic resentment of the local Arabs at the fact that they remain relegated to an inferior status, while the supervisory echelons come to them from afar. Thus are formed two tiers of social status. For example, out of the 17 school education inspectors in Jerusalem, only one is actually from the city; and even he owes his position only to the fact that no inspector from the north agreed to work in the neighborhoods outside the separation barrier [probably because they are perceived as being more dangerous].

During the war of the past two years, yet another wedge was driven between the two populations. In the past, when thousands of Israeli-Arabs used to come for Temple Mount prayer, they would make the shopping rounds in the eastern neighborhoods and shopping centers, contributing nicely to the locals' income. But this slowed down significantly during the course of the war; fewer Arabs came for prayers, and much fewer shopped, and the Arab neighborhoods felt the hit.

While upper-class Israeli Arabs arrive in Jerusalem for work, there is no parallel stream of Jerusalem Arabs to Israeli-Arab communities. A teacher from Arab Jerusalem has no chance of finding an appropriate position there; if anything is available for him or her, it is sure to be on a much lower level than what they seek. Thus, thousands of female teachers in Jerusalem remain unemployed. As a result, many young Arab Jerusalemites relocate to the southern seaside city of Eilat – certainly a much less natural choice for them than the Arab cities and towns of Israel.

Poor and Weak

Thus, unemployment in Jerusalem among Arab women in Jerusalem is lower than that of Israeli Arabs, and they also have a relatively high birth rate – rendering the Jerusalem Arab population one that is, by definition, poor and weak relative to other population sectors.

In sum, we can simply quote the talk on the Arab street: The Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem are an island surrounded on three sides by a security barrier, and by Jewish Jerusalem on the fourth side. This means that the development, and the future in general, of the Arabs of the city lies almost exclusively in Jewish Jerusalem. That is, regardless of their political orientations, and regardless of their nationalist preferences, and almost regardless of their religious inclinations – for, still and all, the more religious they are, the more they strive to remain distant from Israel – the Arabs of Jerusalem are bound up with Israel's future.

