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# Higher Education Among The Arab Minority In Israel: The Demand For The Establishment Of The First Arab University

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the issue of higher education within the Arab minority in Israel by engaging in a comprehensive discussion about their demand to establish the first Arab university. Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping society by influencing its economic and social development and reducing disparities between central and peripheral regions. For minority groups worldwide, it has become a key avenue for empowerment and societal advancement, often serving as a foundation for the development of national movements and the strengthening of national identity. This study focuses on the demand of the Arab minority in Israel to establish the first Arab university. The study examines the specific case of the Arab minority in Israel, highlighting the political, social, and economic dimensions underlying their call for an Arab university. The study discusses findings from qualitative research, using in-depth interviews with Arab local government employees, Arab and Jewish academics and politicians to explore the extent of support for an Arab university in Israel and to elucidate arguments for and against this proposal. The study indicates that like minority universities in other countries, an Arab university could meet particular needs of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel and promoted the social, political and economic status of this minority.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Higher Education Institutions, Minority groups, Arab minority, Israel.

## Introduction

Education in general, and higher education in particular, serves as a major means of shaping society since it determines its economic and social future and bridges the gaps between the central and peripheral geographic regions. In recent years, higher education has become an issue of particular significance for minority groups. In many places throughout the world, academic institutions have served as a substratum for the development of national movements as well as of the national consciousness of minorities (Abu Alhaija, 2003). The latter identify the institutions of higher education as an important asset for increasing their power and as a means of advancing their status in society. As a result, they are calling for the establishment of their own institutions of higher education.

In the present study, our aim is to examine the question of higher education among the Arab minority in Israel by presenting a broad discussion of the demand of this minority to establish the first Arab university. First, we will present an overview of the literature that relates to ethnic groups in various countries around the world that have succeeded in setting up their own institutions of higher education. These groups ascribe great importance to higher education and consider the establishment of their own such institutions to be a means of advancing their social, economic and political status in society. Second, we will relate in depth to the issue of higher education among the Arab minority, paying particular attention to the call for the establishment of the first Arab university in Israel.

The study, therefore, will stress the fact that the Arab minority's call for the establishment of the first Arab university in Israel has largely exposed the intensity of the dispute as well as the conflicts of interest that underlie that call. This sparked a great deal of interest and enabled us to expose the political, social and economic dimensions that form the basis of the development and expansion of the higher education system - particularly among the Arab minority in Israel. The discussion will refer to the factors and motives that prompted the call for the establishment of the first Arab university in Israel as the desirable alternative from many different points of view. It will also relate to the various claims that completely oppose the notion of establishing an Arab university in Israel.

### **Literature Review**

Minority groups in various pluralistic societies around the world have succeeded in establishing their own institutions of higher education, which have contributed to the advancement of their social, economic and political status as well as to the preservation of their cultural identity and heritage. Thus, for instance, the establishment of colleges and universities such as tribal colleges has significantly increased the chance of Native Canadians and Americans to acquire higher education.

Moreover, in contrast to public colleges, tribal colleges preserve the cultural identity of the minority groups – for instance, by offering courses in the native language in order to prevent its extinction (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 1998). They also provide special services to this population, such as counseling, elementary education and courses in entrepreneurship for economic development. Such services are not offered by other academic institutions. Additional examples of the establishment of colleges that serve ethnic minorities and constitute an accessible means of acquiring higher education and professional training are the tribal universities for the Maori population in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>, and colleges that serve the African American population in the United States.

### **The African American colleges and universities in the United States**

According to Evans et al. (2002), the African American colleges and universities in the United States came into being as a result of a racist policy that prohibited the blacks from studying in institutions for whites. Most of the African American institutions were established at the beginning of the nineteenth century, following

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the website of the Tribal University of Awannuirangi – <http://www.wananga.ac.nz>

the American Civil War and the subsequent emancipation of the blacks from slavery. In consequence, blacks and whites studied in separate education systems. The above mentioned colleges and universities were generally established in locations where there was a large African American population – for instance, in the southern and north-eastern United States.

