

Envisioning the Future of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel

Dr. Nihaya Daoud

First, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Association of German Friends of NSWAS for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you. I am very glad to be here with you, to talk about the status of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and to share with you some of my experiences in helping to shape a significant document describing the Future Vision of our community.

In my presentation here today, I'm going to focus on the future of Arab-Jewish relations as reflected by the [Future Vision document](#) of the Arab community in Israel. I will then share some thoughts about how the essential nature of my village of Wahat al-Salam - Neve-Shalom might align with views and principles articulated in the Future Vision of the Palestinians in Israel – might even perhaps become a model for Arab-Jewish relations in all of Israel.

Before I continue, I must say that in my focus here today, I do not mean to ignore or marginalize the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians living on the other side of the "border," in the West Bank and Gaza. Rather, my aim is to consider one aspect of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the part concerning the political status of the Palestinians in Israel. This question arises because we, the Palestinian citizens of Israel, conceive of ourselves as an integral part of the Palestinian people. Yet, due to the tragic historical events of Al-Nakba (*the Catastrophe*) in 1948, we became a minority in our own homeland and within a very short time found ourselves turned into second-class citizens of the State of Israel.

The Nakba had profound implications on the economic and social structure of our society. Villages were destroyed, people were displaced and family members were separated from each other. Massive confiscation of land, the main source of income for many families, by successive Israeli governments created severe structural dislocation of the economy. The society was transformed from a mainly agricultural one into a semi-industrial one, with concomitant modifications in the social strata and class hierarchy; some classes disappeared and others emerged. These economic transitions were accompanied by social structure modifications affecting the collective mosaic of our society, our sense of belonging and our identity. The family structure was also damaged, becoming more individualistic and less group-centered or group-dominated, with further implications for the social capital, social cohesion and social networks of the community.

Since the establishment of Israel, the Israeli government has denied my community its most basic collective rights, including the right to self-determination. We face structural discrimination in many aspects of life, starting from the legislative level; even though Israel is a democracy and we have about 10 Arab members in the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset), our legislators have almost no role in governing coalitions and our ability as a group to affect

legislation in the Knesset is very minimal. Our representation in official and governmental positions (less than 5%) is much lower than our relative proportion in the society, since we are about one-fifth of the total population. Our educational system is dominated by Ministry of Education officials who are Jewish, and our children go to separate schools that suffer from budgetary discrimination and inferior infrastructure as compared to the Jewish schools. Our economic development is totally dependent on the Jewish market. The small Arab ethnic market is consistently disadvantaged by isolation, which peaks whenever there is political upheaval, for example after the events of October 2000, when many Israeli Jews simply stopped visiting Arab localities at all, for any reason. Besides, since the establishment of Israel, development of our cultural life has been impeded. Contact with the Arab people in neighboring countries was forbidden to us because they are defined by Israel as "enemies"; this isolated us from our cultural extension and inspiration. In addition, the Palestinian citizen's right to equal housing is still violated every day in Israel by laws and regulations that rationalize and permit the continuing confiscation of lands belonging to Arab citizens and the demolition of their homes.

The consequences of these policies and actions are very well documented, relegating our community to an inferior status in all aspects of life. Despite the fact that we comprise about 17% of the population, more than 50% of the children who live in poverty in Israel are Arabs. About half the Palestinians families in Israel live under the poverty line. Forty percent of our community has less than a high school education. Unemployment is much higher in the Arab localities, and of course this situation has severe effects on health status. The government's own data, and various surveys, reveal lower indices of public health among Palestinian citizens as compared to the Jewish population.

The foregoing overview provides the necessary context for understanding the effort to create the Future Vision document that we are discussing here today. Although the project is only about three years old, its roots are very deep.

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Inspired to change this situation of subordination, three years ago, the head of the Supreme Arab Fellow-up Committee in Israel Mr. Shawki Khatib proposed an initiative to pull together, in one document, the Palestinian community's views concerning their relations with the state of Israel and their demands for improvement of their situation. During 2005-2006, Mr. Khatib invited about 40 prominent Palestinian professionals in Israel, including community leaders, researchers, and others, to work together and prepare "The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel." The group encompasses a broad spectrum of political perspectives and therefore, despite some disagreements over various sections or components of the complete document, the published Future Vision may fairly be described as a representative voice of the Palestinians in Israel.

Released in December 2006, this document marks an important shift in the locus of Jewish-Arab relations in the state of Israel. For the first time ever, the minority

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speaks in its own voice, on its own initiative, to tell the majority how Palestinians conceive their political position in Israel and to articulate their attitudes concerning the political structure and system in Israel. The minority has made a comprehensive appraisal of its situation with respect to various aspects of life and expresses its own views, alternatives, and demands -- all within the legal and conceptual framework of Israeli citizenship.

Bearing in mind a two-state solution for the Israeli-Arab conflict, for the first time in the history of Israel as a state, this group of Palestinians acknowledges the existence of the state of Israel and does not deny the Jewish right to collective self-determination.

