

The Importance of Ties between Palestinian Citizens of Israel and Diaspora Jewry: A View from Britain

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Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, who feel their political representatives cannot achieve significant change for them on domestic issues, find it hard to believe that their voice could be meaningful in Israel's foreign relations. Indeed, their involvement in Israeli foreign relations, both in the governmental and non-governmental arena, is limited. However, one area in which their involvement and influence have significant untapped potential lies in forging ties with Diaspora Jewry. For instance, in London, there is a clear disconnect between the representative bodies of the Jewish community, such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council, and those representing the Palestinian community, such as The Association of the Palestinian Community in the UK and the Palestinian Forum in Britain which reflect the main currents of Palestinian thinking. While the disconnect is evident on the formal-organizational level, it does not preclude unofficial ties between Palestinians and Jews in London. Nonetheless, links between the two communities are limited, as is the space for joint discussions and exchanges of views, thoughts and narratives.

The complex identity of the Palestinian citizens of Israel could offer new and more unique links between the communities and enable enhanced activity in the field of public diplomacy. This could manifest itself, for example, in raising Jewish community awareness regarding the challenges facing the Palestinian minority in Israel. Increased awareness enables the community to mobilize the multi-ethnic and multi-religious public opinion in support and solidarity with this minority. It could also result in greater public demand for British politicians and leaders to exert pressure on the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to resume negotiations.

The distrust between London's Jewish and Palestinian communities, the ongoing rift between them, and the dichotomous division between pro-Palestine and pro-Israel positions have had serious repercussions. They have prevented a discourse and exchange of knowledge that could have led to a shift in perception and sincere communication of personal and collective experiences that shape each community's identity. Thus, for example, the Jewish community is not exposed to the significance of the Nakba and its implications for the daily lives of Palestinians, even those who live far away from the occupied territories. At the same time, the Palestinian community is not exposed to the depth of the Jewish community's fears of persecution and anti-Semitism, and their impact on the links between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel. The Palestinian community expresses displeasure over the automatic support for Israel and its policies demonstrated by most of the Jewish community in Britain, and cannot understand it in light of Israel's decades-long occupation of the Palestinian people. On the contrary, the Jewish community has a hard

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time dealing with Palestinian criticism of Zionism, which provides the Jewish people with a safe haven after centuries of persecution. This gap in the perceptions of the two communities prevents many Diaspora Palestinians and Diaspora Jews from finding points of contact that would allow them to work together in support of universal values and political mobilization for the sake of a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Palestinian citizens of Israel can convey this experience to Diaspora Palestinians, many of whom have never met Israelis or Jews. This is possible due to their familiarity with the Jewish-Israeli narrative, which stems from their direct links with Jewish Israelis. At the same time, they are well familiar with the narrative of their people, the Palestinians, and feel responsible for ending their suffering under the Israeli occupation. Given the anger of Diaspora Palestinians at Israeli government policies in the occupied territories, they are disinclined to meet the Jewish side and share with it the thoughts and feelings of the Palestinian collective or their individual stories. Many regard a meeting with the Jewish community as a step toward normalization of relations and believe there is no reason to conduct a dialogue between the oppressor and its victims, and to portray the two sides as equal. Although the Palestinian community understands that Diaspora Jewry does not represent the State of Israel or its government, there is still a tendency to blame them for their very support of “the existence of the Zionist project at the expense of the Palestinian people,” as some Palestinians put it.

On the Jewish side, some believe the Palestinian people are a made-up nation designed to challenge the State of Israel’s sovereignty, but liberals think otherwise. The liberals in the UK Jewish community are interested in preserving their Zionism by supporting Israel’s existence, but at the same time would like Israel to be democratic and ethical in the spirit of the state’s Declaration of Independence. The Palestinian community is unaware of the growing desire among British Jews to learn about the Palestinian narrative. In addition, among the liberal Jewish community there is a true and growing interest in confronting tough issues that have been a taboo for long, such as the Nakba. This interest could be leveraged for joint activity directed at ending the occupation and advancing peace in the Middle East.

Out of a belief in the potential empathy between two minorities and the desire of Jewish community members to learn about the Palestinian citizens of Israel and to work for justice and equality, I have undertaken the task to teach British Jewry about us, the Palestinian minority in Israel. Since arriving in London for my Master’s degree studies in International Strategy and Diplomacy at the LSE, I have been delivering lectures to various Jewish groups, among them civil society organizations, synagogues, schools, youth movements and community leaders. Discussion with Jewish groups related to issues of the Palestinian citizens of Israel often lead to an inevitable discussion of the broader issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition to lectures, I also try to create a breakthrough that could help mend the rift between the two communities by linking liberals from both sides and explaining to the Palestinian community that they have an interlocutor on the Jewish side. One of the central challenges I confront is dealing with each community’s fear of being exposed to information that would change its political stance toward the other community or toward the conflict.

On the Palestinian side, there is fear of being diverted away from the conflict. There is concern that the emphasis in discourse with the Jewish community would shift to focus on personal links between individuals rather than on criticism of the State of Israel for the occupation. In their view, this could lead to a softening of the determined Palestinian stance that views Israel as a homogenous entity, and would undermine efforts to forge a common,

uncompromising, clear Palestinian voice. These concerns manifest themselves in comments made to me by a Lebanese friend and researcher whom I told about my efforts to make the Palestinian narrative accessible to the British Jewish community. He argued that while Palestinians must not de-humanize Jews, they must also avoid over-humanizing them.

On the Jewish side, there is concern that the exposure to information could make many in the community lose their sympathy for Israel. Support for Israel is part of the identity diligently nurtured among Diaspora Jewry. This concern becomes more significant given the growing generational gap within the British Jewish community. Whereas the younger generation tends to adopt universal values and feels comfortable criticizing Israeli government policies in the territories and toward its Arab Palestinian citizens, the older generation is grateful for the existence of the State of Israel and avoids harsh criticism of its policies.

Despite these challenges, educating the Jewish community in the UK about the Palestinian citizens of Israel is an excellent opportunity for me to create a space for discussion between the Palestinian citizens of Israel and Diaspora Jews in order to remove barriers, deepen acquaintance, increase understanding of complexities, and mobilize political power to improve the situation and promote peace. Since the Palestinian Diaspora avoids such conversations, often under pressure from political groups that advocate an ongoing disconnect between the communities, Palestinian citizens of Israel can promote it by virtue of their complex identity without risking exclusion from the Palestinian community. Forging and strengthening ties between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Diaspora Jews, could pave the way for a more inclusive conversation, with the participation of the Palestinian Diaspora, for connections based on mutual values and understanding, and for activities designed to change the reality in the Middle East, primarily by ending the occupation.