The Israeli Circassians: non-Arab Arabs

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One day, I was at the tahana merkazit [central bus station] in Jerusalem with Mussa and we went through the metal detector. They let him go through but when it was my turn, they asked for my identity card. They saw that we kept talking together so they asked for his I.D. too. He is a redhead and has blue eyes so they thought he was Ashkenazi. But they saw his name ‘Musa’ – that sounds quite Arabic and they asked him if he was Arab, but then his family name doesn’t sound Arabic at all so he explained that he was Circassian. Then, they asked him what religion he was and he said ‘Muslim’. They were dumbfounded...

The 4,500-odd Israeli Circassians, who arrived during the second half of the 20th century in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire, have an unusual identity: they are Israelis without being Jews and they are Muslims but aren’t Palestinian Arabs (they are Caucasians). Little known by the Israeli public, the members of this inconspicuous minority often experience situations like the one reported above; indeed, many of them have a fair complexion and light-colored eyes that don’t match the widely spread (and expected) clichés about Muslims’ physical traits. At the same time, many Circassians – men, in particular – bear a Muslim name, which immediately causes them to be classified as “Arabs.”

Until 1948, the Zionist project’s exclusive aim was the establishment of a Jewish state – not the establishment of a state where Jews could finally live far from the anti-Semitic threat. In The Jewish State, Theodor Herzl had already stated that “the nations in whose midst Jews live are all either covertly or openly Anti-Semitic”\(^2\) and the establishment of a Jewish state was the future as Zionism saw it. In fact, when the State of Israel was declared, it was defined as the state of the Jewish people, inheritor of the Biblical land of Israel and of the kingdom of Judah. This exclusive definition has made the creation of citizenship categories quite arduous. Actually, some figures of Zionism opposed Herzl’s political Zionism even before the creation of the state. One of them was Asher Hirsch Ginsberg, better known under his pen name Ahad Ha’am. Even though Ahadd Ha’am received the Zionist circles’ moral support, he was convinced that the future state could...
not ingather all the Jews and he fought Herzl’s political Zionism. After his visits in Palestine, the author wrote down his impressions and criticized the functioning of settlements. In his essay *Emet me-Eretz Yisrael* [A Truth from Eretz Yisrael], he denounced the myth of the virgin land conveyed by the Zionist leaders and reminded them that their analysis did not take into account the Arabs:

3 From abroad, we are accustomed to believe that Eretz Israel is presently almost totally desolate, an uncultivated desert, and that anyone wishing to buy a land there can come and buy all he wants. But in truth it is not so. In the entire land, it is hard to find tillable land that is not already tilled [...] We are accustomed to believing that Arabs are all desert savages, like donkeys who do not see or understand what is going on around them. This is a serious mistake. 4

4 Indeed, the Zionist political program did not define the status of the minorities in the Jewish state as it was envisioned and would not do so after reaching its goal in 1948. In fact, after the War of Independence, the various political texts did not analyze the “Arab problem” (*habayyah haAravit*): four-fifth of the Palestinians had fled or had been expelled; and nobody thought the remaining minority could become a problem: the few Palestinians who had remained in the territory were perceived as numerically insignificant and would probably opt for emigration; if not, they would be encouraged to leave and settle in neighboring countries. 4

5 This rhetoric has somehow made the minorities even more “minor”; it has also affected the contemporary Israeli society, which finds it difficult to distinguish between the various groups and to identify their specificities. But the public opinion merely adopts the categories created by the state and is therefore rather ignorant of the non-Jewish groups living in Israel.

6 On May 16, 1948, Haim Weizmann, the first President of the State of Israel was sworn in; he then declared:

> I want all the Arab citizens of Israel to clearly understand that whether they are Christian, Muslim, Druze, Bedouin, or Circassian, the presidential residence is open to each one of them. The President’s official residence is the house of all citizens. 5