Initially, private institutions were established; later, in most cases, public ones were set up. The African American colleges and universities were established in order to appease the black population in the United States, and/or to prevent them from applying to the white institutions. The African American institutions were known as "Historical Black Colleges and Universities" (HBCU) (Evans et al., 2002). LeMelle (2002) points out that the HBCU institutions not only surmounted all the obstacles in their path, but in fact also brought American society closer to the realization of the pluralistic ideal, thereby improving the lot of African American society. Over the years, these institutions have struggled to fulfill their social functions vis-à-vis the community they serve. According to LeMelle, their intention is to prepare the citizens in such a way that they will be able to translate the internalized values of the community into an economic reality, thereby enhancing it. The objective of these institutions is to transform students into talented people who entertain no doubts about their identity or the manner they employ to advance themselves and the interests of the community to which they belong.

However, LeMelle stresses that the main contribution of the African American colleges and universities was reflected in the advancement of that population's social and political status toward a situation in which it enjoyed the same rights as white society. In fact, LeMelle claims, while some people viewed the HBCU institutions as institutions that prevented the integration of ethnic groups in the United States, others considered them to be a setting that permitted the African American students to advance in the most equitable manner (ibid., pp. 193-194). Other researchers also claimed that the establishment of the HBCU institutions enabled African American society to tailor the education process to its needs and to work toward the advancement of African American leadership (Oliver et al., 1996).

### **Ethnic institutions of higher education: Human capital or national cultural capital? The case of Palestinian society**

In the case of Palestinian society, too, the establishment of Palestinian institutions of higher education served as an important means of shaping the political and cultural identity of the younger generations. According to Abu-Lughod (2000), these institutions, which began to be set up in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the beginning of the 1970s, were established by communal groups and organizations under conditions of Israel's military occupation.

According to Gerner and Schrodt (1999), the objective of these institutions was to impart knowledge, intellectual abilities and the ability to lead and conduct research studies and enquiries. A further goal was to advance the development and national integration of Palestinian society. In addition, Taraki (1999) mentions that the institutions of higher education were perceived as a means of social mobility for the sons and daughters of farmers, refugees and members of

the lower and middle classes in Palestinian society. A substantial number of these students assumed leadership positions in their political organizations.

Taraki (1999) goes on to claim that these institutions serve as a substratum for the development of national movements in Palestinian society. During the 1980s, Palestinian universities served as the central arena for political activism, and at certain times as the soil from which national resistance to the occupation of the territories sprang. According to her claim, the establishment of an infrastructure of national institutions alongside the establishment of political parties and organizations that would advance the national struggle was perceived to be the cornerstone of the strategy for building a Palestinian state. The members of the activist student elite were very active in and committed to the national struggle and gained unprecedented influence in the political environment. Thus, most of them seized key leadership positions in their political organizations. A large part of the people who constitute the Fatah movement – the ruling party – and play key roles in the institutions of the Palestinian Authority are former students who were Fatah activists during their student days. Their place in the security system is also an important characteristic of the present political landscape (Taraki, 1999).

In parallel, Abu-Laghod (2000) claims that the university plays an important role in the students' social politics. According to him: The universities have played another important role in the political socialization of students, thus contributing to the process of the democratic transition. Early on, universities accepted the reality of student activism and their modest role in university governance... the Palestinian campus is an important arena for training in democratic politics (Ibid: 82).

To sum up, universities and colleges play a pivotal role in advancing the status of various ethnic groups, particularly under conditions of political and social subordination or of national liberation. Some people claim that these institutions assist in imparting human capital, while others claim that they assist in imparting social-national capital. The political activism that exists on the campuses helps students develop and establish national and social movements.

Arab society in Israel also seeks to improve its standing in Israeli society by means of educational institutions (Al-Haj, 1996). This population has internalized the close link between an academic degree and social status, and has therefore turned the establishment of university institutions and the acquisition of higher education into a central social goal (Nakhleh, 1979). The establishment of Arab institutions of higher education in Israel is perceived by Arab society in Israel as an important instrument for advancing its status and for creating equality between itself and Jewish society.

