

# The Palestinians in Israel

Friday 8 December 2023, by [THOMAS Martin](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2023).

**About 2.3 million Palestinians live in Gaza, about 3 million in the West Bank, and about 2.1 million in Israel or East Jerusalem.**

More than 3 million live in Jordan, and the other four million or so are scattered, with the biggest numbers in Syria, Chile, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the USA.

Of those segments, now, the 21% (and increasing) Arab population in Israel and East Jerusalem probably has the greatest leverage in securing a democratic outcome for the much-defeated Palestinian people.

It was not always so. But now the population of Gaza has been politically expropriated by Hamas and is being crushed by Israeli military assault; in the West Bank, the stranded outcome from diplomacy is that people are cooped up with Palestinian semi-autonomy in 165 separate patches of land, cities, towns, or villages from which they can organise little resistance.

The Palestinian population in Israel, now:

- Has openly-functioning political parties, and political freedom, limited but real.
- Has a larger working-class component. Much of the population of the West Bank and Gaza is pauperised. Palestinian workers in Israel are concentrated in construction, healthcare, education, retail and wholesale trade, and hospitality. But they have jobs, if often low-paid. A good few are in unions. The Histadrut union federation, founded as a Jewish-community organisation, has organised Palestinian workers in Israel since 1959. A smaller and more militant union [organisation](#), [Ma'an](#), also organises Palestinian with Jewish workers.
- Has a big student component. 18% of undergraduate students at Israeli universities are Arab, 41% at Haifa university, 25% at the Technion, Israel's premier university.
- Has more political cohesion for a workable democratic settlement than any other demographic segment in Israel-Palestine. All the parties with a base among Palestinian citizens in Israel advocate "two states".
- Is represented in today's most hopeful social movement in Israel, Standing Together, which is configured as a joint Arab-Jewish movement seeking both peace and independence for Israelis and Palestinians and social justice.

Palestinians in Israel suffer disadvantage. 45% of Palestinian families there are in poverty, as against 13% of Jews. It is difficult in practice for Palestinians to get building permits, so hundreds of Palestinian houses are demolished each year for lack of permits. But among the British left, Israel is often painted so vile as to indicate that no social and political action is possible there, and so it must be suppressed by external force.

Even half-assent to that demonisation, and even if motivated by thinking it best to use the strongest words to denounce ill-use even if they are inaccurate, is counterproductive because it cuts off possible sources of progress.

After the 1947-9 wars, some 150,000 Arabs remained in what had become Israel, mostly peasants living in villages: the biggest Arab-majority town, Nazareth, was then 9,000 people (now, 80,000). Their areas were under military government until 1966. Schools were scanty.

They had a high voter turnout in national elections, but mostly they voted for the mainstream Jewish parties or their “front” operations.

The Palestine Communist Party (PCP) had been formed in 1922-3, primarily by a splinter from left-Zionism. At first almost all its members were Jewish.

From 1929 Stalin imposed a “turn” towards Arab nationalism.

In May 1943 most of the Arab members split to form a National Liberation League, opposing Jewish immigration, USSR-loyal, but with no social programme. The rump PCP opposed partition and advocated a binational state in Palestine. So did some left Zionists, and so, from a different angle, did an official Anglo-American Commission on Palestine in 1946.

## **Takers**

But there were almost no takers for this binational state, which by definition required wide agreement. The United Nations went for partition in November 1947. Stalin, seeing a chance to disrupt the British Empire, backed it.

First the PCP, then the NLL, went along with Stalin, and they reunited in October 1948 in an Israeli Communist Party, Maki. The NLL had worked with the left Zionists of Mapam to distribute leaflets calling on Egyptian and Jordanian soldiers to rebel against their states’ 1948 war on Israel and to turn their fire instead against their own rulers.

Many NLL members were now in the West Bank or Jordan. They set up a Jordanian Communist Party, from which came a new Palestine Communist Party, renamed Palestine People’s Party, which has been a junior (now tiny) ally of Fatah.

