

The Role and Status of the 1948 Palestinians within the Palestinian National Project: A review of attitudes within Palestinian society

Dr. Mtanes Shihadeh and Dr. Ameen Saabneh *

We have seen the political awareness of Palestinians in Israel undergo significant evolution, in parallel to Israel's attempts to enforce status quo policies in the 1967 Occupied Territories, and the near-consensus among Israel's main political parties to reject the establishment of a viable Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and dismiss the two-State solution as unrealistic and a threat to the future of the State of Israel. This evolution also occurred amid an increase in racist legal and political practices against Palestinians within the Green Line. There is growing awareness of the hostility between the State of Israel and Arab citizens of Israel. The fading of the illusion of equality or of the possibility of changing the character of the State to a State for all its citizens, has been accompanied by signs that the discourse is returning to the origins of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, and treating the Zionist project as a settler-colonial project. Such awareness could lead to the growth of a political discourse among Palestinians in Israel based on the idea that putting their political status and future in order, is a part of the resolution of the Palestinian issue (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), and is not marginal to its settlement, and that they themselves are not merely an internal Israeli matter. This shift could qualify Palestinians in Israel to assume an active role in the Palestinian national movement in the near future. However, any future role does not pertain solely to the decision of Palestinians in Israel, but must be shared by all sections of the Palestinian people and all constituents within the Palestinian national movement.

This article seeks to examine the shifts in the political awareness of Palestinians in Israel, as well as their status and role within the Palestinian national project. It presents a preliminary analysis of the results of a public opinion survey, gauging attitudes within Palestinian society on both sides of the Green Line towards the role and status of Palestinians in Israel within the Palestinian national project. The survey was initiated and supervised by the Institute for Palestine Studies and Mada al-Carmel, including the selection of subjects and formulation of questions. The survey was conducted in the 1967 Occupied Territories via personal interviews of a representative sample group consisting of 1,200 individuals aged 18 years and over in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was carried out between 19 and 23 August 2015 by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre. Within the 1948 territories, the survey was conducted by the Statnet research institute via telephone interviews of a representative sample group of Palestinians in Israel consisting of 588 individuals in September 2015. The two surveys contained common questions about the status and role of Palestinians in Israel within

the Palestinian national project. The survey conducted among Palestinians in Israel included a number of additional questions about their attitudes towards the State of Israel.¹

The findings: Convergence in political awareness, divergence in tools

The survey began by asking about the current role played by Palestinians in Israel in the Palestinian national project. It found that a small proportion of respondents believe that they play a major role (11% in the 1948 territories and 14% in the 1967 territories), that nearly one-third of respondents in both areas think that their current role is acceptable, and that the largest group of respondents believe that it is insufficient (36% in the 1948 territories and 23% in the 1967 territories). A small proportion thinks that they are not playing any role (see Table 1). In addition, it is apparent (from the following question) that a majority of respondents believes that there is a need to increase the role played by Palestinians in the 1948 territories within the Palestinian national project.

Table 1: What is your assessment of the current role played by Palestinians in the 1948 territories within the Palestinian national project?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
A major role	11	14
Acceptable	29	35
Insufficient	36	23
No role	19	13
Do not know/no response	5	15
Total	100	100

On the subject of their role, we found that 55% of respondents in both areas believe that Palestinians in the 1948 territories should play a greater role in the Palestinian national project (see Table 2). A quarter of respondents stated that their current role should be maintained, while a very small percentage thinks that their role should be reduced. It can be said that that this attitude reflects a desire on the part of all sections of Palestinian society to involve Palestinians in the 1948 territories in the Palestinian national project. Moreover, it exists despite the absence of any joint party political action spanning the Green Line, and of a strong, clear common political platform proposing these solutions.

¹ The results of the survey were presented at a conference held by the Institute for Palestine Studies and Mada al-Carmel entitled “The role and status of Palestinians in the 1948 areas in the Palestinian national project”, held on 7-9 November 2015 at Birzeit University and Nazareth.

