

Just who are these '1948 Arabs'?

By [Zvi Bar'el](#)

"Let us hope we will be able to get back to him later on in the broadcast," said the Al Jazeera newscaster in the expanded news program earlier this month. Thursday. This comment came after the interview with MK Jamal Zahalka (Balad) was cut off after the second question, as he was trying to explain the kind of terror from which the Arab public in Israel suffers and what it ought to do. The newscaster did not get back to Zahalka nor to the story that was the most important story in Israel that evening, but only fourth in importance on the Al Jazeera program.

It is hard to complain about Al Jazeera when its rival, Al Arabiya, continued in most of its news broadcasts to sum up the life story of King Fahd, and the murder in Shfaram was just a short item with no commentary or interviews. On that day, in the Arab electronic media the drama in Shfaram looked like just another story about a not particularly interesting murder: Again a Jew is killing Arabs, and not just Arabs - but "1948 Arabs," as the Arabs in Israel are called in the Arab media.

On the Friday after the murder it was the turn of the print media. The London-based newspaper Al Hayat reported on the murder on the front page in a short item, between a report on the coup in Mauritania and the border talks between Kuwait and Iraq. This was also the case in most of the newspapers in the Arab countries - not very detailed reports that were acquired from the international news agencies. Apparently they had not had time to write and print editorials or opinion pieces. On Saturday, reports on the funerals appeared, but not a single opinion piece. Not in Egypt, not in Lebanon, not in Qatar and not in Tunis. Shfaram and the Arabs of Israel are still not part of the Arab position.

Only on Sunday, three days after the incident, were there two findings: an editorial in the most important Egyptian newspaper, Al Ahram and two opinion pieces in the Jordanian newspaper Al Destour. In the Gulf states - nothing.

Same as Palestinians

The important Islamic Internet site Islam Online opened a special forum that hosted MK Abdulmalik Dehamshe (United Arab List), of the Islamic Movement (Southern Branch), on which surfers were invited to ask questions. Thirteen people sent in questions, which had mainly to do with how the Arab citizens of Israel intend to defend themselves from other similar attacks. But from most of the questions the immediate impression emerged that the questioners do not make any distinction between Palestinians who are under occupation in the territories and the Arabs in Israel.

It was evident that Dehamshe was having a hard time explaining the uniqueness of the situation of the Arabs in Israel: both Palestinian and

Israeli citizens, called the "1948 Arabs" but not refugees, suffering from discrimination but also represented in the Knesset. This is a creation too difficult to understand and extremely difficult to explain, and apparently therefore less interesting to commentators, never mind Arab commentators.

So uninteresting, that the editorial in the Egyptian Al Ahram about them seemed more suited to an Israeli newspaper than to one that is supposed to offer a strong defense of the brothers in Israel. "Those responsible for the murder must be brought to trial in order to prevent the repetition of such incidents in the future." Who is responsible? How responsible? Where is the well-known "fervor" in this newspaper where Zionism, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the Jewish settlers in the territories or just the Jewish public in Israel are always blamed?

And it goes on: "The danger in this terror attack is that it constitutes a fuse that will nourish the extremists and the spreading of feelings of hatred between Arabs and Jews, and it will not serve the coexistence between them ... Such actions are a ticking bomb aimed at blowing up any effort toward peace between the two sides ... Especially as the date of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza approaches, it is expected that the extremist organizations on both sides will carry out hostile acts that aim to thwart and delay the withdrawal process."

Hello? Is this Al Ahram? Is this its new editor Osama Saraya, who in his previous position (until about a month ago) as editor of the weekly Al Ahram Al `Arabi knew how to use a rapier-sharp and sometimes poisonous vocabulary when it came to Israel? All of a sudden he is writing "the extremist organizations on both sides?" Has Israel lost the monopoly on evil? And perhaps when it is about the "1948 Arabs" the Egyptian sensitivity threshold goes up and it is possible to write a delicate editorial. Nevertheless, Al Ahram is deserving of praise, as in the other government newspapers and opposition newspapers in Egypt it was impossible to find a single editorial or opinion piece.

Display of ignorance

Only Jordan, as noted, rose to the occasion, a veritable flood: two articles that were written by Palestinian writers, citizens of Jordan, who never need a specific incident to use their reservoirs of anti-Israel vocabulary.

