

On Israeli-Arab patriotism

By Alexander Yacobson

A comprehensive survey presented at the Herzliya Conference showed that 94 percent of Israel's Jews and 27 percent of its Arabs declared themselves willing to fight to protect the country. The media presented the figure as "only 27 percent," emphasizing the gap between Jews and Arabs. "Only" 27 percent? Is it a small matter that under the present circumstances, in a country that does not expect Arabs in general to be drafted, that every fourth Arab citizen is willing to protect that country?

The rest of the survey presents a more positive picture of the attitude toward the state than that expressed publicly by most of the Arab leaders and spokespeople: 44 percent of Israel's Arabs "are proud to be Israeli citizens"; 24 percent say they are "patriotic Israelis to a great extent"; and 35 percent say they are "patriotic Israelis to some extent."

Is Israel better than other countries? Sixty-six percent of the Jews think it is, and no less than 77 percent of the Arabs. Moreover, the long-term trend is positive. In 2000, "only" 22 percent of Israel's Arabs said they were willing to fight for the state, and in 1995 "only" 55 percent said that Israel was better than other countries.

Clearly, when Arabs speak of "other countries" they have the neighboring ones in mind. But who among the leaders of this community would say publicly that Israel is better than most other countries? According to other surveys, a clear majority of Arabs is ready to accept the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, on condition that equality for its Arab citizens and a Palestinian state alongside it are assured.

Most Arab MKs transmit an entirely different message to the Jewish public. One calls Israel a "little spider"; another gives a television interview against the backdrop of a picture of Sheikh Yassin; another celebrates with Hezbollah; another sends a congratulatory telegram to Saddam Hussein; another supports Assad, Jr.; another signs a telegram to Assad, Sr. with the words "Nazareth, Palestine."

The most powerful sheikh among the Arab leadership rejects the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish nation-state - that is, the very principle of a two-state solution. The Jewish public hears, sees and forms its impressions.

There is no reason to assume that the Arab MKs are cut off from the mood of the public that sent them to office again and again.

The extreme statements they make are intended to attract voters, not repel them. But the opinion polls prove that the attitude of the Arab public to the state is ambivalent, just as reality itself is complex and ambivalent, with the leaders expressing only the negative side of that ambivalence.

Only the Arab voters can change this reality, by electing different representatives. The "bottom line" is always what the public chooses in free elections. The Arab MKs will find something else to do, even if they will not be busy organizing victory parties for Hezbollah.

When Arab citizens come to Ben-Gurion International Airport and go through what they go through there, this is not to be assumed to be a moment when they feel like patriotic Israelis "to a great extent," nor even to "some extent."

Security exigencies are understandable. But has the state really invested every possible effort to limit injury to its Arab citizens? It is doubtful. Arab MKs who struggle determinedly for the rights of their constituency and are truly committed to the rights of both peoples to national independence would be doing a great service to Israeli society as a whole.