Table 2: What is your assessment of the role that Palestinians in the 1948 territories should play in the future of the Palestinian national project?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
They should play a greater role than their current role	56	55
They should maintain their current role	24	26
They should play a relatively smaller role	3	2
They should not play any role	10	4
Do not know/no response	7	13
Total	100	100

In corroboration of responses to the previous questions, we find that a large majority of respondents in the 1967 territories and the 1948 territories think that the resolution of the Palestinian question is a concern of all Palestinians, i.e. Palestinians living in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and the refugees, including those living in the 1948 territories. They further believe that Palestinians in the 1948 territories should play an active and not merely a supporting role, as illustrated by the following question (see Table 3).

Table 3: I will present you with two statements about the role of Palestinians in the 1948 territories in relation to the resolution of the Palestinian issue: The first is that the solution to the Palestinian issue is essentially a matter for Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the refugees, and that Palestinians in the 1948 territories should play only a supporting role and not an active one; The second is that the solution to the Palestinian issue is a matter for all Palestinians, i.e. Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the refugees, including Palestinians in the 1948 territories. Which of these two statements do you support more?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
The first statement	27	16
The second statement	67	76
Do not know/no response	6	8
Total	100	100

In addition to finding support for the statement that the solution to the Palestinian issue is a matter for all Palestinians – i.e. Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the refugees, including Palestinians in the 1948 territories – we additionally found that the majority of respondents in the 1967 territories believe that there is an urgent need for Palestinians in the 1948 territories to have serious representation in the Palestinian national political institutions. A quarter of respondents in the 1948 territories think that there is an urgent need for such representation, and 15% that there is a non-urgent need for it, while 51% think there is no need for it (see Table 4). Thus Palestinians in the 1948 territories are divided over this

question, in contrast to Palestinians in the 1967 territories, and there is a difference in attitude between Palestinians in the 1948 and 1967 territories. The majority of Palestinians in Israel thinks there is a need for them to play a greater role in the Palestinian national project, but has not decided upon the tools to be used in exercising this role. Thus, for example, we do not find a majority in favor of playing this role through the Palestinian national institutions, a finding that could be reflective of a lack of clarity regarding the national movement and the functions of the national institutions, or of fears of the Israeli reaction.

Table 4: Do you see a need for Palestinians in the 1948 territories to have serious representation within the Palestinian national political institutions?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
I think there is an urgent need	26	56
I think there is a non-urgent need	15	17
I do not think there is any need	51	13
Do not know/no response	8	14
Total	100	100

The lack of clarity over the working tools or means of including Palestinians in the 1948 territories in the Palestinian national project is also apparent in responses to the following question: “In which political framework should the role of Palestinians in the 1948 territories be more concentrated: in the framework of the official Israeli establishment (e.g. the Knesset), or in the framework of the official Palestinian establishment (e.g. the Palestinian National Council)?” We find greater certainty in the responses given by respondents in the 1967 territories, 50% of whom answered in the framework of the official Palestinian establishment (e.g. the Palestinian National Council), and 34% of whom answered in the framework of the official Israeli establishment (e.g. the Knesset) (see Table 5). However, we did not find a clear inclination towards either response among respondents in the 1948 territories: 32% of respondents answered in the framework of the official Israeli establishment, 6% answered in the framework of the official Palestinian establishment, and 49% answered both. Hence Palestinians in the 1948 territories do not exclusively regard either the Knesset or the Palestinian institutions as the appropriate framework through which to work on the Palestinian national project, but rather a combination of the two.

Table 5: In relation to the Palestinian national project, in which political framework should the role of Palestinians in the 1948 territories be more concentrated: in the framework of the official Israeli establishment (e.g. the Knesset), or in the framework of the official Palestinian establishment (e.g. the Palestinian National Council)?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
In the framework of the official Israeli establishment (e.g. the Knesset)	32	34
In the framework of the official Palestinian establishment (e.g. the Palestinian National Council)	6	51
Both of the two previous responses	49	--
Other (another response)	2	--
Do not know/no response	11	15
Total	100	100

These findings indicate that there is a somewhat clear attitude regarding the need for Palestinians in Israel to be involved in the Palestinian national project, and that they should play an active role in the Palestinian national project and contribute to the resolution of the Palestinian issue. However, there is a lack of certainty or agreement over the tools.

