

Islamic Identity in Israel: Challenges and Prospects

Sobhi Rayan¹

Abstract

This article examines Islamic identity and the challenges facing Muslims in Israel in defining identity and analyzes the relationship between Muslims and the state. Muslims in Israel are linked to different circles of affiliation that affect the formulation of identity. They are citizens of Israel, yet they belong to the Palestinian people and an Arab and Islamic nation at the same time.

There is no doubt that these affiliations are conflicting and must be reconciled, as the Israeli identity clashes with the Palestinian national identity in terms of narratives, concepts, and terminology. This contradiction creates an identity crisis among Muslims in Israel, in addition to tension between national and Islamic identity.

Islamic identity is characterized by a predominance of moral and human qualities, which entitles it to be considered a central and original identity that accommodates other incidental and practical identities. It is the primordial identity of the Muslims in Israel from which other identities branch off, which gives it a moral character.

Keywords: Identity, Islam, Palestine, Arab Society, Ethics

Introduction

Arab society in Israel has undergone an important developmental process. It began as a dissociated rural society without social institutions or a leadership that could represent the population as a collective. In the course of time, political and social institutions began to be built, as well as a leadership composed of Knesset members, heads of regional councils and cities, and the heads of political and

¹ Prof. Sobhi Rayan, Islamic Studies Department, Al Qasemi Academy.

religious movements. The Arab minority is the result of the “Nakba” (Catastrophe) of the 1948 war.² This minority, part of a widely dispersed people, is now in a state of existential distress, which stems from the fact that it lives within the framework of the sovereign state that defeated it.

Arab society is composed of various religious groups, with the Muslims comprising 82% and the Christians and Druze 18% of the Arab population.¹ Besides its religious divisions, this society is split politically and ideologically into various Arab parties and movements. Today, the Islamic movement is considered one of the central political trends in Arab-Israeli society. The main activities of the movement take place among Muslims, who form a large group within this society, and its discourse is directed mainly towards them.

Muslims in Israel are linked to several overlapping and different circles of belonging that influence the formulation of identity: Israeli citizenship, Palestinian nationalism, Arab nationalism, and the Islamic circle. The differences among these identities create a crisis of belonging among Muslims in Israel.

For historical, religious, and political reasons, Muslims in Israel face great challenges in forming their identity, a process that pulls them in several different and sometimes contradictory directions. For example, being a Palestinian national minority conflicts with Israeli citizenship, as the narratives of the two identities are different.

Moreover, faced with these differences, Muslims cannot choose one identity and reject the other. This means that a Muslim in Israel, who is Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim at the same time, must reconcile these identities.

² Amal Jamal, *Multiculturalism and the Differential Citizenship Challenge in Israel*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2007, p. 40.

There is no doubt that these multiple affiliations are reflected in the behavior of Muslims in politics, religion, and various other aspects of life.

The interest of Muslims in Israel is limited to reconciling their Israeli identity, which means citizenship and its associated rights, with their Palestinian identity, which means national and Islamic affiliation. The tension between national and Islamic identity is not hidden.

This article aims to clarify the role of Islamic identity in the struggle undertaken by Muslims in Israel to reconcile their dual identities. To address this problem, the article presents a history of the concept of Islamic identity and explains how to approach it to reconcile the conflicting Israeli/Islamic identities of Muslims in Israel.

What is Islamic identity?

Research on the concept of "identity" espoused by ancient Muslim scholars is essential to understanding the contemporary Islamic identity, because of their influence on Islamic culture and, in turn, on the formation of the contemporary Islamic identity. Research with an ethical philosophical perspective on the concept of identity undoubtedly enriches the concept and broadens its horizons. The ancient concept of identity was cast in terms of what a human being is and the qualities that humans have over other beings. In this focus it differs from the contemporary idea of accidental and relative identities that define a human being on the basis of national, cultural, social, linguistic, individual, gender-based, and other affiliations.

Identity research in early Islam produced several different theories, such as the theories of mental identity (Ibn Sina), ethical identity (al Ghazali and Sufism), and urban identity (Ibn Khaldun). Primarily, their subject is the human being, which makes them theories that speak to Man as Man and focus on collective human values that encompass all human beings. Moral identity is the

original identity on which other identities are based, and it transcends local, tribal, and circumstantial affiliations and accidental, relative, and practical identities.

Islamic philosophy spoke of the Self in the sense of individual identity (ego), as well as in the sense of general human identity (Man as Man). Thus, identity is the Truth that expresses the Self, the self-awareness of innate human qualities. Philosophers have used the term "He, He." "It is a composite word, which is intended to mean 'unity with the Self'"³, namely, that each thing is identical with itself: $A = A$.

