

To Be or Not to Be an Arab: The Complex Identity of Arab Christians in Israel

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“Writing Hebrew is More Convenient for Me,” She Said.

I would like to begin this short paper by sharing experiences of my fieldwork since 2000 among Arab Christians in Israel.

One day, I was talking with a friend at Wadi Nisnas, Haifa. I shall refer to her as Irina here. Although her actual name sounds Russian, Irina is a true *Haifawiya*—an Arab woman born and raised in Haifa. She was eager to learn how to cook Sushi. While teaching her how to prepare the vinegared rice for sushi, I found that Irina was taking notes in Hebrew rather than in Arabic.

Slightly shocked, I asked Irina, “Why don’t you write in Arabic?” She gave me a bright smile and said, “Why do you ask me such a question? It is more convenient for me. We’ve been writing our papers and business mails in Hebrew since our school days, so we can write much quicker in Hebrew than in Arabic.” Irina was educated at a public school attended by Jewish children.

This incident was not only slightly shocking for me but also shed light on many facts. Indeed, many young Arabs in Israel, especially Christians such as Irina, behave as “Israelis” in their daily life. In general, they are extremely westernized inside out—they are prompt in adopting trends. They are introduced to various trends in the bustling Jewish areas atop Mt. Carmel in Haifa rather than in Wadi Nisnas, a poor downtown area occupied mainly by Arab citizens. I noticed that Irina loves talking in Hebrew with her husband—who is also an Arab Christian—and they are fond of visiting the stylish sushi bars at Mt. Carmel and the huge shopping centers in the suburbs on weekends. In fact, Irina’s stepmother and neighbors continually mock her for the shades of Hebrew and Hebraic accent in her Arabic. Nevertheless, it is a fact that not only the younger generations such as that of Irina but also middle-aged Arabs in Israel have become “Israelized” and have an identity that is clearly distinct from the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

Complex identity of Arab Christians in Israel

Before further elaborating on the situation of Arab Christians, I shall summarize how Arab citizens in Israel perceive their identity and how different they are from Palestinians in the

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Occupied Territories. About 20% of the Israeli population, which is about 1.4 million as per the statistics of 2007, comprises Arab citizens. Generally speaking, they have retained their identity as Palestinians, but it is not sufficient to explain their true feelings under the present circumstances. On the other hand, although they strongly acknowledge their Palestinian identity, never showing it straight and hiding it in public, they also embrace their Israeli citizenship and exploit its advantages. For example, they seldom reveal their Palestinian identity in their daily lives in order to avoid the unnecessary criticism from Jewish citizens. They even feel that they can lead safer and more liberal and sophisticated lives in Israel as compared with that in Palestine or other Arab states (In this context, Palestine implies the Occupied Territories).

In the Galilee area, this tendency appears to be more prominent among the Christians, who account for only 9% of the Arab population in Israel. Their identity is different and more complicated from that of Muslims. Needless to say, their strongest identity is “being a Christian,” and Muslims are their closest and biggest group of “others.” Of course, although Jewish citizens are also “others” for them, they are more conscious of Muslims as their rivals at all times.

Similar to most Arab citizens, Arab Christians in Israel are also not keen on expressing their Palestinian identity. Moreover, they sometimes hesitate to identify themselves as Arabs. It might sound very shocking, but I have actually heard many Arab Christians in Israel express negative feelings toward Arab states such as the Gulf States, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as their repulsion toward the bracketing of citizens such as themselves as “Arabs.” They criticize the Muslim leaders of the Palestinian Authority or Somalia as being the cause of their internal troubles and ease their depression by condemning the bad tastes of the upstart Muslim millionaires in the Gulf. The Arab Christians also say that Jewish citizens are closer to them and more “*eleganti*” than the Palestinians and Egyptians (needless to say, the Hebrew word “*eleganti*” is borrowed from the English word “elegant.” They include this word in our conversation in Arabic). A close look at the Christian community reveals that Arab priests are considered to be no better than foreign priests. In fact, the Arab congregation is of the view that Arab priests are interested only in their own careers, while foreign priests are more faithful and support the congregation to a greater extent.

Arab citizens’ negative perceptions of Arabs and Palestinians are based on their distrustfulness toward the Arab states. Since *al-Nakba* and the establishment of the state of Israel, they have been more or less ignored by the surrounding Arab states, and the relationship that had existed between them and the Arab states since the ancient times has been discontinued. Their hatred against Jordan and Egypt, in particular, stems from the fact that they believe that the two countries had betrayed their trust in the 1970s. Moreover, the Arab citizens no longer trust their Arab “brothers” and have isolated themselves alone under

the cover of the Israeli Authority's policy of "Israelization" of Arab citizens. Now, habituated with this policy, they believe that they are different from Palestinians, and Christians in particular deride the Arab states as conservative Muslim states.

In addition, although they are also neighboring Arab states, Syria and Lebanon are considered as special exceptions. The Arab Christians in Israel never criticize them but rather tend to sympathize with them. This tendency became clear during the Second Lebanese War in 2006. Despite the hardships they faced during the war as Israeli citizens residing in the border area, they still sympathized with Hizbullah.

To Be a Melkite Catholic Christian in Israel

This tendency to be a Melkite Catholic Christian is witnessed more clearly among the Melkite Greek Catholics (*Rum al-Katurik* in Arabic). Unlike in Palestine, the Occupied Territory, the majority sect among the Arab Christians in Israel is the Melkites, and they have been historically linked with Syria and Lebanon.

