

# Israel and the Problem of Multiculturalism

In early December 2015 *Time Magazine* announced that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was its Person of the Year. Among her many accomplishments was that Germany had led in welcoming Middle Eastern immigrants and was committed to accepting 800,000 this year.

The editors of *Time* may have been startled by Merkel's speech on December 14, 2015 in which she said that multiculturalism "leads to parallel societies and remains a sham... We want and we will reduce the number of refugees noticeably." Yet, they should not have been surprised since in a speech in October 2010 Merkel had said that multiculturalism had failed utterly. Newcomers, she said, should assimilate to German values and culture, and respect the country's laws.

Chancellor Merkel joined other European and other leaders, notably British Prime Minister David Cameron, French former president Nicolas Sarkozy, former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar and former Australian Prime Minister John Howard in this assertion that multiculturalism has been a mistake. All agree that in their countries different cultural communities have been encouraged to live separate lives. Those separate communities have behaved in ways that run counter to British, German and French values. In these countries assimilation, and integration of newcomers, particularly Muslims, has not been, or is only partially, successful.

One can accept the fact that the existence and diversity of cultures is desirable and healthy for successful societies. Nevertheless, the fundamental problem is that multiculturalism has led to adherence, as Merkel said, to separatism and parallel societies, rather than to a common civic nation based on some if not all factors such common ancestry, language,

history, and traditions.

In democratic western societies the immigration of ethnic and religious minorities, unable or unwilling to be integrated had added to the problems of the existence and protection of cultural pluralism, and the question of affirmative action. The countries are challenged by the tension between communitarianism and ethnicity on one hand and a common collective identity and values on the other. To what extent can and should societies incorporate multilateral principles?

It is intriguing to examine the State of Israel in the context of the complex issue of multicultural ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and the cleavages in Israeli society. Israel has survived not only because of its military success against Arab neighbors but also because it has accepted some forms of diversity, if not multiculturalism. From the beginning it rejected religious coercion, while incorporating non-belligerent religion and maintaining political and social liberties in the country, in spite of external and internal animus.

Is multiculturalism incompatible with Jewish self-determination? There are two separate issues: the unusual diversity of Jewish affiliations, religious and political; and the Arab minority. Though the differences between religious Jews -the ultra-orthodox, those who came from Arab countries, Ashkenazis and Sephardim-, and the secular, the leftists, and the Russian non believers, are considerable, they collectively believe in some common values and a compromise, sometimes difficult, on the place of Judaism.

Today Israel is a country with 8.4 million population, composed of 6.2 million Jews, with a common heritage and ethnic homogeneity, coming from more than 100 countries, 1.7 million Arabs, 360,000 others, and 100,000 legal immigrant workers. Thus the population is made up of 75 per cent Jews, 17 per cent Muslim, mostly Sunni, 2 per cent Christian, and

1.5 per cent Druze.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence spoke of the establishment of a Jewish State in the Land of Israel, and the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate. The Declaration, in democratic fashion, also spoke of ensuring complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex, and of guaranteeing freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture. Arab inhabitants of Israel were to become equal citizens in the Jewish State.

The establishment of a Jewish State has meant that symbols reflect the Jewish majority: the Hebrew language, though Arabic is an official second language; observing the Sabbath as a day of rest; officially serving kosher food; and the national airline El Al not flying on Sabbath. The Star of David is on the flag and the national anthem is Hatikvah , the song of the Jewish people's desire to return to their homeland. Yet, while Israel observes Independence Day, many Arabs observe al-Nakba (Calamity) Day.

Although there is a sizable Arab minority a bi-national state is not realistic. As a Jewish state, Israel passed the Law of Return on July 5, 1950 granting every Jew the right to settle in Israel and gain citizenship. The Law was extended in 1970 to people with one Jewish grandparent or people married to a Jew.

Since it was founded in 1901, the private Jewish National Fund has existed to buy and develop land for Jewish settlement. The JNF now owns 13 per cent of the land in Israel, while 80 per cent is owned by the state, and the rest by private individuals.

How to reconcile a society based individual liberty and equality of all citizens with the existence of specific cultures and separate arrangements, or even full cultural

autonomy, for Arabs? A fundamental problem is that a majority of Arabs regard themselves as part of a particular culture, as "Palestinian Citizens of Israel" rather than as Israelis. They do not identify with the state of Israel, but rather with a Palestinian collective identity, even if it is partly based on a fallacious reading of history.

The Arab minority complains of the Israeli laws on immigration, use of state land, and exemption from compulsory military service, except for the Druze who have been conscripted since 1956. The military rule that limited the movement of Arabs between 1948 and 1966 was ended, but serious gaps, economic, employment opportunities, educational, and political, still exist between the Arab and Jewish citizens.

Yet if Arabs complain of discrimination, they are not on the periphery of society. They benefit from formal equality and legal protection, especially by the Supreme Court. Arabic is the second official language of the country. They have their own autonomous primary educational system and administer their personal status of marriage and divorce by religious authorities. Public funds have been given for mosques and churches.

The Arab minority does participate in all forms of activity, including voting and being part of official institutions, and of the educated, business and professional class. These include mainstream political parties and also an Islamic Movement that opposes Israel's existence or its existence as a Jewish state. Arabs have been present as members of the Knesset, 17 in 2015, a judge on the Supreme Court, a member of the Prime Minister's Cabinet, ambassadors, army generals, and senior positions in the Israel police.

Israel, like other democratic countries, has a moral dilemma in dealing with minority groups. Plurality of cultures, political, ethnic, and religious, exist and minority rights are respected, but multiculturalism in the sense of separate

communities cannot be sustained in a viable, successful national society.