**Non-Arab Arabs**

7 In the case of the Israeli Circassians, the categories defined and used for the census in 2010 are problematic. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) classifies the population following two variables. In 2009, the Israeli population was divided into three categories: “Jews,” “Arabs,” and “Others”; until 1995, the second and the third categories were merged. The Circassians are neither Jews nor Palestinian Arabs. They are Israelis and Muslims but these two denominations have never been meant to go together. The “Others” category includes some of the Russian immigrants (not all) that are not considered authentic Jews according to the religious law; it also includes foreign workers, and in some documents, it also includes Druze and Circassians. The second variable used by the CBS is religion; there are four groups: “Jews,” “Muslims,” “Christians,” and “Druze.” In that case, the Circassians are classified – and rightly so – as “Muslims.” In certain administrative documents, however, or for “practical” reasons, the Circassians are included in the Druze minority. This “Circassian-Druze” group is sometimes viewed as a distinct homogenous group and at other times, it is also included in the dominant “Arab” category.
In May 2004, Henia Markovitch made a report to the Civil Service Commission about the professionalization of Non-Jews. The very title of her report – “The Fair Representation of Arabs including Druze and Circassians in the Civil Service 2003” – was problematic. Chen Bram, the only Israeli anthropologist who has studied the Circassian community in the country and gave reports on their situation to the government, wrote: “Like most Israeli Arabs, they are Sunni Muslims, but they describe themselves as a separate community, distinct from the other Sunnis in Israel, and are recognized as such.” Actually, if the Circassians make a point of emphasizing their difference, they don’t refer to their religion – as the Druze do. On the contrary, while they fully identify themselves as Muslims, they insist on their ethno-cultural characteristic: they are neither Arabs nor Palestinians, they are Circassians and Caucasians. When I met Yoav Stern, a journalist for the Haaretz daily newspaper who has written several articles on the Circassian community, he gave me his business card. It read that he worked for the office of “Arab Affairs.” Along with a few other journalists of Haaretz, he has authored most of the articles about non-Jewish minorities. These articles clearly distinguish between the various minorities but the leftist newspaper itself considers them all “Arabs.” In fact, the aforementioned journalists have difficulties calling the Circassians – like all other non-Jewish Muslim minorities – anything but Arabs. As for the various communities of interests – the State of Israel or Palestinian nationalists – they classify the Circassians as Arabs or non-Arabs, at their convenience.

Several webpages about Israeli society, intended for tourists and diplomats, can be found on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of these webpages presents Israel as “a mosaic made up of different population groups coexisting in the framework of a democratic state.” The brief overview of the various populations which make up Israeli society is introduced as such: “Some 1.8 million people, comprising some 24 percent of Israel’s population, are non-Jews. Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, they include a number of different, primarily Arabic-speaking, groups, each with distinct characteristics.” The document’s first paragraph focuses on the “Muslim Arabs,” the second paragraph is on “Bedouin Arabs” – who are Muslims –, the third paragraph presents “Christian Arabs,” while the fourth paragraph has to do with the Druze and the fifth one talks about the Circassians, who are described as follows:

The Circassians, comprising some 4,000 people concentrated in two northern villages, are Sunni Muslims, although they share neither the Arab origin nor the cultural background of the larger Islamic community. While maintaining a distinct ethnic identity, they participate in Israel’s economic and national affairs without assimilating either into Jewish society or into the Muslim community.

These few lines shed light on two major problems of categorization in the official rhetoric. The first one is the segmentation of the Palestinian group (called “Israeli Arabs,” in this document) and the second one is the inclusion of the Circassians in the “Arab” category. Even though the webpage does state that they don’t share the Arab origin of the larger Islamic community, speaking of the “culture” of the “Muslim community” is problematic. Saying that the Circassians claim a culture that differs from that of the “Palestinians” or that of the “Israeli Arabs” – to quote the terms officially used by the state – would have been justified. Indeed, the Circassians don’t pretend to have a culture similar to that of the Muslim Palestinians, neither do they share the cultural background of the Christian Palestinians. They do, however, follow the same Islam as the country’s Muslim community. Another surprising point is that the Circassians are mentioned and are officially recognized as a distinct group, and that this minority is listed on the website...
just like other larger groups, while the Circassian population only totals about 4,500 individuals.