Ibn Sina divides "identity" into several types:

The one that is in the Self is precisely in matters that are particularly progressive in the Self. So, what is "he, he" in its gender (sex, *Jins*) is called "*mujanis*", namely, homogenous, and what is in the 'species' "*naw'*", is called: "*mumathil*", namely "similar", and also what is "He he" in properties is called *مشاكل* Formalism "compatible."⁴

In Ibn Siva's discourse, identity, or Self, was not separate from the concept of the "Other." The Other had a place in identity research:

... and versus the He he, is absolutely the 'Other' and the 'Other' is in its Gender, the other in the species, which is in itself the "Other" by '*specific difference*', and the Other is from it by being accidental.⁵

³ al-Tahanawi (1988). *Kashaf Istilahat al-Funun*. Vol. 4, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiya, p. 406.

⁴ Ibn Sina (2018). al-Ilayiyat. Qum: Iran. Maktabat Ayatullah al-Mar'ashli al-Najafi, p. 303.

⁵ Ibid., p. 304.

Identity represents the unity of multiple meanings and divisions. It does not exist on its own but requires multiplicity, in the sense of multiple identities:

Entirely, all the sections of the unit are verified in the He He sections, but multiplicity should be considered in the He He as it is not conceived without duality, and the single person cannot be as one in terms of oneness.⁶

Muslim subjectivity is not separated from the Other nor does it consist of different Selves. The relationship between the Self and Other is an essential component of Muslim identity, and it determines the Muslim relationship with the different. This relationship, which results from a value system, necessitates communicative behaviors with the Other, based on the principle of brotherhood, and this treatment is not limited to the Other (human beings), but also applies to the creatures and assets of the world.

Al-Ghazali also used the method of doubt to know the self, until he attained the state of the original instinct (الفطرة) that reveals the relationship between awareness of the human self and awareness of the divine self. It follows from this, that man's relationship with his brotherhood should be based on the principle of plurality and differences among human beings: "The difference of creation is a necessary and eternal rule."

During this period, which produced the sciences, Islamic thinkers analyzed the discourses and narratives that influenced individual and collective self-formation. Their analyses were based on an understanding of *habitus*, which refers to the customs, skills, and behavior that are inherent in a community – in this case the Islamic community. Customary cultural and value investment represents the way in which a group's culture and the personal history of the

⁶ Al-Tahanawi, *Kashaf Istilahat al-Funun*, p. 406.

individual are shaped; they become the *doxa* (δόξα), namely, the set of values spontaneously accepted and followed by the community.

Muslim scholars, especially Ghazali, worked on building the rules of Shari'a (Islamic law) upon the "techniques of the Self" and applied them to sharia and to behavior as a reflection of the Self. These techniques concern the actions of man in relation to his Self, and they involve a systematic and complex process that requires intention, consciousness, and purpose, and depends on the repetition of the work, such that the work becomes one of the techniques of the Self that contribute to the making of the Self.

Researching the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the concept of Islamic identity, as understood by Muslim scholars such as Iban Sina, Ghazali, Ibn Khaldoun and others, contributes to our understanding of the evolution of contemporary Islamic identity. Contemporary identity discourse is based on and influenced by narratives in the Islamic heritage; it calls for critical reading of the narratives and an analysis of the relationship between the past and the present and of the extent to which the past has affected the formation of modern Islamic identity discourse.

Taha Abdel Rahman says: "It is known that the definition of identity is that it is the truth that expresses the self." He starts from the axiom that states there is no human without morals, so that a person has a description of humanity according to what he achieves from it; thus, if the moral meanings and higher values increase, this description increases, and if they decrease, it decreases. It follows from this axiom that human identity is basically of a moral nature and that identities fall into three types, all of which are related to the human self:

A. A deaf (solid) identity is generated from looking at oneself through one's own eyes and looking at others through one's own eyes as well. It is a closed, authoritarian, or self-sufficient identity.

- B. A soft identity is generated from looking at oneself through the eyes of others and vice versa and looking at others through one's own eyes. It is an open identity, non-authoritarian, or lacking in others.
- T. A fluid identity (liquid) is generated from looking at oneself through the eyes of others and looking at others through the eyes of others as well. It may be an alienated, anxious, or a lost identity.

Challenges facing Islamic identity in Israel

The Palestinians began formulating the Palestinian national identity to confront the Jewish national identity before the establishment of the State of Israel, in the sense that the Palestinian national identity was a response to a contrasting national identity in the dispute over sovereignty and land. This competition has continued after the Nakba, as the Arab community continues to live in the State of Israel, which seeks to strengthen the Jewish national identity. Israel uses all possible means to erase the Palestinian identity, impose the Zionist narrative, reject the Palestinian narrative through its educational curricula, degrade the status of the Arabic language, and change the names of historical places and geographical locations.