The Future Vision document opens with a self-definition of the Palestinians in Israel, stating that, "We, the Palestinian Arabs in Israel, are the indigenous people of the homeland, residents of the State of Israel, and an integral part of the Palestinian People [and of] the Arab-Muslim and international community." This statement came after days of work and discussions, all aimed at defining our position as a collective community, and not just in the context of our past but also of our present and our future.

Afterwards, the Future Vision document addresses three major domains that concern with the life of the Palestinian community in Israel, and these are:

1. The political position and legal status of the Palestinians in Israel.
2. Practical suggestions concerning different vital aspects of life (land ownership, education, socio-economic and cultural development).
3. Institutional and political public work within Arab society and relations with the international community.

Now, I'll try to briefly explore each of these domains:

First -- the political and legal status of the Palestinians in Israel. This section lays out and analyses the community's relations with the state of Israel and concludes that, although Israel is a democratic state, the ethnocentric structure of its democracy cannot guarantee, protect or sustain Palestinian citizens' demands for political integration and involvement in decision-making.

While preserving their Arab Palestinian identity, Palestinians in Israel have a basic and pressing need to actualize their full citizenship vis-à-vis the State and its institutions. Palestinians also aspire to attain institutional self-rule in the fields of education, culture and religion – a basic component of actualizing their civic equality as citizens of the Israeli state. This type of self-rule within the State is grounded in an approach based on what is known as "consociational democracy." That approach recognizes the presence of two national groups, the Jewish and the Palestinian, and it can enable our community to take an active role in decision-making involving issues of concern for the community. We seek to obtain functional equality and partnership at the national-collective level, based on simple principles of equality, partnership and mutuality.

The demand for a shift toward a consociational democracy is a demand not only for legal and civic equality for every citizen, but also for “collective rights” that would create a multicultural state. This would guarantee, for example, granting autonomy to Jews and Arabs over relevant issues like religion and education; giving each group a veto over laws that could damage them; and making the state's symbols, like the national flag and the national anthem, more inclusive. This necessarily would be supplemental to the adoption of laws guaranteeing a fair distribution of state resources – or “distributional justice” -- between the Arab citizens and the Jewish citizens within the consociational democracy.

Worth mentioning here is that an agreement to build a political system based on consociational democracy requires that Israel acknowledge its historical responsibility for the tragedy of Al-Nakba and recognize us as a collective national group and, hence as an equal partner in this land. This process sets up a new relationship between the two national groups, both of which are now enabled to recognize each other's rights and obligations in this land. Possibly part of this new picture would be compensation for the lands lost by about 30% of the Palestinians who have been displaced and for the entire Palestinian community in Israel victimized by policies of economic segregation. For example, one sort of compensation would be the establishment of a special fund for higher education for young Arabs who want to pursue university studies but are hampered by economic constraints. (I don't think that compensation for lost lands should be made at the personal level -- although, if it were done that way, my husband and I might become rich since our families lost lots of land after they were displaced from our original villages, destroyed soon after the establishment of the state in 1948 and 1951 respectively).

The second part of the Future Vision document includes practical suggestions concerning various vital aspects of life, and addressing:

1. Land ownership and land use planning, and housing policy.
2. Economic development.
3. Social development.
4. Educational vision and strategic planning.
5. Cultural development.

Concerning land planning and housing policy, the text of the document states that changing existing Israeli policies concerning land and planning starts with recognizing the historic oppression inflicted on the Palestinian minority. The document further proposes cancellation of all laws of confiscation and other regulations that discriminate against the Arab minority. The boundaries of Israeli land must conform to the boundaries of citizenship and not to the boundaries of the Jewish people. There should be administrative reconstruction of the Israeli institutions that work in the fields of land planning and housing; the boundaries of the geographical jurisdiction of the Arab villages and towns should be expanded so that areas designated as public land will be encompassed in these jurisdictions.

The economic development section aims at achieving a comprehensive structural societal transformation, incorporating genuine parity in living conditions for the minority. The aim is to enable full social and economic equality with the majority. The text states our opposition to the institutionalized structural economic dependency from which the Palestinian Arabs suffer and calls for merging Arabs fully into the Israeli labor market. The object here is to create internal economic momentum and promote progress toward freeing Arab society from dependency on the Israeli market and that will promote more work opportunities.

As concerns the social development of the Palestinian Arabs, the Future Vision document aims at creating a sound and cordial atmosphere that guarantees solidarity, social cohesion and equality. This seeks to enable individuals to enjoy a better life while achieving a balance between individual and collective interests, maintaining gender balance and upgrading the status of women in the society.

The section on educational vision and strategic planning for the Arab educational system in Israel highlights the education-related rights of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel (as indigenous people in their homeland), including self-administration of the educational system and self-determination in educational policy. The Arabic educational curriculum needs clear educational aims and strategies that take cultural development into account and provide for wide exposure to the technology revolution. As a most basic example, the teaching of Palestinian history and the narrative of Al-Nakba will not be forbidden as it is today in the Arab schools. Finally, the Future Vision document emphasizes the need for equitable budgets and investments in the infrastructure of the Arab schools.