### **The expansion of the non-university (college) sector in Israel**

The institutions of higher education in Israel – in particular the colleges – served the peripheral groups as an accessible means of acquiring higher education and as a source of academic accreditation. Ayalon and Yogev (2001) claim that "the spread of higher education in Israel, rather than opening the gates to equal opportunities in higher education, has hitherto mainly opened a window to higher education and to the academic dream for social groups that are slightly lower than the university students."

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Council for Higher Education decided to invest in the development of the non-university sector. This policy stressed the importance and centrality of the "college" for various peripheral groups. As a result, and in accordance with the policy of then Minister of Education, Amnon Rubinstein, an important program, whose goal was the expansion of higher education in Israel, was devised by the Council for Higher Education and the Ministry of Education and granted government approval in 1994. The program, dubbed "A program for the expansion of higher education and the colleges", included: the establishment of 13 regional colleges that would confer Bachelor's degrees; the establishment of five engineering colleges; the broadening of academic recognition of colleges of education so as to double the number of graduates (Farah, 1999).

### **The participation of the Arab population in the non-university sector (colleges)**

The opening of the colleges in Israel expands and diversifies the higher education system and creates learning opportunities for new sectors (Svirsky & Svirsky, 1997). These authors claim that the expansion of the colleges did indeed provide the Arab population in Israel with an accessible means of acquiring higher education and led to a considerable increase in the percentage of Arab students in these institutions. Ayalon and Yogev (2001) point out: "Relatively high rates of Arab students can be found in the colleges of education (14%) and in the regional colleges (9%)." In addition, they claim: The regional colleges do indeed make their mission more flexible and open the gates to higher education to the inhabitants of the periphery... The regional colleges absorb relatively high rates of students who come from the periphery (Ibid: 491). However, the fact that the earlier opening of designated universities, such as Haifa University, afforded the Arab students opportunities to acquire higher education cannot be ignored. In this context, Yogev (2000) states: Haifa University is the only one of the designated universities that strives for an optimal relative rate of students of Middle Eastern origin. However, the highest relative rate of Arab students exists in this university – almost three times more than expected (ibid., p. 492).

In the 1993/1994 academic year, Arab students comprised two percent of the total number of students studying in non-university institutions – institutions that offered studies leading to a Bachelor's degree in one subject at least (Svirsky & Svirsky, 1997). Over the years, an increase in the participation of the Arab population in higher education in these institutions commenced. In 1999, Arab students comprised 5.6% of the total number of students in academic colleges (some 1,582 students) and 17.3% of the total number of students in colleges of education (some 3,263 students)<sup>2</sup>. In 2005, the percentage of Arab students reached 5.6% in academic colleges (some 3,080 students) and 30.4% of the total number of students in colleges of education (some 6,827 students)<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, the program for expanding higher education in Arab society actually contributed only marginally to the establishment of non-university

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The Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The report of the Committee for Examining the Higher Education System in Israel, 2007.

academic institutions in Arab society. Recognition by the Council for Higher Education was granted only to colleges of education, which confer B.Ed. degrees. Thus, for instance, Sakhnin College of Education, which was founded in 2001, is recognized by the Council, run by the Sakhnin NPO and supervised and funded by the Ministry of Education. This college prepares its graduates in various fields such as special education, early childhood education, English, mathematics and computer sciences.

Another example is the Arab College of Education in Haifa, which was initially founded in Jaffa and transferred to Haifa in 1961. Since its establishment, it has been granted recognition by the Council for Higher Education, and confers B.Ed. degrees in subjects such as Hebrew, Arabic, kindergarten teaching, special education, mathematics and computers.

The third college of education is Alqasmi College in Bak'a el-Gharbiyeh that was founded in 1989 and granted recognition by the Council for Higher Education. It confers B.Ed. degrees in subjects such as special education, English language and literature, mathematics and computer sciences, Arabic language and literature and Islamic religious studies.

However, it is important to mention that in parallel to the establishment of these institutions, several colleges were established in the Jewish sector, granted recognition by the Council for Higher Education, and permitted to confer B.A. degrees in various fields. These colleges include Emek Yizreel Academic College, Tel Hai College, Emek Hayarden College, and so on.