Originally, the majority sect among the Arab Christian community under the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century was Orthodox Christianity. However, the relationship between the church and the congregation was far from stable. Since the Orthodox Church was occupied by the Greek-speaking priests for many years—which is still prevalent in the Orthodox Church in the Middle East and especially prominent in Jerusalem—the Arabic-speaking congregation was not satisfied with it, and gradually made a commitment to the Roman Catholic missionaries, which began to operate in Syria with the backing of France. In addition, it was a great fascination for them to work with the French missionaries as a "protégé," since they were relieved of heavy tax payment levied on monotheist minorities by the Ottoman Empire.

Conflict between the anti-Catholic faction (the Greek-speaking priests) and pro-Catholic faction (mainly comprising Arab priests and the congregation) inside the Orthodox Church raged at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the latter faction was separated as the Melkite Catholic Church in Damascus in 1724. The Melkites made great account of being "the Church for the Arab congregation, who pray in Arabic" by editing their original liturgy prayed mainly in Arabic, and succeeded in quick and wide conversion of the Arab congregation in Syria and Lebanon. However, on the other hand, the Melkites failed to get officially recognized as *millet* by the Ottoman Empire, and this meant that the Melkites had to stay under the control of the Orthodox Church. Moreover, they kept arguing with the Orthodoxies for conversion of the congregation. Therefore, the Melkites were forced to shift their bases from Syria and Lebanon to other marginal places within Wilayat al-Sham, the Province of Syria. Their main destination was Galilee, blooming as a half-independent state under the rule of Zahir al-'Umar, the local hero born in Tiberias at that time. Zahir gave important posts to

Jews and Christians, especially the Melkite merchants in line with his policy of increasing wealth in his ruling area, and this is why Melkite Christians have comprised the majority of the Christian population in Galilee till date.

If we ask Melkite Catholic Christians in Israel about their roots, they will narrate a long story of their ancestors' "exodus" from Syria and Lebanon and their hardship until taking root in Galilee. Throughout their conversation, it is obvious that they have retained their sense of belonging to Syria and Lebanon as the descendants of Melkite emigrants from these countries. Thus, they have retained their sense of belonging to Syria and Lebanon, which is the very reason why they support Hizbullah despite the differences in religion. They even explain their stand as follows, "Nasrallah is quite different from King Abdullah and Mubarak, the dogs of Israel. Hizbullah embodies the real Great Cause of Arabs." However, this opinion is incongruous with their usual talk and behavior. They consider the "great cause of Arabs" as a hollow slogan coined by dishonest Arab countries that turn their eyes away from the ongoing Palestinian Nakba and never believe in it. Moreover, their hatred against the Arab countries has made them declare that they do not wish to call themselves as Arabs!

In this manner, the identity of the Arab Christians in Israel is extremely complex. On the one hand, they acknowledge their Israeli citizenships and the "privileges" that it provides. For example, they sometimes confess that their Israeli citizenships have given them the "luck" to receive safer and more convenient and democratic life than the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Though they refuse to call themselves as "Israelis," they are clearly aware of the merit of possessing Israeli citizenships. On the other hand, they long to be Arabs and Palestinians. In other words, they are torn between their multiple identities of being an Israeli citizen, Arab, and Palestinian. They have to deal with this complex situation, and in the case of Christians, their identity as Christians saves them from this dilemma. For Melkite Christians, the word "Christian" refers to Melkites, and if they identify themselves as Christians in Israel, it automatically implies that they are Arabs. The Melkite Church established as "the Church for Arabs who pray in Arabic" is the most honored source of pride for Melkites. It can be said that they embody the sorrow and the toughness of the minority in Israel, a Jewish state, and the Arab world, a Muslim-first community. However, simultaneously, they are also suffering for their sense of mistrust toward their Melkite Church, since the Melkite Church sometimes behaved as a pro-Israeli authority by selling church-owned land to the Jewish Foundation and by cooperating with the Israeli Labor Party at the time of elections from the 1950s to '60s. Today, this tendency is cast aside by local-born leaders, but the common people will never forget about their church's "dishonesty" and the fact that this policy was operated by an archbishop from Egypt. Thus, their identity as Melkites is highly complicated.

“I Want to Be Proud of Being an Arab Christian,” She Said.

However, they obviously never quit their identity as Arabs. Instead, they appear to try to express their Arab identity in a different manner from the Palestinians. The last time when I spoke to Irina on the phone in February, I found a clear evidence of this tendency in her words. She said that she is pregnant now, and along with her husband, she is choosing some names suitable for her baby. “The only thing we care about is that we want to give our baby an ARABIC NAME, which is not like mine. Many Christian parents give their children Western names such as Mike, Johnny, Nancy, and Irina, but I hate this trend. WE ARE ARABS, and we cannot get rid of this fact. I want to be proud of being an Arab Christian, and I want my offspring to be so! This is why we want to give our baby a traditional Arabic name. We have many beautiful-sounding and good-meaning Arab Christian names such as Habib (beloved one), Bishara (annunciation), Samiha (generous), and Amal (hope). They sound far more beautiful and dignified than the Western names, don’t they?” Irina’s talk embodies one of the ways in which younger Arab Christians in Israel express their identity; these young Arab Christians were given Western and sometimes even Hebrew names by their parents and grew up under the severe control of the Israeli authority. Although I was shocked when I noticed Irina taking notes in Hebrew, in her talk, I found a small hope for the future of young Arab Christians in Israel.