



Israel Viewpoint

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Middle East Minorities

Israeli-Arabs overwhelmingly identify first as Arabs, Muslims, or Palestinians, and only last as Israelis. Regardless of their identification, they are the largest minority in Israel, constituting about 20 percent of the population. Lately, Israel has achieved notoriety as an “apartheid, racist state” in the United Nations and throughout the world. As an example, former president Jimmy Carter’s book, “Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid,” soared to the top of the New York Times bestseller list when it was published in 2006.

Among anti-Zionists, the term “apartheid” usually describes Israel’s treatment of Palestinians while “racist” is the term used to describe Israel’s treatment of Israeli-

Arabs. I believe that the first instance is totally false and diminishes the horrors of the former South Africa apartheid regime; I won’t even address it. The subject of this article is the second instance: whether Israel’s government treats its Israeli-Arab minority in a racist manner.

Historically, the Middle East has been home to many minorities, who still reside there today: Kurds, Druze, Copts, Assyrians, etc. The majority, Arabs, are composed of many peoples of varying skin color, united primarily by language and culture. Jews have been a minority among the Arabs for centuries, from at least 586 BCE, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and Jews

were dispersed in all directions. Before the time of Mohammed, Jewish nomads roamed the eastern section of the Middle East, a monotheistic minority among the pagan Arab and Aryan tribes. Until the rise of Mohammed in 622 CE, the Jewish tribes held their own. The province of Khaibar, for example, located north of Medina, was inhabited by various Jewish tribes who built seven fortresses there.

After Mohammed began his war to convert all the nomadic tribes to his new religion, the Banu Nadir tribe deserted the prophet’s camp and sought refuge in Khaibar, where they led the other Jewish tribes to resist Mohammad’s invasion in 628. The Jews retreated to their fortresses and bravely defended

themselves before eventually surrendering. Mohammad allowed them to remain in Khaibar only after paying a monetary tribute to their conqueror. (www.jewishencyclopedia.com)

In his book “Arabs in History,” Bernard Lewis, dean of Middle Eastern

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scholars, wrote: “The city of Medina, some 280 miles north of Mecca, had originally been settled by Jewish tribes from the north, especially the Banu Nadir and Banu Quraiza. The comparative richness of the town attracted an infiltration of pagan Arabs who came at first as clients of the Jews and ultimately succeeded in dominating them. The Jews, engaged mainly in agriculture and handicrafts, were economically and culturally superior to the

Arabs, and were consequently disliked ... as soon as the Arabs had attained unity through the agency of Muhammad they attacked and ultimately eliminated the Jews.

(www.eretzyisroel.org)

But the Jews didn’t disappear from Arabia, Iran and N. Africa after the Muslim conquest. They (and any Christians) lived as dhimmis – infidels with inferior status - among the Arabs. As dhimmis, the Jews were forced to live apart from the Muslims, to wear special garments, to pay extraordinary taxes, and above all, to remain in an inferior position to their Muslim overlords. In addition, they suffered from periodic pogroms. Even in the “Golden Age” of Jewish life under Muslim sovereignty (8th-12th centuries in Spain and Portugal), the strictures of dhimmitude remained in effect.

The Jews continued to live among the Muslims in the eastern Middle East and

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