The Israeli jurisdiction mixes up the notions of religion, nationality, and citizenship

11 In Hebrew, the word “leom” literally means “nation” and it is often translated as “ethnicity.” This word is the official term by which the Ministry of the Interior classifies all Israeli citizens. The Israeli citizenship per se does not exist; in a state which is ethnically defined and conceived as a Jewish “nation,” the notions of religion, nationality, and citizenship merge. The forms on the Ministry of the Interior’s website list a hundred and twenty leomim. Among them we find a hundred and sixteen nationalities – from Abkhazian to Yugoslavian – most of which are related to actual countries. Obsolete nationalities such as East or West-German are still listed, as well as the mysterious “Hebrew” nationality. These nationalities mostly represent the countries of origin of the Jews who now live in Israel. Five leomim, defined according to other criteria, are also listed: “Arab,” “Jew,” “Druze,” “Bedouin,” and “Circassian” – those are larger transnational groups. Up until 2005, these leomim were mentioned on the Israeli national identity cards (teudat zehut). The teudat zehut is made of two separate documents that have to be shown together. The first document is the identity card itself; it bears a registration number, the holder’s last name, the first name, the father’s and mother’s first names, the holder’s date and place of birth, the leom (until 2005), the gender, the place and date of issuance (according to the civil and the Hebrew calendars), as well as a color picture of the ID holder. Before 2005, the identity card mentioned the holder’s leom but the Supreme Court ruled that it had to be removed because it could lead one to make a distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens and discriminate against the citizens classified as “Arabs,” in particular. It should be noted that the Circassians did not welcome the removal of the leom category on the identity card: indeed, that information allowed them to be officially identified as non-Palestinians. It is true that the leom reference on the card could possibly lead to discriminatory reactions during security checks, but even without it, other elements on that card have remained that easily reveal whether the card holder is a Jew or a non-Jew. The ID holders’ culture can often be identified by their last names, their first names, and those of their parents; besides, the cards of the Israeli citizens who are Jewish mention their date of birth according to the Jewish calendar, in addition to their date of birth in the civil calendar as it appears on everyone’s card. In 2007, the Knesset voted an amendment stating that a Jewish citizen may ask to have their Hebrew date of birth removed from the identity card but in practice, except for a few militants, almost no Israeli wishes to distinguish him/herself or even thinks that this information may be problematic. The Israeli Circassians’ identity card doesn’t differentiate them from the larger “non-Jewish” group. The second document in the identity card includes the registration number, the holder’s current address, former addresses, maiden names (in the case of women), citizenship (which therefore appears in fine), as well as the names and ID numbers of the holder’s spouse and children.

12 In Israel’s nationality law, the words “nationality” and “citizenship” are used indifferently. The law reads that nationality applies to individuals who were born in Israel or who reside in the country and that citizenship can be acquired by birth, according to the Law of Return, by residence, or by naturalization. Individuals acquire
nationality by birth if they were born in Israel to a father or a mother who is an Israeli citizen and if they do not hold another citizenship. Since the enactment of the Law of Return (1950), every Jew – regardless of his/her place of birth and residence – is entitled to make aliya to Israel and become a citizen (a Jew is a person who was born to a Jewish mother or someone who converted to Judaism and does not claim any other religious affiliation). The Jew who makes aliya becomes a citizen upon arriving in Israel, where he/she is granted an olleh certificate (olleh means “who came up,” who made aliya). Since 1970, the Law of Return has been expanded to include the children of a Jew and their spouse, and the grandchildren of a Jew, in the name of the right to family reunification, even in the case of mixed marriages. This Law of Return has enabled the immigration of the vast majority of olim from the former Soviet Union, even though not all of them are considered “kosher” Jews according to the halakha (the Jewish religious law). Israel’s nationality law contains a specific clause regarding the acquisition of nationality by residence and addresses the case of the citizens of the Mandate of Palestine. The individuals who could prove uninterrupted presence within the territorial confines of Israel between the Declaration of Independence (in 1948) and the Ratification of the Nationality Law (in 1952) were granted Israeli citizenship. Therefore, according to Israeli jurisdiction, the Palestinians who were expelled or went into exile in neighboring countries are not considered Israeli citizens. The right of return for the 1948 refugees is at the heart of the Palestinian claims but the chances that it be considered favorably by Israeli negotiators are slim. A sociologist at the University of Haifa once shared with me the opinion of the majority of the Israeli Jews: “the right of return for Palestinians means the end of Israel as a Jewish state: their return is our end.”

