

## **Reflections on Keffiyeh Day 2007**

By [Amir Afsai](#)

On the afternoon of Wednesday, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Arab students at two Israeli universities held rallies to mark the first annual *Yaum al-Kufiya* (يوم الكوفية), “Keffiyeh Day.” Draped in the traditional Arab headdress, they held signs, chanted slogans and sang songs declaring their loyalty to the Arab nation and the Palestinian cause.

Officially the rallies were held to commemorate three years since the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. But spokesmen for the Arab students said the idea of making the *keffiyeh* the day’s theme came in response to an incident the previous week in which students from a right-wing campus group at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem allegedly painted a Palestinian *keffiyeh* blue and white, the colors of the Israeli flag.<sup>1</sup>

When the rally at Hebrew U started, I happened to be on the fifth floor of the humanities library building. From a window overlooking the main courtyard I watched as two dozen Arab students faced off with a slightly larger number of Jewish students who had gathered in counterprotest. The two groups exchanged volleys of heated rhetoric and suggestive body language that grew more aggressive and hostile as the minutes passed. The charged scene evoked a number of impressions that I wish here to share with the reader.

First, some supportive criticism for both sides. It is encouraging to see students committed to a noble idea and devoting energy to raising the public’s awareness of it. Whether it is environmental activism, workers’ rights campaigns, feeding the poor, or promoting national heritage, passion and enthusiasm are to be preferred over apathy and fatigue of the soul, for they are among the things that build character in a man and make Israel the exciting and stimulating country that it is.

Our national identity, or the national component in our collective identity, is indeed a noble idea. Included in it are language, history, cultural heritage, and territorial and ancestral affinities. To a large extent these are what enrich the human experience on earth, adding color and depth to it. We ought to be thankful that Israel is not a melting pot in the American vein. In the melting pot conformity and assimilation are ever the goal, while in the Israeli model each collective is afforded the freedom to preserve and cultivate its unique identity.

On the other hand, the rallies completely lacked a constructive impulse. Instead of dialog having been generated between the two camps, what was salient was an atmosphere of mutual rejection and animosity. The Arab students’ signs, slogans and anthems were not directed inwards at the group’s own members, nor at the neutral passers-by that paused to watch out of curiosity; rather, they served as ammunition against the opposing camp. An observer who did not know better would be sure he had stumbled upon a pack of wild soccer hoodlums, not university students advancing a cultural message. The Jewish students, for their part, deliberately selected provocative songs with divisive subtexts and dishonored the Israeli flag by waving it as a symbol of contempt.

Solidarity that is oriented around common roots is something to be encouraged. But the kind of solidarity that is based chiefly on attack is often indicative of a faulty ideological foundation. It becomes a dangerous platform for unity because it sacrifices *introcriticism* on the altar of *extrocriticism*. It compensates for its own vulnerabilities by focusing attention on what threatens to expose those vulnerabilities. Ideals that cannot be

affirmed without drawing attention to the threats against them are seldom worthy of being affirmed. But ideals that can withstand rigorous self-criticism emerge vindicated.

The ideals of Zionism, democracy and coexistence are a package that Israelis of all backgrounds can form a consensus around. Zionism is the practical expression of the Jewish people's historic bond with the land of Israel. Its political vision, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, extends an offer of peaceful coexistence under a canopy of civic equality and mutual respect to every citizen of the state, "irrespective of religion, race or sex." Two conditions must be met in order for this vision to be successful: Israel's government must confer equality upon the entire population indiscriminately, and Israel's Arab citizens must accept the right of the Jews to self-determination in their homeland. The first of these conditions has generally been met, though there remain areas for improvement. The extent to which the second has, however, is subject to dispute.

There are essentially two approaches to defining the attitude of Israel's Arabs to their state. One, of which *Haaretz* columnist Danny Rubinstein is a known exponent, looks at figures such as the decline in Arab Israeli voting turnout and attributes them to a loss of confidence in the political system at the state level. In 1996 77% of eligible Arab voters went to the polls, but a decade later the number dropped to just 56%. "[T]he experience of Israeli Arabs has taught them that they cannot alter their status and improve their situation through parliamentary activity," Rubinstein concludes, citing Aziz Haidar of Hebrew University.<sup>2</sup>

Others, however, see this generation of young Arab Israelis beginning to shed their Palestinian identity and slowly embracing an Israeli one in its stead. *Yedioth Ahronoth* columnist Ofer Petersburg writes that the last five years have witnessed an unprecedented surge in the number of Arabs enrolling in Israel's national service programs – in spite of urgent calls from prominent Arab leaders not to volunteer.<sup>3</sup> Religious leaders who tried to foment an Arab Israeli crisis when Israeli archeologists began excavating the western slope of the Temple Mount early in 2007 also failed to arouse their constituents' concern. What was portrayed by the press as a potential catalyst for a new intifada evaporated from the public's consciousness like the morning dew.<sup>4</sup>

Although to some extent the decline in Arab voter turnout is indeed the result of disillusionment at the level of state (among Jewish voters a similar trend has been registered and the phenomenon is commonly known as "the crisis of leadership"), to a much larger extent it is indicative of a loss of confidence in the representatives of the Arab sector, who consistently fail to own up to their commitments and anyway are committed to values that young Arabs perceive to be anachronistic. Israel's Arabs wish more strongly to integrate as Israelis with Arab roots than be associated with the Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

The Keffiyeh Day rallies confirm this pattern. Ultimately they failed to attract the majority of the universities' Arab students because their message was too narrow, too shallow, and too negative. And Jewish students kept their distance from the counterprotestors for similar, if more diffident, reasons. As yet, no campus group has come forth offering a platform upon which Jewish and Arab students can unite as Israelis. Though some may argue that an endeavor in that spirit is unneeded, what is certain is that until such a group materializes, the vacuum will continue to be filled by the fringes. They will continue to be the ones whose voices are heard the loudest, and they will continue to polarize, and thus potentially erode, the mainstream.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3471547,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> Danny Rubinstein. *Haaretz*, 31.10.07

<sup>3</sup> Ofer Petersburg. *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 12.02.07

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Elad. *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 11.02.07

<sup>5</sup> According to Jawad Boulous (*Haaretz*, 26.11.07) the trend operates in the other direction, as well: Palestinians resent Arab Israelis for becoming successful and turning their back on the Palestinian struggle.