

# **Democratic Culture: A Political Project that Complements the State of Equal Citizens and the Cultural Autonomy of the Palestinians in Israel**

**Ayman Agbaria \***

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This paper seeks to present the general aspects of prominent Arab thinker, Dr. Azmi Bishara's proposals, on the issue of cultural autonomy for the Palestinians in Israel, by identifying points that still need to be developed in the thought and political action associated with this issue. Specifically, this presentation argues that the integration Bishara formulates and justifies in theory, between the idea of the State of equal citizens and the idea of cultural autonomy in the case of the Palestinians in Israel, does not negate the cohesive relationship between the dimension of conflict and succession. Nor does it end the structural tension between the liberal orientation, as reflected in the idea of a State of equal citizens (or, as is commonly called, "the State of all its citizens"), and the communitarian orientation as reflected in the idea of cultural autonomy.

This contrasting dimension, which Bishara may see proposed and presented, without dealing with its problems and implications, seems clear and distinctive when, firstly, the concept of collective rights is reduced to the idea of cultural autonomy and expanded to include other collective rights. Rights that have priorities that may complement or compete with the idea of autonomy for the individual or group. Secondly, the conflict dimension becomes more evident when the concept of collective rights, including the idea of cultural autonomy, is tested with regards to the relationship with the central State. The State that is supposed to carry out the collective rights, including cultural autonomy, through its institutions and systems. The test of this relationship, theoretically at this stage, requires insight into the possibility of overcoming cultural patterns or political entities that do not accept the values and procedures of democracy, be it at the level of cultural autonomy, State or central government, or both. The question here is not: What "autonomy" are we talking about in terms of collective rights and powers exercised through it? Rather, the question is: What political and societal culture (in its pluralist sense) should this "autonomy" organize and reflect, and even educate for?

From here, we stress the importance of supplementing the two ideas put forward by Bishara (State of its citizens and cultural autonomy) with the idea of a "democratic culture." In this, I argue that building a democratic culture is a political project that is waiting for someone to adopt and seriously translate it. The importance and seriousness of this building task, similarly to the idea of the State of equal citizens and cultural autonomy, is the same for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Part of the text of this article was presented during a National Democratic Assembly study day held on April 1, 2017 in the city of Nazareth, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Dr. Azmi Bishara's forced exile.

two-State solution and the one-State solution. In the two solutions, we are required to uphold the State of equal citizenship of the citizens, with cultural autonomy in its various forms, at least for the Palestinians and Jews, and for a democratic culture that will consolidate the values and principles that will enable the two groups to live and share in peace, freedom, equality and justice between and within them.

### Previously ...

It goes without saying that any clash or comment on Dr. Azmi Bishara's ideas and writings on any subject, is an experience in foresight and understanding, as much as it is a challenge to generate new ideas and concepts. This is because his language contains inspirational energy and spaces for exploration, which allow a shift from Bishara's original meanings and vocabulary. The idea of cultural autonomy may be a good example of Bishara's writing pedagogy, which, as usual, leaves enough room for the reader to reflect on his text and to launch from it into new catalysts in political thought and action. In his discussion of the idea of cultural autonomy, Bishara adopts the reference, not the pure explanation, to present the idea, usually, in only a few pages.<sup>2</sup> In this, Bishara insists that he does not present an "elaborate model" of the idea, merely "presenting the initial choice."<sup>3</sup> This strategy is based on delving into the principles at the expense of detail in the models. Bishara explicitly expresses this, when he describes himself in the context of talking about the idea of cultural autonomy. He says that he is "not one who believes in the development of ready and integrated theoretical models, and attempts to impose them on the complex reality. The option must evolve gradually, and the forces and elites who will demand it, will propose it in detail. There is no need to propose a detailed model in advance, except through theoretical exercises."<sup>4</sup> (Furthermore I think that, after nearly two and a half decades, the ball is rolling into our court as readers, researchers, activists and politicians, to provide detailed processes and specific models of the idea of cultural autonomy).