“Preferred” Minorities and/or Second-Class Citizens?

Now, Circassians are not Palestinians; if they have stayed in Israel after 1948, it is thanks to a political decision taken that year. They have never integrated into the Jewish Israeli majority since they are Muslims; they haven’t integrated into the Israeli Palestinian community either because of their loyalty to Israel; and they have never identified with the Druze since they are Circassians. The Circassian community cannot but define its identity thanks to solidarity and identification practices. A resident of Reyhaniya once told me: “To the Jews, we are mere Muslims and to the Arabs, we are Israelis.”

Rather than identifying themselves as neither Jews nor Palestinians, nor Druze, the Israeli Circassians have adopted some behaviors from each major group and have established different partnerships with Jews, with Palestinians, and with the Druze.

Like some, the Circassians experience fear and discrimination; like others, they are accused of treachery and strongly wish to be recognized as unique; with others still, they wish to live together while making sure they get recognition. These identification practices have led the Circassians to make difficult choices that have an ongoing impact on their daily life and cause frustration. Indeed, while the Israeli Circassians are treated quite differently from the Palestinians, they are still denied full citizenship and are often victims of discrimination. I interviewed a resident of Reyhaniya, whose husband holds a high-ranking position in the army and who sees herself as a full-fledged Israeli; she told me:

We travel a lot and when we fly abroad, we fly out of Tel-Aviv, like everyone else.
When we go through the security check, problems often arise. Last time, an
eighteen-year-old kid asked us to show our identity cards. She was all smiles, but we gave her our IDs and when she saw our names on them, her smile disappeared. For an eighteen-year-old Israeli, our name sounds very Arabic. She asked us to wait and called her manager. X [the narrator’s husband] asked her what the problem was [...] we knew full well what the problem was... and she curtly answered him that we should wait, that was all. Her manager arrived and asked what the problem was. She handed him our identity cards and gave our name. He first asked us where we were going, for what purpose, for how long. I was furious but didn’t say anything, and at that moment, X [her husband] produced his district officer identification card... The security officer was quite embarrassed. X could have been his superior; he apologized. X and I, or the kids, we all look Israelis; I am blond and everyone always thinks I am Ashkenazi, and we speak perfect Hebrew, like all Israelis... Unlike the Arab-looking people, we rarely get checked at the security, but when we do get checked and when the security agents see our names, we have the same problems as the others.

16 All Circassians agree that they consider themselves as full Israeli citizens and they call history as a witness to their “unique” situation. They note, however, that they still aren’t viewed as citizens “like the others.” Individual accounts confirm this feeling but the distinction also affects the community as a whole. In November 2001, the Israeli daily newspapers reported on a two-week strike (well featured in the media) organized by the Druze and the Circassian municipal councils. Their representatives demanded that their councils be granted the same status as the Israeli councils. Ariel Sharon, then Prime Minister, committed to contribute fifty million shekels. For the municipal councils, this commitment was a first step in receiving official recognition; their meeting with President Moshe Katsav, who confirmed Sharon’s promise, ended the conflict on November 8th.

17 As early as 1987, the minister’s private office asked that the Druze and the Circassian towns receive equal treatment. Yet, the politicians’ wish to distinguish between the minorities rarely results in any real action. For instance, in 2008, Hurbeish – a Druze town with a population of 6,000 – had a twenty-seven million shekel budget while Shlomi, a neighboring Israeli town with the same number of inhabitants, boasted a forty-four million shekel budget. In February 2002, the Druze and Circassian education sectors went on strike to ask for a budget increase and to demand that the promises made in November 2001 be fulfilled. The agreements passed at the time were signed by Minister of Finance Silvan Shalom and Minister of the Interior Eli Yishai but only a third of the funds were transferred and the Druze and the Circassian towns once again implemented austerity measures the following year. “We have had enough of the politics of discrimination [...] we want equality for the Druze and the Circassian citizens,” said the strikers (reported by Haaretz)12. While the latter don’t hesitate to publicly denounce the discriminations they endure, they don’t ask for equality for all citizens; indeed, they advocate for equal rights between the Jews, the Circassians, and the Druze. At the same time, the municipality councils of Israeli Palestinians also went on strike. (Sometimes, the various groups within the non-Jewish sector join forces to move the negotiations forward, even if the latter are specific to each group.) The heads of the councils, supported by the Palestinian members of the Knesset, tried to be heard in the Parliament – to no avail. The Minister of the Interior, Abraham Poraz, received the Circassian and the Druze representatives separately, thus highlighting the distinction between their different claims. As usual, the Druze deputy Majalli Whbee, who serves as an intermediary for the councils, promised the strikers that Ariel Sharon would personally come and speak with
them if they ended the strike. The following year, the councils once again went on strike for the same reasons and, once again, the political intervention and promises persuaded the strikers to end the strike. The councils have regularly gone on strike for the past ten years to remind the government of their demands but the benefits they have been granted have been mainly theoretical.