In this context, a majority of respondents in the 1948 territories (60%) opted for the two-State solution, compared with 44% in the 1967 territories, while the one-State solution found support among 28% of respondents in the 1948 territories and 21% in the 1967 territories (see Table 6). This discrepancy is logical given the fact that there is no clear and institutionalized political project advocating for the one-State solution among the main political groupings in the 1948 territories, which have consistently called for the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside the State of Israel since the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. The PLO has made this same call since the 1980s. Thus it is the dominant demand among Palestinians.

Table 6: Some see the two-state formula as the best solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while others think that Historical Palestine should not be divided into two States, and therefore that the best solution is a single bi-national State in all of Palestine within which Palestinians and Israelis enjoy equal representation and equal rights. Which of these solutions do you prefer?

Responses	1948 Territories (%)	1967 Territories (%)
I prefer the two-State solution, one Palestinian and one Israeli	60	44
I prefer the solution of a single bi-national State in all of Palestine	29	21
I prefer another solution	1	1
There is no solution	3	15
A Palestinian State*	--	17
An Islamic State*	--	1
Don't know	4	0
No response	3	1
Total	100	100

* These responses were not offered to respondents in the 1948 territories

Despite the fact that a majority of respondents in the 1948 territories still supports the two-State solution, and does not believe there is a need to work within the Palestinian national institutions, we nevertheless find that over half of them (53%) think that there is a common political future for Palestinians in Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This finding indicates that Palestinians in Israel have yet to settle their political choices (Table 7).

Table 7: Do you believe that there is a common political future for Palestinians in Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip?

	The 1948 territories
1. Yes	53
2. No	47
Total	100

Conclusion

The survey findings reveal convergence in attitudes between Palestinians in the 1967 and 1948 territories concerning the significance of the role of Palestinians in Israel within the Palestinian national project, and the importance of expanding and strengthening this role. The difference between them is over the tools. The lack of clarity regarding the functions and roles of Palestinians in the 1948 territories within the Palestinian national project and the tools for translating this role cannot be attributed to satisfaction on the part of Palestinians in the 1948 territories with their civil and legal status within the State of Israel. And nor does it not stem from a belief on their part that their political fate is separate from that of the rest of the Palestinian people, from a conviction that Israel is a democratic state, from their privileging of matters of day-to-day living conditions over national issues, or from a sense that Israel grants them rights, and works for their benefit, as the responses to the questions specific to the 1948 territories illustrate (these findings are not presented in the present report).

Among the main factors that could explain this lack of clarity is the fact that no Arab political party in Israel has advocated for a role for the 1948 Palestinians within the national project as a coherent and cohesive political program. There are currently three main political camps serving the Palestinian community inside Israel, and they all differ in their conceptions of the role and functions of Palestinians in Israel within the Palestinian national project and in their proposals of how to change the status of Palestinians in Israel.

The Israeli communist camp remains committed to communist thought and strives for the establishment of a socialist regime. It calls for a change in policy towards Palestinians in Israel, and for an end to racial discrimination and the Occupation. It believes that the end of the Occupation of the 1967 territories is the essential step and the heart of the conflict, and that ending the Occupation will allow for the transformation of Israel into a democratic state.

The Islamic camp adopts the strategy of the Caliphate state, and does not have a clearly-delineated political program specific to Palestinians in Israel, but rather suffices with organizing society on a religious basis.

The National camp's political program addresses the specific case of the Palestinians in Israel, and thus far has called for the establishment of a Palestinian State to exist alongside the State of Israel as a state for all its citizens, and for recognition of the collective rights of Palestinians in Israel. From its discourse one can conclude that altering the character of Israel and dismantling the colonial situation is a necessary condition for ending the Occupation and changing the status of Palestinians in Israel. The end of the Occupation alone is considered an insufficient condition.

The results of the public opinion survey reveal that it is possible to develop a political discourse that sees the dismantling of the Zionist settler-colonial project as a necessary step for ending the Occupation and for changing the status of Palestinians in Israel. However, dismantling this system requires a joint Palestinian project to be put in place, that is based on an agreement over shared national goals and principles, and that takes into account the working tools available to each segment of the Palestinian people. The goal is common; the difference is over the tools.

- * **Dr. Mtanes Shihadeh, Director of Research Programs at Mada al-Carmel.**
- * **Dr. Ameen Saabneh, Research Fellow and Coordinator of the Survey Research Unit at Mada al-Carmel.**