Here, it must be argued that the presentation of a detailed model that goes beyond the mere presentation of the initial idea, is not a "theoretical exercise." Rather it is two issues; the first is the need to reinforce the political and social mobility among the Palestinians inside Israel with hope and motivation. This can be done through detailed perceptions that translate the abstract principles into models that can be lived with on the ground, and among people as big, but clear dreams, as well as specific national projects (including clear and detailed visions of direct elections for the High Follow-up Committee, establishment of trade unions, a city, forest, museum, university, national fund, film or theater festival, etc.) The second is combating "soft Israelization" that is vigorously present in the current political climate among the Palestinians in Israel, which is often predominated by opportunistic practices, political opportunism and media obsession. According to Bishara, in this climate, it is easy to distort the idea in favor of political projects that enshrine "acceptance of the situation of half a citizen on the one hand and half the community on the other." In this context, it is useful to recall Bishara's own assertion that the idea of autonomy for Arabs in Israel was not initially raised by Arab intellectuals, as some believe, but by the Israeli academic law institution as was evident in Claude Klein's discussion in 1977. This idea was presented, of course, in isolation

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Bishara, Azmi. (1992). The Palestinian Minority in Israel: A New Vision Project. **Journal of Palestinian Studies**. 3 (11): 1- 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 26.

from the debate on the Jewishness of the State and its colonial settlement nature, and practically as an alternative to equality and the State of its citizens.

Therefore, it is important to clarify that the idea of cultural autonomy in the context of Palestinians in Israel was developed in at least four different and intersecting directions. The first was by sociologist Sami Samouha, who believes that there is a possibility for granting the Arabs non-regional autonomy (without a geographical dimension) for their cultural issues in a way that does not contradict the Jewishness of the State, as part of his “ethnic democracy” model. Here, I also refer to the recent proposal by Carlo Schattnerger and Gad Yadid, according to which Israel can be divided into twelve autonomous regions, including two Arab regions in the Galilee and the Naqab. This is one of the attempts to resolve the contradiction of identities in Israel (religious, secular and national) within the so-called ethnic-cultural mosaic in Israel, without considering the nature of the central political power.

This approach is practically an alternative to the idea of fundamental equality in the State of its citizens, in that it considers autonomy of the national minority and liberal democracy two separate and not complementary issues. Bishara, for his part, criticized Samouha’s thesis of this split, which according to him is an attempt to establish reality, not to change it and overcome it. In this critique, Bishara presents, along with Said Zeidani and others, a different approach in which he presents a vision that compromises between the idea of autonomy, and the idea of the State of its citizens, drawing on the principle of fundamental equality as one common basis for the two ideas. It should be noted here that Zeidani does not exclude the geographical dimension of autonomy, while Bishara focuses on the political and cultural dimensions.

The third approach was developed by the political theorist, Iris Marion Young, in dealing with the right to self-determination. Instead of establishing the concept of self-determination as non-interference, Young proposes that the concept of self-determination be defined as non-domination. The model of self-determination as non-interference means, in essence, the non-intervention of outsiders in the decisions and actions of the governing institutions in respect of what is happening within their sovereign areas and the limits of their jurisdiction. Therefore, Young proposes another model of self-determination based on non-domination and the pursuit of cooperation and peace among the political entities. This would be done through the establishment of institutions and mechanisms to enable continuous and systematic negotiation and arbitration on the relationships and potential conflicts between these entities. In particular, Young proposes self-determination as non-domination by building a bi-national federation of autonomous units for Palestinians and Israeli Jews alike, where each unit, or group of units, exercises its independence within the parameters of relations with the other units. This is the approach that broadens the concept of autonomy, to become the principle that can establish a common political system for Jews and Palestinians in historic Palestine.

The fourth approach is what I presented with my colleague Dr. Yousef Jabareen in our research effort to consolidate the idea of cultural autonomy and deal with it specifically in the context of Arab education. This is a practical approach. What distinguishes it, is its reliance on the principles of international law relating to ethnic and indigenous minorities that have been agreed upon and widely theorized for, since the early 1990s. Specifically, this approach links the idea of cultural autonomy with the principle of fundamental equality by engaging with concepts of cultural freedom, in particular the right to identity and the right to education. This approach is clearly reflected in the document of alternative goals for the education of the

Palestinians in Israel, which has been formulated based on community and cultural discussions and debates that have lasted more than a year through the work of the Arab Education Council, a non-governmental initiative within the Follow-up Committee for Arab Education. The above-mentioned objectives document affirms that “a culturally independent Arab-Palestinian education system must be developed, with specific national distinctiveness that is supported by the State and provided with the necessary resources to achieve its linguistic uniqueness and organizational independence.” The goals include “rooting belonging to a Palestinian Arab national identity, proud of its cultural achievements and effectively connected with its Arab, Islamic and human depth. This identity is established on strengthening the cohesion of the Palestinian people on the basis of pluralism and diversity, and enhancing the collective memory and the Palestinian historical narrative. While also emphasizing the historic and political rights of the Palestinian people and respect for the internal cultural, religious and communal pluralism of Palestinian society.” This extension of the Arab Education Council seeks to demonstrate the importance of translating principles into models, and abstract ideas into practical concepts, through collective action in which the political is combined with the cultural.

