

Muhammad, Where Are You?

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IT SOUNDS LIKE a joke. But it isn't.

About a month ago, on the eve of the Jewish New Year, the government statistical office published a set of interesting items about the population of the state. It is intended as a gift for the citizens. The population is growing, it is getting richer and it is satisfied.

One of the items lists the most popular names given last year to newborn boys and girls.

When the statisticians saw the results, they were flabbergasted. It appears the name that topped the list was Muhammad.

Muhammad? The most popular name in the Jewish state?

There is a simple explanation for this. Arabs constitute more than 20% of the citizenry. Arab parents like to give their sons the name of the Prophet, God bless his soul. Also, Arab citizens have many more children than Jewish citizens. If every second Arab boy is called Muhammad, you get in principle 5%.

Jewish citizens have a much wider choice. There are hundreds of names for boys, and the list is growing all the time, because young parents like to invent fresh Hebrew names. Even if a tenth of the Jewish parents prefer the name Josef, the most popular Hebrew name according to the list, you get only 4%.

What to do? Simple: you just omit the Arab names. No Muhammad.

When this became known, many Israelis laughed. How silly can you get?

BUT IT is not a joke. It shows that the Arab citizens are not considered as really "belonging". 66 years after the foundation of Israel, the place of the Arabs in the "Jewish State" remains problematical, to say the least.

Last Tuesday, reading Haaretz, I noticed that a whole page—page 4—consisted of news concerning Jewish-Arab relations.

Item 1: Tens of Jewish settlers invaded the Arab neighborhood of Silwan, next to the Temple Mount, in the middle of the night. Silwan, the biblical Shiloah, is an Arab village that was joined to Jerusalem when East Jerusalem was annexed by Israel after the Six-day War. For years now an association of settlers called Elad has been trying to Judaize this neighborhood by secretly buying properties from poor Arabs, using Arab traitors as straw-men. Now the association has decided to fill these houses, arriving like thieves in the night.

(The president of Elad is Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. I boast of having detested him from first sight, and even invented a new Hebrew word for him. It translates roughly as "Holocaustist".)

Item 2: It was disclosed that the central building organization of the settlers, which is heavily subsidized by the government, is giving huge donations to a group called "If You Will", which specializes in ferreting out leftist lecturers in the universities and other places.

The group has built a Stasi-like system of informers, and

claims to "promote Zionist values in Israel" – denouncing lecturers who demand equality for Arabs and such.

Item 3: Professor (emeritus) Hillel Weiss, still a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University, published a call on Facebook for genocide of the Palestinians. "Since they are not a people, this would not constitute genocide," he asserted, "but just the eradication of rabble." He advised the Palestinians to leave Eretz Israel (the land up to the Jordan) at once, before the inevitable genocide occurs.

Bar Ilan University, it should be remembered, is the Alma Mater of Yigal Amir, the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin.

Item 4: The Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, demanded that Hanin Zuabi should be put "in prison for many years".

Zuabi, a female Member of the Knesset for a small nationalist Arab faction, has a knack for uttering extremely provocative statements. Lately she said that there is no difference between an ISIS fighter who cuts off individual people's heads and an Israeli pilot who pushes a button and kills many Palestinians.

Lieberman told Zuabi to go and live in Gaza. He suggested that "as an unmarried woman, who dresses as she dresses (wearing modern clothes)" she would suffer under Hamas. He also demanded that she be stripped of her Israeli citizenship.

Item 5: This does not directly concern the Arabs, but represents racism at its worst. The Israeli Supreme Court, which acts as a constitutional court (though Israel has no written constitution, only some "basic laws"), has ordered the government to close at once an "open" prison built in the middle of the desert for African asylum-seekers, who are held there indefinitely without trial, until they agree to leave Israel "voluntarily".

The government has refused to obey the order, something quite unprecedented, and is now in the process of enacting a new law, which would allow 61 (out of 120) Knesset members to overturn Supreme Court decisions.

ISRAEL BOASTS of being the Only Democracy In The Middle East.

These random items, and those published on any other day, throw some doubt on this assertion.