Since this situation was inconsistent with the reality of the Palestinians, and since the State possessed power and authority, dominated the country's resources, and viewed the Arabs as dissenters from the Zionist narrative and not as equal citizens, the Arabs were placed on the margins of participation and influence and faced with great challenges.

The current challenges facing the Arab society

The Arab society in Israel is confronted with fundamental adversities, and in the near future, these may turn into existential threats and dissolve its ties. As a result, thoughts of emigration have started occupying the minds of the younger

generation. The problems include violence and crime, and land and housing difficulties, as well as other problems, just as significant, that follow from these, such as poverty, lack of employment, poor education, and others.

The Arab society's vulnerabilities proceed from the neglect of the State and its executive and judicial bodies, which is not due to weakness of the State but rather to a deliberate policy aimed at damaging the Arab society, which has resulted in the spread of violence, weapons, drugs, and a black market. According to statistics, between 2000-2021 1,400 people were killed and thousands wounded, whereas between 1980-2000 the death toll was 80.

The State bears direct responsibility for the security and living conditions of the Arab society. It oversees the care of its Arab citizens from cradle to grave by dominating the educational, judicial, and economic, spheres of life and the distribution of resources. The State also has an exclusive monopoly on the use of violence and the deployment of power mechanisms, which makes it solely responsible for ensuring the security of its citizens and solving their problems.

The suffering of the Arab society under the State's policy of discrimination and marginalization has exacerbated two central problems: violence and crime, which are threats to the personal security of Arab citizens, to the preservation of their dignity and right to life, and to their fair access to land and housing, and which are related to the confiscation of Arab lands, the demolition of houses, and the restriction of Arab villages and cities by placing obstacles in the way of licensing houses and endorsing the plans of local authorities.

Resorting to a political solution and prioritizing it over the social role stems from the fact that the potentials of the State are enormous compared to those of the Arab society. State power dominates key aspects of life in the society and has left it with no effective power. There are means of effecting change and

solving the problems of the Arab society in short order, but these are controlled by the State,.

In contrast, although the Arab society's own process of change pays off in the long run, it takes place through education, so its reforms are slow. Meanwhile the society is forced to bear the pressure of burning problems and to continue to live with them for a long time, instead of being able to intervene rapidly using the powerful tools needed to enforce law and order, which are not accessible to the society.

Therefore, it is necessary to act in both directions, by investing in both the power of the State and the power of Arab society. It is necessary to influence and change State policy so the State can promptly intervene to solve problems through the activation of security and judicial systems. This could be accompanied by societal action that seeks ethical value change, to be carried out by civil society institutions and public and cultural bodies through programs at schools, mosques, cultural clubs, and research centers.

Jurisprudential challenges for Moslems in Israel

Muslims face religious challenges that are endemic to their different identities – as Muslims in the Arab and Muslim world⁷, as a Muslim minority in a non-Muslim state, as a minority with the unique history of having been a former majority transformed into a minority in their homeland, and as citizens of a state that is hostile to them.⁸ These challenges take different forms that are related to

⁷ Amara, Mohammad and Kabhat Sofian (1966). *Zehut Hatsuya/ Split Identity*. Giv'at Haviva. Institute for Peace Research. P. 136.

⁸ Hugerat, Mousa (2008). *al-Hawiya al-Jama'iyah li Abna al-Arabiyy fi Dawlat Israel*. Kufr Qari. Dar al-Huda, p. 75.

the practice of Islam in Israel. A key challenge is the application of jurisprudence in Israel.

Muslims in Israel face serious challenges in matters of worship and economic, social, and political transactions. In many cases, legal and jurisprudential provisions clash with the laws of the State of Israel, which indicates a need to search for appropriate solutions to the problems confronted by Muslims living in Israel. This is difficult in the absence of Islamic jurisprudential bodies and research centers, so that Muslims have to rely on opinions and ideas from the official and popular Arab world, without regard for the specific conditions of Muslim life in Israel.

These imported solutions are not only inappropriate but are also puzzling and chaotic because of their different jurisprudential sources and politics. Relying on jurisprudence abroad is not only a poor approach, it is also a misleading approach that makes it more difficult for Muslims to live well, because *fatawa* centers in the Arab world are ignorant of the realities of life in Israel.

