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Covert support

By Nazir Majali

As with everything else having to do with Israel-Palestinian relations, Israeli Arabs were left out of the disengagement plan. Not at their own initiative, perhaps, but their representatives did play a role.

Paying no notice to Israeli Arabs - both by the Israeli and the Palestinian sides - has characterized the history of dialogue between the two sides. Yitzhak Rabin brought 15 people with him to the signing ceremony of the Oslo Accords at the White House, to represent the diverse face of Israeli society. When asked why he did not see fit to add even a single Israeli Arab to the entourage - even though his coalition at the time was propped up by an Arab parliamentary bloc - he immediately and unhesitatingly replied: "Because we are going to sign a peace treaty between Jewish Israel and the PLO."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon needed the votes of the Arab Knesset members, but never even considered asking them for their support, evidently out of concern that any such direct request might be leaked to the press and help the right wing that was opposed to the disengagement plan. After all, nothing turns off a Jewish public more than knowing that the Arabs are supporting something. Which is why Sharon sent representatives of the Labor Party to the Arabs, to put pressure on them to vote in favor of the plan, their objections notwithstanding. Because except for MK Abdulmalik Dehamshe and MK Talab al-Sana, who backed disengagement from the start, every other Arab parliamentarian opposed the plan, volubly attacking it in the media, and describing as a scheme concocted by Sharon with the aim of evading

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implementation of the road map and bolstering the settlement enterprise in the West Bank. At the last moment, the Arab MKs abstained in the vote, in order not to bring down the plan.

Nevertheless, it Advertisement

turns out that the Arabs in Israel - as opposed to the stance taken by most of their representatives in Knesset - largely supported the plan. This is proved not only by the polls, but also by the



actions of this public. After the act of terrorism in Shfaram, the Arab public demonstrated responsibility, and refused to respond to incendiary suggestions - from within and from outside the community - to make a show of force and heat up the atmosphere. It was argued that the far right should not be permitted to disrupt the withdrawal. And so, everyone - the political leadership, the imams, the press - avoided escalation.

In Shfaram itself, they received with open arms and warm, genuine feeling the many hundreds of Jews who came to pay condolence calls, with most of the speakers emphasizing the commitment to continue the good relations between the two peoples. This message was not directed exclusively at Israeli public opinion, but at pan-Arab public opinion, too, via the Arab television channels, which sent some 10 crews from Jerusalem and Gaza to the small city in northern Israel.

Without a doubt, the message was received, and it also had an effect on extremist Palestinian organizations, which chose not to react to the act of terror in the same currency. The Palestinian public in general internalized the fact that in spite of the unilateral nature of the disengagement plan, it serves their interests as well, and they did not its implementation being tampered with. This is why the Palestinian organizations did not react to the terrorist attack in Shilo, either. Everyone knew that any such response would not have been looked upon kindly by the Palestinian public.

This is one example of the potential of Israeli Arabs to act as a conciliatory factor between the two peoples living in this country,

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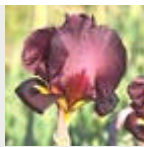
which for some reason is being widely ignored. Moreover, there are those who are seeing to it that every positive step in relations between Israel and the Arabs is inscribed in the Israeli Arab consciousness as a traumatic event. Following the peace treaty with Egypt, members of the Al-Azazma tribe were thrown off their lands in the Negev to make room for Israeli army training grounds. The Oslo Accords led to the Rabin assassination, and every successive government has intensified the discrimination against the Arabs of Israel.

And now, in the wake of the disengagement plan, there is talk of plans to develop the Negev and the Galilee. The plans call for the establishment of 14 new settlements. Not a single one is an Arab settlement.

The writer is a commentator on Israeli affairs on Arab television channels, and in the newspaper Asharq Al Awsat.



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