The higher education system in Israel for the 2021/2022 academic year is displayed in the following table:

**Table 1:** Israeli institutions of higher education<sup>4</sup>

| Academic institutions                    | State, state religious and ultra-Orthodox | Arab sector |
|--|---|-------------|
| Colleges of education (Teaching – B.Ed.) | 22  | 3           |
| Non-university academic institutions     | 31  | 0           |
| Universities                             | 9   | 0           |

In the face of these data, the fact that the number of Arab colleges established is relatively small in comparison to the number of colleges established in the Jewish sector is noticeable. Moreover, all of the colleges operating in the Arab sector aim only to prepare teachers. Some of them were established by the State and the rest by various social organizations. It is worth mentioning that the influence of official organizations – for example, local authorities, the Committee for the Local Authorities, the Tracking Committee for Arab Education – in Arab society as

<sup>4</sup> The Council of Higher Education, 2022.

regards establishing academic colleges remains small and limited, and their involvement in the establishment of Arab colleges is negligible and marginal.

### **The call for establishing institutions of higher education in the Arab society in Israel**

Institutions of education in general and of higher education in particular are perceived as pivotal instruments in social and developmental mobility (Al-Haj, 1996). The prevailing notion among broad layers of Arab society in Israel is that higher education is a national resource by means of which Arab identity, culture and heritage can be grounded, reinforced and preserved. It is perceived to be a means of promoting modernization in Arab society and reducing the gaps between that society and the Jewish population. Nakhleh (1979) claims: "Academic education constitutes an important factor in the struggle for civil and national matters in Arab society in Israel."

The Arab population in Israel has long been calling for the establishment of an Arab academic institution by means of which this society can increase its access to higher education and professional specialization. The idea of establishing an Arab university in Israel commenced over 20 years ago among the country's Arab population. It featured in the Rakah party's 1975 election campaign in Nazareth, under the title: "Jameat el-Jalil fi el Nasra" (The Galilee University in Nazareth). In 1978, an NPO called "Altsawt" (The Voice) came into being in Nazareth and began to map the needs of the Arab population and plan for the establishment of an Arab university in the city. This NPO, whose members included Arab academics and scholars, initiated a survey among Arab and Jewish intellectuals in order to examine the need for establishing a university of this kind. The results were published in 1980 in the book *Min Ajal Almostkabal* (For the Future), and indicated the huge support for the establishment of the university (Abu Alhaija, 2003). Today, too, the idea is still on the agenda of the Arab population in Israel, occupying a central place in every public discussion that deals with this population in general and with fields of education, higher education and employment for the new generation of academics in particular.

### **Claims with regard to the establishment of an Arab university in Israel**

In this part of the paper, we will survey and analyze a number of claims with regard to the establishment of an Arab university in Israel. We will relate to the claims of various public figures, academics and public bodies that supported the idea as well as of those who rejected it out of hand.

#### **a. Public figures and heads of local authorities**

Public functionaries share a similar attitude toward everything concerning the establishment of an Arab academic institution in Israel. Many of them expressed vigorous support for the establishment of such an institution and indicated its importance to the Arab minority as an existential need in itself<sup>5</sup>. They claimed that an institution of this kind would solve the problem of discrimination encountered by Arab students when applying to existing institutions. It would also lead to

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<sup>5</sup> See Abu Alhaija, 2003, Chapter 3, for greater detail.

higher education becoming increasingly accessible to Arab society in general, and would afford Arab women the opportunity to continue their studies at the level of higher education in particular. Such an institution would enable the Arab students to study their Arabic language and culture. In addition, an institution of this type would serve as an intellectual center for the Arab population, enhance the preservation of the Arab cultural heritage, and help shape a social and economic leadership that would contribute to the advancement of the social, cultural and political status of the Arab minority in Israel. However, some of the public figures objected to the establishment of an Arab university meant for Arab students only and in which the language of instruction is Arabic. One of them claimed that such a step would entrench the segregation and isolationism of the Arab population. In his opinion, it is necessary to become integrated into Israeli society and advance along social, economic and political planes.