The Muslim minority suffers from two main challenges that stem from Israeli law and the dependence on external jurisprudence. The law often opposes jurisprudence rulings. On the other hand, jurisprudence imported from abroad is not appropriate for the circumstances in Israel. What is required is an Islamic system based on moral values that has Islamic Shari'a as its central framework and is tailored to a specific historical condition and, possibly, contemporary reality. The importation of external legal provisions and their application to the realities of the Muslim minority in Israel, which lacks the basic conditions for enacting them, and the transfer and appropriation of provisions which do not suit the needs of the Muslim minority, have consequences that, at the very least, provide no solutions and do no good, but perpetuate the society's state of deadlock and suffering.

Furthermore, Muslims are subject to Israeli laws that have no clear legal provisions for areas such as “bank interest,” “family,” “inheritance,” and “endowment,” etc., which have economic, social, political, and educational aspects. One example is the issue of *riba* (interest). Financial and economic transactions are controlled by banks, which do not allow a Muslim to do business or even work based on a monthly salary, which is the simplest transaction for fulfilling necessary humanitarian needs, without banking. This means that these simple transactions are inevitably subject to “interest treatment.”

Israel's economic reality also requires people to take out bank loans to meet basic needs such as housing and education. A Muslim may have to take out a bank loan to buy a house, which is a human need and a condition for a normal dignified life. This is due to the cost of living in Israel, to the confiscation of Arab lands, and to the planning and construction laws imposed by the State on Arab citizens, which prevent the expansion of Arab villages and cities that are suffering from overcrowding with people and buildings. The advisory opinion (*fatwa*) in this case must take this reality into account and strive to find a solution to the problem, not perpetuate it.

With regard to family issues, Israeli law on family matters imposes a number of legal provisions and procedures that are inconsistent with the spirit of Islamic jurisprudence, such as polygamy, male-female equality in inheritance, marriage and divorce laws, pregnancy, abortion, etc., all of which relate to liberal personal freedoms and concepts of gender that transformed the traditional Islamic family from one that included father, mother and children to a modern one that can consist of two males or two females, with adopted sons, and so forth.

These challenges faced by Muslims in Israel have advanced the development of a national identity at the expense of an Islamic identity, and the political competition between Islamists and secular national movements has played a role in promoting the national identity. Although the national culture

values moral and material religious symbols, preserving religious rites and mosques, its identity differs from the Islamic identity, whose subject is the human being, not the physical space.

National identity is a new term in Islamic culture, inherited from secular Western societies. It is not an Islamic product, as it was not an issue in Islam's past and did not concern the early scholars. It is a concept brought to the East during the colonial period, when it was adopted by the colonized peoples, especially the Islamic and Arab peoples who were divided into states based on national affiliations.

In these countries, the national movements rejected the material colonialism represented by military occupation yet at the same time adopted the values and ideology of colonialism. Thus, colonialism succeeded in consolidating its moral and cultural presence in the minds of these movements and peoples.

National identity is based on the exclusion and intimidation of others and the rejection of pluralism and difference. In addition, provoking conflicts is a necessary condition for reviving and strengthening it.

Material and moral symbols are produced with the aim of eliciting reverence and persuading simple people to sacrifice for the sake of these artificial and imaginary symbols. This process also requires a political discourse that feeds an ideology of exclusion and hatred. Thus, the construction of a national identity is a form of political exploitation designed to expand the kingdom of the politician.

Conclusion

Islamic identity, whose subject is the human Self, is an authentic identity that accommodates plurality, difference, and multiplicity, and rejects unilateralism. It transcends national affiliations, linguistic differences, and religious fanaticisms. In contrast, national identity is accidental and relative, a practical identity under which a person might be a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or cook.

For the Arabs in Israel, the relationship between the Islamic and national identities must be based on the fact that national identity is an attribute or a branch of the original Islamic identity, because separating national identity from morality results in a fluid, fanatical, and closed identity that rejects the Other.

This approach raises the question of the homeland from a local issue confined to geographical space to a human issue, one that concerns every human being as a human being, and raises it from a material issue to an issue involving the values of humanity. The orientation towards the nation then becomes a human orientation, which removes it from the isolation and physical confinement of geographical limitations and elevates it to an ethical issue based on the values of compassion, empathy, and sharing. Humans instinctively disdain injustice and seek justice, and a person finds value in a goal that exacts effort and sacrifice in return for success.

The relationship with the homeland is a moral issue that transcends politics. It involves an innate relationship based on lineage and morality, such that sincerity, love, and righteousness are part of the manner of treatment; if people are absented from their homeland, they become overwhelmed by longing and nostalgia for it. Hence, this relationship with the homeland must be more than a relative relationship; it demands a relationship that gives it the characteristic of humanity.

ARABIC
SECTION