

## Book Reviews

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*Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict.* By Nadim N. Rouhana. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997. Pp. 312, \$32.00, cloth.

Reviewed by Eyal Benvenisti\*

The very title of this thought-provoking and important book hints at the complex issue of choosing labels to describe the collective identity of minority groups. Both the majority and the minority groups within a certain state choose group labels that reflect their attitudes towards their own group and towards the other. In Israel,<sup>1</sup> the majority of about eighty percent Jews refer to the twenty percent minority as "Arabs of Israel," "Israeli Arabs," or "the minorities." The label "Israelis" is designated only to the Jewish citizens. Even the term "Arab Israelis"—resonating similar to "African American"—that would have emphasized a closer link between the minority and the state, is not in use.

In recent years, terms such as "Arab citizens of the state" or "Palestinian citizens of Israel" have entered Hebrew discourse but their use betrays a political viewpoint that is outside the political mainstream. The Arab minority also uses the label "Israelis" as the collective label of the Jews in Israel, and struggles with the question of self-labeling. Ethnic and national minority groups often have little access to state symbols such as a flag, anthem, official language or holidays. Self-labeling therefore assumes an issue of utmost importance for the development and maintenance of collective identity of such minorities. "The way in which people combine the various available labels should reflect all layers of their collective identity," writes Rouhana, [because] "even apparently slight differences in the way labels are combined might be of extreme importance to the individual who choose the label."<sup>2</sup> Based on this insight, Rouhana devotes the first chapter of his search to define the components of collective identity of Palestinians in Israel<sup>3</sup> to a thorough study, based on interviews, of collective self-labeling.

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1. The reference here and in the book is to Israel within the 1967 borders, not including the West Bank and Gaza.

2. NADIM N. ROUHANA, *PALESTINIAN CITIZENS IN AN ETHNIC JEWISH STATE: IDENTITIES IN CONFLICT* 21 (1997).

3. *Id.* pt. III, ch. 7, at 111–29.

The study of self-labeling of the Palestinians in Israel is one of the tools Rouhana uses in this impressive account and analysis of the development of the collective identity of that group. Rouhana grew up as a Palestinian in Israel. His sensitivities are therefore different from those of Israeli researchers, and his outlook leads him to criticize in a convincing way the research methods employed by Israelis who have studied the question and the conclusions they reached,<sup>4</sup> and to offer an alternative portrait of Arab society in Israel.

Beyond this very sensitive study looms a more general thesis. Rouhana demonstrates how collective identity of a national minority in an ethnic state is shaped, and examines the dynamic relationship between identity and conflict. His social-psychological model of collective identity underlines the salience of group membership as part of the individual's personal identity. This provides crucial support for the claim that collective identity is a basic human need, and that collective identity is therefore an interest that must be respected by law, as strongly as interests in free speech or freedom of religion. Such respect is particularly problematic in bi-ethnic or multiethnic states, where state symbols are usually fashioned by the majority group, and where greater potential for discriminatory treatment and conflict exists.

In the latter part of the book, Rouhana explores several structural options for the reduction of the conflict between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and assesses which of those options promises to resolve the conflict. In Rouhana's view, for genuine coexistence to occur, Israel must discard its character as a Jewish state and transform itself into a democratic civil state, which would provide Arab and Jewish citizens alike—all regarded as "Israelis"—the same dimensions of identity.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the conflict will fade only when the two societies coalesce into a single Israeli nationality.

This view may very well seem utopic. It certainly runs contrary to the logic of inter-communal interaction, which teaches that conflict only intensifies exclusionary tendencies and raises the walls that separate the rival parties. But Rouhana dreams of an altogether different political setting, in which all the outstanding issues between Israel and its neighbors, particularly the Palestinian in the West Bank and Gaza, will have been settled. The Jews will not worry about external security problems and, as the majority and hence the stronger side, would find it opportune to negotiate the transformation of their symbols and to ensure individual equality. Global persecution of Jews will no longer be regarded as a threat, and the Jewish majority will agree to rescind the Law of Return and abolish its open-gates policy toward world Jewry.

One other precondition that has to be fulfilled for any fruitful negotiations to begin between the two communities (and also within each of them) is that both Arabs and Jews in Israel become fully aware of the sensitivities

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4. *Id.* at 115–20.

5. *Id.* at 228.

and needs of “the other.” Rouhana’s book is a significant contribution to this awareness and hence to the inter-communal dialogue.