Why don't the Arabs in Israel interest the public in the Arab countries? Why is the Jewish certainty in Israel that the Arabs have 22 countries to move to not exactly what the citizens of those 22 countries think about them? Answers to this can be found at the chat sites or Internet forums that from time to time relate to the Arabs of Israel. For example, shortly after the events of October, 2000, the Islam Online site opened a forum with Sheikh Raad Salah. The variety of the questions showed a stunning display of ignorance: "Is it possible to establish in Israel an Arab economy that is separate from the Israeli economy?" asked an Arab citizen of Gibraltar. "Is the Palestinian government trying to return the 1948 Arabs to their land - where Jews are living?" asked another Arab participant. These questions testify to empathy but not to close familiarity with the situation of the Arabs in Israel.

The term "1948 Arabs," a sweeping term that is supposed to distinguish them from the 1948 refugees, from the Palestinians in the occupied territories and from Palestinian immigrants, is also a concept that is not clear at all. "The 1948 Arabs" is usually a term of staunchness, of not

fleeing from the "Israeli occupation" and of preserving the homeland. But these honorifics do not help the Arabs in Israel when they come to Arab countries or when spokesmen - official or intellectual - discuss their situation.

Jordan is perhaps the only country where the concept "1948 Arabs" is familiar with all its significances, and not only because of the close tie that exists between the two populations. At hotels in Amman, for example, "1948 Arabs" are the most important tourism sector. Jordan is the preferred vacation destination for those among them who cannot afford to travel to Europe or to the United States, or prefer not to vacation at hotels in Israel, where they are considered suspicious objects. In Jordan they are not seen as an element that endangers Jordanian demography, as the Palestinians in the territories are perceived. They are the only Palestinians who do not constitute a "threat to the kingdom" who do not need to be resettled or denied political rights. They are "established Palestinians," as one Jordanian researcher said to me, "and they arouse envy here."

Best of both worlds

To a large extent it is possible that the lack of interest in covering what is happening among the Israeli Arabs in the Arab press derives from the fact that they are perceived as enjoying the best of both worlds: "They are living in a democratic country, they are better established economically than most of the inhabitants of the West Bank and most of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Jordan, they enjoy the prestige of not having fled from the Israeli occupation in 1948 and yet they are part of the Palestinian problem. In the entire Arab world there are no other Palestinians like them," says this researcher.

However, the telescopic view from Jordan does not resemble the view from Cairo. After the terror attacks in Sharm el-Sheikh last month, suspicion arose that Israelis were involved after Israeli license plates were found near the car bomb. This hypothesis, immediately accepted on the street as the truth, was that Israel is making use of Israeli Arabs for terror attacks. Azzam Azzam's name also came up in the context of Israeli espionage and terror and in conversations as well as in Internet forums, Arabs are wondering and expressing suspicion as to how it is possible that Arabs serve in the Knesset, serve in the Israeli army and receive licenses to open newspapers and radio stations if collaboration for "Zionist" purposes is not also involved.

"How is it possible to understand why Israeli Arabs don't carry out suicide actions against Israel?" wondered one participant two years ago in an Internet forum that was held by Sheikh Raad Salah. In this the questioner made clear his expectations from the Arab public in Israel and his lack of understanding of the situation of this public inside the State of Israel. This is not just a lack of understanding concerning the participation of the Arabs of Israel in the Palestinian intifada - the Arab-Israeli culture is also not familiar.

Thus, for example, the Egyptian National Council for the Defense of the Arabs of Israel has called for support for the Arab schools in Israel "lest they lose their national language, Arabic." The call by this council came in the wake of the double fear of "Hebrew gaining control as the language of technology in the Middle East" and the calls from the Israeli right to revoke the status of Arabic as an official language.

"In effect, those Egyptians see us, the Israeli Palestinians, a people who

are in exile and are in danger of cultural assimilation any day," says a senior inspector at the Education Ministry who requested not to be identified. "This is a perception that could apply to Arabs living in London or New York, but not to us. But what can be done - this is the Arab ignorance that is now catching up with the Israeli ignorance. And then you come along and say to us that we have another 22 countries where we can live."

/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=612973

[close window](#)