In this context, it is worth noting that Bishara presented a revolutionary proposal at the time to amend the Israeli Education Law in the 14th Knesset. He proposed the establishment of “official Arab education” in which he emphasized the Arab character of Arab education and proposed specific mechanisms to develop its independence in policy and decision-making within the Israeli Ministry of Education, which would be somewhat similar to the independence of Jewish religious education.<sup>5</sup> The Joint List, in the name of all the parties forming the List, collectively submitted the same proposal in 2015 in a session of the 20th Knesset.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, we draw attention to the need to work again on this proposal, to develop it and not be content only with what Bishara accomplished in the mid-1990s. The objectives mentioned in this proposal need to be updated in line with the ten goals of the Arab education developed by the Education Council. Bishara's proposal was limited to one goal of “establishing Arab education in the State on enlightened values in Arab heritage, achievements of science, patriotism, values of democracy, loyalty to the laws of the State, equality between genders and peoples, and the aspiration for a society based on freedom, equality, tolerance, mutual assistance and human love.”

There is no doubt that the goals of the Education Council -the result of a collective effort of Palestinian educators and academics- seem more assertive of Palestinian identity and deeper engaged with the challenges of current Arab education, than the text proposed by Bishara. This is due to the time interval between the two texts and the changes that have taken place in the education system among the Palestinians in Israel. In addition, it is necessary to consider the structure required for the Arab education system and its relationship with the Ministry of Education. Bishara's proposal outlines the boundaries of independence of Arab education in many ways similar to the autonomy granted to official Jewish religious education. This may

---

<sup>5</sup> See: Proposed State Education Law (Amendment - Arab Education), 5763-2002. This motion was presented in the Fifteenth Knesset, but the text of the proposal stated that the proposal was presented by Bishara with the same text in the Fourteenth Knesset: “Law Proposal on Identity was placed on the table of the Fourteenth Knesset and its number P / 1666 and P / 2453.”

<sup>6</sup> State Education Law (Amendment - Arab Education), 5765 - 2015. P / 1461/20

be a somewhat low ceiling, in comparison to what can be drawn from practical concepts based on the idea of cultural autonomy.

### **Next ...**

I would like to argue here that I am with Bishara's approach, which assumes that the idea of the State of equal citizens and cultural autonomy are complementary. However, I also argue that they are in a strained relationship. In other words, the two ideas are really not as separate as Bishara claims, but they are also in essence in a dialectical and contradictory relationship.

To clarify with much simplification, since the early 1980s, the world's intellectual arena has witnessed a debate about the universality of liberal policies and ethics. In this debate, postcolonial studies, gender and communitarian approaches have posed theoretical challenges, that we have no room to deal with here. Challenges facing the ability of the liberal democratic State to adopt holistic policies and universal humanitarian standards that are not related to the social context, historical experience and cultural identity of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups within that State. Specifically, these approaches oppose the idea of the priority and objectivity of any principles of policy and thought that would be general humanitarian principles, devoid of interests and the context through which they developed, such as human rights and public freedoms. In general, these approaches deny the primacy of these principles and their ability to transcend the ethics of any group, criticizing the imposition of laws and human rights frameworks on any other societal or religious arrangements, understandings, or beliefs. In this debate, the liberals with their European enlightenment inheritance are on one side, arguing for the existence of holistic human ethics based on rational and objective thinking. Whose purpose is to protect the individual, his rights and freedoms, and to establish a political system that draws on these ethics and is based on the State's neutrality of values and ideology toward the citizens. Based on the idea of justice as impartiality and the principle of equality among individuals. While on the other side are the pluralists with their contemporary interpretations of Aristotle and Hegel, arguing for the need to recognize the right of groups and societies to manage their lives according to their own values and legacies. In this regard, group rights are largely based on individual rights. Culture, heritage and religion are frameworks that possess the individual as much as he owns them, and belongs to them as long as they follow his intellectual, moral or belief system. In this sense, culture is not only an option or a liberal right, it is, above all, a framework for belonging to the community.