The section concerning cultural development states – and I quote: "The Palestinians in Israel are an integral part of this place as it creates their consciousness and language and crystallizes their identity. The land is wherever Palestinian creative people meet. The sense of belonging to and in this place remains the priority of a national, cultural and civilized identity". Thus the document proposes the creation of a high-level "board of cultural affairs" that will promote development of an appropriate framework for relevant activities and will collect cultural artifacts to maintain and develop our culture.

Finally, the last section is on institutional and political public work within Arab society and relations with the international community. This part of the document includes suggestions for the internal organization and development of national institutions and the clarification of their internal roles and their relations with the various State institutions. The most prominent challenges that require discussion and decision-making relate to the role of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee, the role of community initiatives and NGOs, of the private sector and the political institutions. The assumption has been that better internal organization would promote our status in the State and our collective vision that is in the process of being crystallized.

In addition, the Future Vision document emphasizes the importance of developing relations and activities with other countries and with organizations

of the international community including international Jewish organizations, in order to stress the importance of international recognition of the national, cultural, economic and social needs of the Arab society in Israel.

The public release of the Future Vision document evoked a lot of feedback from both the Arab and Jewish communities. Much of the feedback from Jewish Israeli media focused on the first section, dealing with the foundation of the state and its institutions, our demands for a share in state symbols, and our demands for self-administration in certain vital issues as described earlier. Therefore, some called us "separatists"; others accused us of trying to establish another state within the State of Israel. However, despite these voices, the document actually urged a healthy dialogue between some groups of intellectual Arabs and Jews both within Israel and outside Israel.

The intention is now to expand the Future Vision document into 8 "action plans" concerned with the various specific aspects of life addressed in the Future Vision document. These action plans will be introduced to decision makers in parliament and government.

To sum up: The Future Vision document creates a very important ideological framework for the Palestinians in Israel. It presents the Palestinian demands for self-administration and for the acknowledgment of its legal status as a collective national minority possessing equal rights based on full citizenship in Israel.

Most important, the Future Vision aims at creating a dialog between the two national groups in Israel and thereby to contribute to changing the reality of Palestinians by changing the Israeli government's policies, while transforming public opinion and attitudes towards the Palestinians in Israel.

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Now I come to the second part of my presentation here today, concerning how the essence of our community of Wahat al-Salam / Neve-Shalom accords with this Future Vision?

I have been living in NSWAS for almost 18 years. Our village was established in 1970. The original initiative was that of a priest who believed that people from the three monotheistic religions can overcome disagreements and live peacefully together. Due to the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, our village quickly became more a politically-oriented community than a religiously-oriented one. The village -- which was jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel -- is grounded firmly on equality and understanding between the two peoples. Neve Shalom / Wahat al-Salam demonstrates the possibility of coexistence between Jews and Palestinians by its continuing evolution as a community based on mutual acceptance, respect and cooperation. About 55 families reside in the village today and our outreach efforts focus mainly on educational peace activities, along with some involvement in political coalitions for peace.

In my opinion, NSWAS could embody a practical expression of the Future Vision, not just for the Arab community but for both the Arab and the Jewish communities in Israel. I'll try briefly here to explore why I think so:

1. In NSWAS, each national group acknowledges the existence of the other group and there is mutual understanding of each other's narrative and history.
2. Our organizational and institutional system is based on principles of equity and the provision of equal opportunity for individuals from both national groups.
3. We have a bi-national, bi-lingual educational system in the village based on respect for each other from early childhood onward. Our School for Peace provides an opportunity for groups of young people and adults to meet and to explore and debate each other's opinions.
4. As we seek to establish a "new society" for both national groups, each side recognizes and values the other's culture and traditions. This creates feelings of belonging and inclusion within the community.
5. We have a democratic decision-making system that provides equal opportunity to affect decisions concerning different aspects of life. NSWAS is managed by an annually elected steering committee ("secretariat") chaired by a "secretary general." Matters of policy, acceptance of new members, annual budgets, etc, are finalized and approved in general assemblies of all the members. I hope also that we will improve in the matter of gender balance.

That said, I think that we can consider our village of NSWAS as a model for conducting optimal relationships between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority. Our experience of living together for many years has proven that yes, it is indeed possible.

Finally, I hope that the Future Vision of the Arabs in Israel together with our experience in the peace village of NSWAS will be a source of inspiration for restructuring the relations between the Palestinian and Jewish peoples and lead to true dialog and to peace and reconciliation in Israel and beyond.

I wish to end by stressing the positive role that the European community can have in our area. You have played an influential role throughout the history of the Palestinian – Israeli relationship. I believe that you can have even an even more instrumental and significant involvement that will bring peace and justice to our area.

Thank you very much!