### **b. Academics**

The Arab academics also supported the establishment of an Arab academic institution in Israel, and stressed the importance of the project for the Arab minority on various planes. While some of them stressed the importance of the project for the preservation of the Arab heritage, culture and identity, there were others who stressed the contribution of the project to the imparting of professional human capital that would enable young Arab academics to integrate successfully into the Israeli workforce<sup>6</sup>. In addition, they emphasized the importance of the academic excellence that should characterize an institution of this nature so that it can be on a par with the academic institutions that exist in Israel. In other words, the university is perceived as a social institution whose main goal is to impart national cultural capital to a national minority group.

In contrast, there were people who related to the university as an employment institution whose goal was to impart human capital to a national minority. Some of the Jewish academics also expressed support for the project, stating that it was a legitimate right of the Arab minority. However, others opposed this idea for fear that it would cause separatism and isolationism (the creation of a ghetto). In other words, this step would make it difficult for Arab students to integrate into Israeli society and the Israeli job market. They further claimed that it would not solve the problem of unemployed academics who are unable to find work in the Israeli job market.

### **c. Politicians**

A considerable number of the Jewish and Arab politicians agreed on principle to the establishment of an Arab university, but they disagreed on its characteristics<sup>7</sup>. Differences among the attitudes of the Arab politicians are evident. Some of them stressed the importance of the establishment of an Arab academic institution whose language of instruction would be Arabic. Others supported the establishment of an Arab academic institution whose language of instruction would be Arabic, but not as a national institution. In their opinion, an institution

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



of this kind would have to be open to Jewish and other students as well. On the other hand, some of the Jewish politicians supported the establishment of a bilingual Arab academic institution, especially a college, in which both Arab and Jewish students could study.

However, some of the Jewish politicians expressed their opposition to the establishment of an Arab university in Israel since the idea not only contradicted the notion of coexistence, but also constituted an obstacle to the integration of Arab citizens into the country. They further claimed that an institution of this kind would be liable to create segregation among the citizens and lead to a breakdown in the interrelations between Jews and Arabs and an increase in the alienation between the two peoples.

The attitudes and conceptions of the Arab public functionaries, academics and politicians permit the discussion of the establishment of an Arab university to be positioned along two central axes:

- a. The university as an institution that imparts national cultural capital, as opposed to a university that imparts human capital.
- b. The university as an institution that is run by and for an Arab minority only, as opposed to a university that is run in the language of the minority but is not essentially different from any other university in which both Jews and Arabs study.

It is evident that the Jewish academics and politicians had differing conceptions and attitudes. Some of them supported the establishment of an Arab academic institution with two languages of instruction. The institution would be meant for both Arab and Jewish students, that is, it would be based on integration rather than on segregation. Others opposed the establishment of such an institution because it would create separatism and isolationism in Arab society, and the gap between the sectors would widen. People who held that viewpoint claimed that this would make it difficult for the graduates of the institution to integrate into Israeli society and into the Israeli job market.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The present study related to the issue of higher education and its importance from the point of view of the Arab minority as the principal means of advancing that minority's social, economic and political status within Israeli society. Moreover, it related in detail to that minority's claim regarding the establishment of the first Arab university in Israel, stressing the claims that supported the idea as well as those that completely opposed it.

The Arab minority's call for the establishment of the first Arab university in Israel has largely exposed the intensity of the dispute as well as the conflicts of interests that underlie that call. This sparked a great deal of interest and enabled us to reveal the political, social and economic dimensions that form the basis of the development and expansion of the higher education system – particularly among the Arab minority in Israel.

The research literature indicates, therefore, that in many places in the world, academic institutions served as a substratum for the development of national movements or of the national consciousness of minorities. Diverse ethnic groups

around the world ascribe a great deal of importance to institutions of higher education and consider them to be a means of advancing their social, political and economic status. Among groups of Native Canadians and Americans, for instance, the establishment of colleges and other institutions of higher education such as tribal colleges constitute an accessible way for the minority population to acquire higher education. In addition, these colleges provide special services for this population such as counseling, elementary education and initiatives for economic development that are not provided by other bodies. They also offer courses in the native language with the aim of preserving this language and culture and safeguarding them from the danger of extinction.