Thus, the State of equal citizens can be considered an expression of the traditional liberal position, and the idea of autonomy, an expression of the pluralist position. Both of which, once again, fall within the stream of liberal thinking and complement each other in the conception of liberal democracy; but they are also in constant tension. This tension may be managed or mitigated, but it cannot be completely eliminated in any conception of a liberal democratic State.

This tension is evident when we consider, for example, the issue of exit rights for individuals and groups within the model proposed by Bishara. What would be the position of a group within the Palestinian group - a religious or political group - if it decides to organize and "exit" from the cultural autonomy of the Palestinian group? What are their rights? Can it continue as a group before the State institutions and demand collective rights? What is the position of a Palestinian individual who, for whatever reason, does not want to be included in

the cultural autonomy system and demand his cultural rights directly from the State? What would happen if a non-liberal or undemocratic group, in its practices and thought, took control of the cultural autonomy and sought to convert it to its interests and values? Can individuals or groups, if they feel harmed or threatened, seek the protection of the central State, and what are the limits of State interference? All of these are questions without clear answers that confirm the idea of the State of equal citizens and autonomy. However, they also show the tension between them and reflect the need to develop perceptions of what should be the relationship between them, not to end the tension between them, but to manage it effectively.

In such scenarios, it is important to pay attention to an important issue, namely, the need not to diminish collective rights. It is worth recalling here that we are talking about a package of rights, including, for example, exceptions, proportional representation and so on. To demonstrate, think with me about the Palestinian cultural goods (it may be a plant, a garment or a song). To simplify further, consider the “Thyme” plant in the State of all its citizens and under cultural autonomy; will everyone be allowed to harvest, produce, market and develop medical products from it, or will it be a special cultural commodity? You will find that the answer calls for thinking about a wide range of exceptions, privileges and symbolic demands, which would complicate the relationship between the idea of equal citizens and the idea of cultural autonomy. Furthermore, consider with me the extent to which a political or religious group can define the nature of cultural autonomy, its content and limits, and try to impose certain values, narratives and identities that other groups in the Palestinian total may not accept. How will cultural differences be internally managed? What are the limits of the central government’s intervention in this administration?

The tension in this relationship is intensely acute, especially in the contexts of the indigenous national minorities that demand cultural autonomy. In these contexts, it can be asserted that no national minority considers the establishment of cultural independence, however important, as a complete substitute to the right to self-determination. Therefore, Bishara sees<sup>7</sup> the idea of cultural autonomy as a concession and a “historic compromise with the country's indigenous people, citizens of the State,” as much as it is a political demand. What is more important is that no minority considers this independence as compensation for its claim of control over land and resources, and therefore demands for cultural autonomy frequently include demands related to the place and its resources. It is therefore important to develop the idea of cultural autonomy to include a clearer engagement with land issues and resources. While Bishara sees autonomy as a policy that does not depend on geographic and regional dimensions, and Zeidani believes that this dimension should not be excluded, I see that it is possible to develop an intermediate model that does not exclude the geographic dimension, but does not consider it linked to a particular geography or region. In other words, cultural autonomy is linked to issues of land, housing and natural resources, but not within specific boundaries. In order to demonstrate the importance of linking autonomy to land issues, it is possible to look at the role of Planning and Building Committees that work in the field of urban planning and development, land allocation for public and private purposes, and home licensing. This work has a direct impact on the culture, education, memory preservation and nature of the Palestinian public space. Hence, it is inevitable that the idea of autonomy must be supplemented by new ideas that allow for linkage to land issues and resources.

---

<sup>7</sup> Bishara, Azmi. (1992). Previous source. p. 25.