Of course, in its treatment of its national minority Israel is not alone, and not the worst. Almost every state around the world has one or more national minorities, and almost every national minority has cause for complaint. One has only to think about the Kurds in Syria, the Russian-speakers in Ukraine or the Tamils in Sri Lanka to get some sense of proportion.

I would guess that in any impartial worldwide review of the status of minorities, Israel would figure somewhere in the middle.

I suppose that the position of every minority is unique, conditioned by history and local circumstances. The position of the Arab minority in Israel certainly is.

First of all, like the Aborigines in Australia and the Inuit in Canada, they were here long before the present majority. The case of Zuabi-Lieberman is a case in point.

The family of Hanin Zuabi has been in Lower Galilee for centuries, perhaps millennia. After the foundation of Israel, Saif-al-Din Zuabi has been a member of the Zionist Labor Party and a deputy speaker of the Knesset. Another relative, Abd-al-Rahman Zuabi, has been a Supreme Court judge. Abd-al-Aziz Zuabi, a Knesset member of the Zionist Mapam party (now Meretz) was a deputy minister.

Lieberman's original first name was Evet. He was born in Kishinev in Soviet Moldova, and his mother tongue is Yiddish. Though he came to Israel in 1978, he is still considered a "new immigrant" and speaks Hebrew with a marked Russian accent. Of the two, Hanin Zuabi arguably speaks better Hebrew.

It was Abd-al-Aziz who coined the sentence "my tragedy is that my country is at war with my people".

That is the second anomaly: "Israeli Arabs" are an integral part of the Palestinian people. Almost every Israeli Arab citizen has relatives in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip or both, as well as in the refugee camps.

When actual fighting is going on, as in the recent Gaza war, their hearts are with the other side, the "enemy". At this moment, several young Israeli Arab citizens are fighting with ISIS, after crossing into Syria through Turkey.

AS THE Zuabi family tree shows, there is another side of the coin. Arab citizens are deeply interwoven in the fabric of Israel.

I often wonder what would happen if the wishful thinking of Lieberman (and others of his ilk around the world) were fulfilled, and the minority left the country.

We know from history. When the French Huguenots were expelled from France, many of them fled to the fledgling Prussian state. Backward Berlin became an economic center and Prussia flourished, while France was enfeebled. The same, but even more so, happened to Spain after the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims. Spain was never the same again, and the Ottoman empire, which gladly absorbed most of them, was enriched.

Israel's Arab citizens do not serve in the army. They do not

want to fight against their Palestinian brothers, nor does the army want to train them and give them arms, God forbid. (Though at this moment, the army would like to enlist Christian Arabs, a minority of the minority, in order to create a split. Some Arabs, mostly Bedouin and Druze, do serve.)

But apart from army service, Arab citizens fulfill all the duties of a citizen. They pay their taxes. Since Value Added Tax and other indirect taxes make up a large part of government revenues, they cannot evade them. They fulfill many tasks.

Indeed, Arabs are far more deeply imbedded in Israeli society than many of them would like to admit. They are physicians, lawyers, engineers, judges. When I brought my late wife to hospital, it took several days before I realized the head of the department was an Arab doctor.

All Arab citizens learn Hebrew and speak it well, while our army intelligence department has a hard time finding Jews who speak Arabic.

The personal income of Arab citizens is on average lower than that of Jewish citizens, but still far higher than that of their relatives in the occupied territories. Arabs in the annexed areas of East Jerusalem, who have not been accorded Israeli citizenship but are officially "residents", still enjoy full rights under the national insurance system, which are considerable.

IN GENERAL, the situation of the Arab citizens is far from what we (and they, of course) desire. We must fight for total equality. This fight should be continuous, and should be fought by Jewish and Arab human rights activists hand in hand.

However, the sad fact is that this cooperation, which once was close and almost intimate, has become distant and rare. Arabs are afraid of "normalization", which might look like supporting the occupation. Jews are afraid of being branded by the extreme Right as "Arab-lovers" and traitors.

This situation, though natural, must be overcome. The Israeli Left has no chance of ever regaining power without active cooperation with "the Zuabis", as Finance Minister Yair Lapid once contemptuously called all Arab citizens. Including Hanin, though she is a woman, unmarried and dressed as she wants.

And all the missing Muhammads.