Eileen and Catherine (1998) stressed that the tribal colleges established by Native American tribes set themselves the goal of providing this population with higher education and preserving the Native American culture. Michael (2001) also mentions that the institutions established for the Indian community are indeed based on communal values, arts, traditions and language. They provide their students with knowledge and essential skills so that they can rebuild their communal infrastructures. Preservation of the Native American culture and language is the top priority of the community and of the tribal institutions of higher education. Michael (2001) claims: "These institutions have an authentic, communal, familial character; they have an affinity for the culture and the earth.". In another study, Lawrence (2003) points out that the establishment of institutions of higher education was perceived by the African American community in the United States as an important step toward building a better future.

In the case of Palestinian society, the establishment of Palestinian institutions of higher education also constituted an important channel in the shaping of the political and cultural identity of the younger generations. According to Gerner and Schrodtt (1999), the goal of such institutions was to provide knowledge and to develop human capital and social leadership.

In the light of the above overview of the literature, it can be claimed that the case under discussion is similar to a certain extent to the case of various ethnic groups that have succeeded in establishing their own institutions and integrating into the society in which they live. These institutions have made a significant contribution to improving the lives of the groups and grounding their status in various fields. Moreover, the findings show that for years, Arab society has also aspired to establish institutions of higher education with the aim of advancing its social, economic and political status and achieving equality with Jewish society. In this context, it can be claimed that the proposed notion of establishing an Arab university seeks to accomplish two main objectives from the point of view of the Arab minority: The first is to impart national-cultural capital to adults as a part of the building of their identity and their social identification, and the second is to impart human capital in terms of employment qualifications.

The findings also show that the call to establish an Arab institution of higher education within Arab society sparked a dispute among public functionaries, academics and politicians from both the Arab and the Jewish sectors. To a certain extent, it exposed opposing attitudes and conceptions. However, despite the fact that there were differences between and within the groups, most members

expressed their support for the establishment of an Arab academic institution for the Arab minority in Israel.

Those who supported the project wished to see the integration of Arab society into Israeli society so as to narrow the gap that has been created between them in various fields over the years. Among those who opposed the idea, some stressed that it was liable to lead to segregation and even to the isolation of Arab society from Israeli society. They went on to claim that an Arab university would lead to the limitation of employment opportunities available to its graduates in the Israeli job market. Others wanted to preserve the status quo – that is, they supported the continued dependence of Arab society on the country's various institutions. This means that they opposed the call of Arab society to establish institutions of higher education for fear that this process was liable to be linked to a demand for cultural autonomy.

It is worth mentioning that the case of the Arab minority in Israel as a distinct cultural group is similar to certain cases in which distinct cultural groups in Israel demanded the establishment of their own institutions of higher education. However, in contrast to the Arab minority, the State permitted them to establish such institutions – for example, the State-funded post-secondary-school yeshivot. Although the latter do not belong to the higher education system, the very fact of their existence reflects the State's acknowledgement of the right of the ultra-Orthodox public to cultural autonomy. Another instance of the establishment of a private institution of higher education for a distinct cultural group is Bar-Ilan University (Klein, 1998). According to Klein, this institution was established by the Mizrachi movement and was granted the recognition of the Council for Higher Education as a university in 1970.

It comes as no surprise that the Arab minority in Israel – as a native minority and as a distinct cultural group – has the right to establish its own institution of higher education. The establishment of an Arab university could contribute to the advancement of the social, economic and political status of the Arab minority in Israel as well as bringing about social cross-fertilization between Arab and Jewish society within the State of Israel. Moreover, the establishment of an Arab university could solve the problem of unemployed academics, especially those who hold advanced degrees (M.A. and Ph.D.), by taking them on as faculty members.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that the establishment of institutions of higher education has in fact remained the province of the State, both directly and by means of the Council for Higher Education. In other words, the ability to operate these institutions is not in the hands of distinct cultural groups but rather mediated by multidimensional political processes. The fact that the Arab minority has been working unsuccessfully toward establishing an institution of higher education for three decades is proof of this. The significance of this conclusion is that the establishment of institutions of higher education in the Israeli periphery does not necessarily serve to increase the power of weaker groups, as could be expected. Under certain conditions such as the present case, the attempt to torpedo the claim of the Arab minority constitutes a means of preserving the hegemonic relations of the dominant majority group in the political establishment vis-à-vis minority national-ethnic groups.

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