Maki, the Israeli Communist Party, peaked at 4.5% of the vote in 1955, after some people from Mapam defected to it. In 1965 it split. By now the USSR was courting Arab nationalist governments and, though still on paper for “two states”, hostile to Israel. The USSR-critical “Eurocommunist” side of the 1965 split took most of Maki’s Jewish membership. It eventually dissolved into Meretz.

The USSR-loyal side built and retained sizeable support among Israel’s Arabs, more as standing up for Arab rights than as “communist”. In 1977 it launched a “front”, Hadash, which won 4.6% in that year’s election. Since then its score has settled down to 3% or sometimes more.

In 2015 and 2020 it ran in a Joint List with other Arab-based parties, getting 10.6% and 12.7%. In 2015 election, without result, Hadash mooted ideas of cooperation with the mainstream-Jewish-left Meretz. Allowing for lower Arab turnout, East Jerusalem residents mostly not registering as citizens, and much of the Arab population being below voting age, Hadash holds about a third of the Arab vote.

Some Arabs still vote for mainstream Jewish-dominated parties, and the other Arab parties are Ra’am, Balad, and Ta’al. Ra’am is soft-Islamist, but was in Israel’s 2021-2 coalition government. Its

chief support is in the south and the Negev, while Hadash's is in the north. Raed Salah, leader of another wing of the Islamists, based in Umm al-Fahm in the north, campaigns against Arabs voting in Israel's elections. Arab turnout has decreased since the 1970s: higher self-confidence and greater impatience with successive Israeli governments must also play a part. Arab turnout in local government elections is still high.

Ta'al is led by a former top adviser to Yasser Arafat. Balad is more sharply nationalist.

Ra'am, Balad, Ta'al, and Hadash all support "two states" and equality for Arabs living in Israel. Even Ra'am condemns Hamas's 7 October atrocity convincingly.

Hadash leader Assaf Talgam [says](#) Hadash and Maki support the "right of return" (i.e. en masse resettlement in Israel of descendants of the 1948 refugees) and repeal of the "Law of Return" (right for Jews to settle in Israel). But those do not figure in Hadash's or Maki's public platforms. Talgam [calls](#) for "negotiations towards a permanent peace situation between Israel and the Palestinians" as an immediate step, but "can't imagine any political scenario for" the "right of return". Ra'am, Balad, and Ta'al also in practice present those issues as distant-future.

Some such distancing is necessary to make "two states" a meaningful policy. As socialists we want open borders, free movement. We do not say nations can have self-determination only if they establish open borders. If we did, then we would oppose self-determination for every nation in the world today...

The Jewish community in Palestine established Israel more *in order to* be able to have the Law of Return, so survivors from the Holocaust could find a Jewish majority for collective self-defence, than for independence in general. With the large flights to Israel of Jews from Asian and African states (from late 1940s), from the former USSR (from 1989), and from Argentina (1970s to 2002 or so), that desire for a refuge-homeland remains in-built.

"Right of return" is, as its advocates stress, about organised resettlement of millions, not about individual movement; after all the wars and after 7 October, inevitably Israeli Jews fear it.

We can hope for immediate relief for the refugees (resettlement in an independent Palestinian state or in Israel, compensation, aid, as sketched by [negotiators](#) over the years), and rapid progress to free movement. In practice that is what the Palestinian movements in Israel push for: not "no two states, unless..."

Standing Together includes members from Hadash and from Meretz, and many from no party. Distinctive about Standing Together is that it is a joint Arab-Jewish movement (Hadash is, too, but mostly an Arab movement with some Jewish members), and that is a social movement with an activist and campaigning approach, striving to connect equal rights, national rights, and social issues in a single effort.

---

**Martin Thomas**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

---

**P.S.**

Workers' Liberty

<https://www.workersliberty.org/index.php/story/2023-12-05/palestinians-israel>