## Summary

In dealing with the idea of cultural autonomy, Bishara was interested in the political sense of the idea without losing sight of its cultural meaning. Specifically, for Bishara, cultural autonomy is “a tool to confront two problematic cultural options: 1. Cultural marginalization of the Arab society through individual integration on the margins of Israeli society; 2. The reaction to the marginalization apparent in cultural discipline and isolation, in the form of fundamentalism. Therefore, we have to propose a third alternative, which is the political and cultural alternative based on faith in values, equality, freedom, social justice and Jewish-Arab cooperation based on equality and mutual respect.”<sup>8</sup> However, despite this important reference to the relationship of autonomy to the cultural options of the Palestinians in Israel, Bishara does not elaborate on the cultural significance of the project and does not engage with the ability of the cultural sphere to shape and influence the political sphere. This creates a new focal point to develop the idea of autonomy around the role of democratic culture in the management of the relationship between the Palestinian and Jewish groups and in the design of the internal Palestinian public sphere.

To this end, I would like to draw attention to the distinction made by the researcher Chantal Mouffe between the concept of “politics” and the term “political.” Where the intended from “political” is the opposite, or conflicting dimension, of socio-political life. While “politics” refers to a set of practices and institutions, that create a particular regime that controls coexistence among people within the context of the conflict that results from the “political.” Here, I argue that Bishara presents the idea of cultural independence as a “policy” that is supposed to arrange, organize and reshape the “political” field. This field that is based on the dispute, and in other dimensions on the hostility between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian national project on the issue of the right to self-determination in historic Palestine. Thus, theorizing of this idea adjusts part of the conflict and deals only implicitly with the fundamental issue of self-determination of the Palestinians. The question here is: Is cultural autonomy based on fundamental equality in a State of all its citizens a solution to the issue of the right to self-determination, or do we need to reconsider the concept of self-determination in terms of its content and coordinates? What is most important in this regard is: How can we manage a difference that does not accept cessation or resolution with regard to the nature of the Zionist movement as a colonial and settlement movement? How will it be possible to reach a “disputed consensus”<sup>9</sup> with the Jewish group in historic Palestine? By “disputed consensus,” I mean the agreement on a set of political and moral values, such as freedom, justice and equality, while reserving the right to differ in their interpretation. This agreement will allow coexistence of the two peoples in peace and mutual cooperation, and enable the Palestinian people to include political, religious, sectarian and regional pluralism within the principles of democracy and public freedoms.

In order to build this disputed consensus, between the Palestinian and Jewish groups as well as within each group, it is necessary to build a democratic political culture. This culture would be based on the rule of law, circulation of power, respect for pluralism of interests, and the right to express collective identities in the public domain in an organized manner, etc. The building of this culture is a political project that calls for a discourse that differs from the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, page 26.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see Taha Abdel Rahman's third chapter on Chantal Mouffe's ideas on conflict and conflict management in his second book, “**Spirit of Religion**”, published in 2012 by the Arab Cultural Center - Beirut.

discourse of cultural rights among indigenous peoples contained in various international legal charters. This discourse, despite its importance in defending the rights of Palestinians and asserting their rights, recognizes the colonizer's victory and superiority, as well as empathizes with the permanence of power relations between the colonizer and colonized. The discourse required for building a common democratic culture is an open political project that seeks to permanently engage with the ideology and practices of the Zionist movement, without giving up on communication with the Jewish group. However, most importantly, at least at this stage, is to build a democratic culture within the Palestinian community.

In this regard, I emphasize the importance of developing theoretical and practical concepts of the idea of democratic culture, not as an educational matter for preaching and reform, but as a political project to re-shape the disintegrated Palestinian political field. Moreover, the importance of the democratic culture lies in its ability to organize the conflict between the idea of the State of equal citizens and the idea of autonomy. The tension between them is organic and permanent, and requires values and mechanisms to manage it. In this regard, I argue that a democratic culture that seeks to create democratic citizens, not citizens of the group (Palestinians) or the citizens of the State (whatever its name), is a culture that can produce a low tension integration between cultural autonomy and the central State, whether in a one State or two-State solution. Perhaps more importantly, is that culture is the most important factor in preserving what can be called the "vitality of Palestinian nationalism" in order to develop and maintain it as the collective identity of the Palestinian people. This culture is the consciousness that is inherited and bequeathed, a disciplined framework for the Palestinian constants and a control for political action, that tightens its rein when moving, and relaxes it when it is tenacious in its positions.

\* **Dr. Ayman Agbaria** is a professor of leadership and educational policy. He is the Head of the Master's Program in the Studies of Education, Society and Culture at Haifa University.