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Racism by any other name

By Yitzhak Laor

It was announced this week that the government plans to stiffen the rules for granting citizenship to non-Jews, through amendments to the law that make it difficult to grant legal status to Palestinians and other foreigners married to Israeli citizens. The prime minister held a special discussion of the issue and decided to establish a committee headed by the interior minister. The Interior Ministry claims that some 55,000 applications for Palestinian family reunification through marriages to Israeli Arabs have been submitted since 1968, and that natural growth increased the "naturalized" population to some 137,000 Arabs - about one-tenth of the Arab minority in Israel.

Meanwhile, an "emergency regulation" passed in 2003 limits the right of Arab citizens of Israel - a right that belongs to not only every Jew in Israel but every Jew in the world - to have their spouse and children naturalized. That distinction is expressed in the classifications of the Central Bureau of Statistics, which formally divides the citizens of Israel into two categories: "Jews and others" (Jews, Christians who are not Arabs, and people without religious classification); and "the Arab population" (Muslims, Druze, Christian Arabs). That is the language of the separation.

One must ask the sages of the National Security Council headed by Giora Eiland - who took part in the special discussion of the issue and presented the opinions of senior jurists like Ruth Gavison - what would happen to the natural growth of the Arab population in Israel (and that, after all is the "danger," not the immigration but their natural growth) without the "family unifications" if those are prevented by the proposed law. Perhaps there is a need for a special plan for Arabs? Maybe cuts in the welfare budgets, the education budgets, the budgets for local authorities? Perhaps tougher sentences for criminal offenses? Perhaps prohibition of the establishment of new communities, or construction beyond the limits of their villages since 1948? All that already exists. According to the racist logic of the campaign against the natural growth, we will also reach limits on childbirths. The name of the game is no longer security, nor "existence," but turning the national existence into the very purpose of human existence.

Less than two years ago, when the government backed down from its intention to make it difficult to grant legal status to Palestinians who married Israeli citizens, because of opposition from the legal advisor to the Knesset, the Knesset Interior Committee held a closed door session. The head of the Shin Bet provided "data about the scope of involvement in terror activity by people who have blue identity cards because of family unification," said Haaretz on July 30, 2003. Then,

too, the entire matter sounded dubious. But the discussion was framed in the context of "security" to pass the High Court of Justice. Now they are channeling it into a "discussion of immigration," once again framing it for the High Court's ears. In the background is the constant equation, "what's bad for the Arabs is good for the Jews." Betar Jerusalem's fans screaming their "death to Arabs" slogans are less dangerous than Eiland and Gavison.

Nonetheless, this has nothing to do with immigration, even if that's where the rhetorical effort is concentrated. It is first about the ongoing attitude of the state of Israel to the Palestinian people. Israel never has truly recognized their equal right to exist, neither inside Israel's borders nor outside them. There is nothing like the latest statistical campaign, with its nightmare predictions, to prove that.

Not only are the subjects of the occupation for more than a generation, 38 years, not allowed inside the country without a regime of special permits, and for the last 15 years prevented from working; and not only, when they leave their defined territories to spend a period of time overseas, can they lose their homes and property forever, as if they were foreigners; but the Arabs who are the citizens of Israel lose more and more of their civil rights, like the right to grant their children minimum conditions to live with dignity, a public library, a cultural center, enough nutrition. Those who think there was a big difference between Kahane and Rehavam Ze'evi will not find big differences between their common spiritual world and the spiritual world behind this legislation, in its new campaign.

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