In the summer of 2006, the 2006 Lebanon War set the north of the country on fire. An article by Aryeh Dayan in Haaretz revealed that the towns located in the area had received unequal compensations. A governmental report projected that depending on their economic loss, the towns would be granted full compensation or would receive partial payment of damages. The towns within ten kilometers of the Lebanese border would be fully compensated. Mr. Dahwar, a Palestinian lawyer from Fassuta, presented several petitions to the Supreme Court. He stated that the compensations were granted according to the ethnicity of the inhabitants; he declared: “The Arab towns near the Lebanese border will receive less money simply because they are Arabs.” To support his point, he provided a list of the towns which received compensation; the list showed that no Palestinian town had received full compensation while they had been damaged by the Hezbollah rockets no less than the other towns. Kibbutz Yehiam and Moshav Me’ona, for instance, appeared on the list of the towns which were compensated in full, whereas the Palestinian town of Ma’ilia, closer to the border, didn’t. The same was true of Jish, which did not appear on the list, while Dalton and Safufa were included in it.

Only three non-Jewish towns on the list were to receive full compensation: Peqi’in and Hurfeish – two Druze towns – and Reyhaniya. A political distinction was therefore made in favor of the two communities, a move that angered the neighboring Palestinian towns that failed to understand it. Exceptionally, the Minister’s private office released four hundred and forty-seven million shekels to indemnify the north of the country. The Druze and the Circassian communities were then close to be finally and concretely viewed as true Israelis.

Over a year later, Hurfeish mayor Rakad Khira-Din declared that the majority of the money had not been received. The towns’ economic situation worsened and in 2008, the municipal council of Kfar Kama was unable to pay the salaries of its employees for eight months. The mayor of Reyhaniya even disclosed to me that a fifth of the town’s inhabitants could not pay the local taxes. On June 19, 2009, the Druze and Circassian authorities organized a new demonstration in front of the Knesset, in Jerusalem. As in former demonstrations, the mayors and the heads of the communities, who served in the Israeli army before turning to politics, wore their uniforms. Their placards read: “In the war, a Jew and a Druze are equal. In the budget, ten Druze children equal one Jewish child.”

The Circassians in Israel are neither Jews nor Palestinian Arabs; in theory, they cannot identify with these two major communities (even though they share with each of them enunciations and references – whether historical, geographical, cultural, political, or religious) but they wonder what share they will be given in the forthcoming territorial and geopolitical reconfigurations. At a time when the land will probably be divided into two states for two peoples, the Circassians present the unusual case of Israeli citizens who are not Jewish but Muslim. Unlike the majority of the Israeli Palestinians who demand a political Palestinian citizenship, the Circassians define themselves as full-fledged Israelis and don’t question the Jewish ethnicity of the State of Israel. They accept their minority status and recognize the Israeli sovereignty (and its symbols); in exchange for that, they
expect the State of Israel to view them as true citizens, who enjoy the same rights and have the same duties as the Jewish majority.

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NOTES
1. Interview with K. N., Kfar Kama, June 20, 2009.
2. Theodor Herzl, 2008, p. 64.
5. Archives of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
9. Interview with W. I., Haifa, May 9, 2010.
16. The September 2, 2002 issue of Haaretz reported the words of Mufeid Amar, then mayor of Hurfeish, who was also an army reserve colonel: “In this uniform, I felt I was equal […] I am very sorry to see that now, in civilian life, we are discriminated against.”

AUTHORS

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