The Jewish state is a recipe for continued injustice

Over the last twenty years, many actors in the state and within Israeli society have worked tirelessly to embed the idea of the State of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic” state in the Israeli, Arab and international public consciousness. These efforts have attained such dimensions that we can designate them “the project of the Jewish State.” Israeli academia has endeavored to develop a paradigm that fits this Israeli reality, namely the “ethnic democracy,” and both parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors have attempted to draft a constitution to consolidate this definition. The Knesset has enacted laws to confer legality on the concept; Israeli diplomats have actively propagated it; and the Israeli press has made significant efforts in this regard. All of the efforts invested in this project stem from a realization on the part of these actors that the definition contains an internal contradiction that cannot be resolved.

Over the last ten years there has been a shift towards a demand for recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. Israel demands that the world, and also the Palestinians, recognize it as such and sets this recognition as a condition for its own acceptance of the existence of a Palestinian state. What Israel seeks in making this demand is that the Palestinians accept its legitimacy as a Jewish state, i.e., a Zionist state, which constitutes the legitimization of the Zionist project itself. In practice, this demand means that the world and the Palestinians accept that this part of the homeland belongs to the Jewish people and that the Palestinian citizen (its indigenous inhabitant) is a guest of the new master. It further implies that the door to return is closed – the Right of Return is erased with Palestinian approval – and that Jewish supremacy over Arabs in this country will start to take on an air of legitimacy.

The source of the emphasis placed on this demand that the world, and the entire Palestinian people – the victims of the Zionist project – accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state may be attributed to a conviction among Israelis that this legitimacy is not a foregone conclusion, but is open to question.

The questioning of this legitimacy by Palestinian citizens in Israel represents the greatest challenge, due to their citizenship status. The opinions published in this volume of jadal, and the important interview conducted with the Chairman of the High Follow-Up Committee, reflect a Palestinian consensus within the Green Line against accepting the legitimacy of the Jewish State. The reason for this consensus is that, put simply, it entrenches the inferior status of Palestinians; they believe that no one is entitled to demand that they accept this inferiority, or to speak on their behalf contrary to this position.
The global spread of political discourse of two states for two peoples – a Palestinian state and a Jewish state – is regrettable. Many around the world are ignorant of the meaning of the Jewish State, and the fact that it grants preference to a Jewish person in Israel, or anywhere else in the world, over its own citizens of other religions and nationalities. When some right-wingers describe the US as a Christian state, many rightly reject this description. However, at the same time this description – in contrast to the situation in Israel – does not grant constitutional and legal preference to Christian over Jew, Muslim or Buddhist. In Israel, the political significance of the definition of the Jewish State is precisely that the Jew is given preference over the non-Jew. The world should understand the depth of the injustice that this definition inflicts on the Palestinians and refuse to accept it. The world must stand with the Palestinians to avert this injustice, which in its gravity may rival that which befell them in 1948. It must stand with them in their demand for Israel to be transformed into a democratic state. The ethnic state is a recipe for continued injustice and for resistance to it, and thus for the continuation of the conflict. It is the democratic state that will guarantee equality among all citizens, and it is therefore surprising that the proudly democratic West should stand in the way of the democratic solution.