

“Gaza and Political Oppression in Israel”, Ayman Odeh, Member of the Knesset, 13.7.2025

Presentation

Today in *Eyes on Gaza* we host MK Ayman Odeh — both to express solidarity with him in light of the political attacks he is currently facing, and to discuss the connection between the political oppression of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel and the war of extermination in Gaza. Odeh will speak for about eight minutes, after which we will leave time for a short discussion. Participants are invited to submit questions in the chat, which will be read to him after his remarks.

Talk

Thank you. Since I only have eight minutes, I will speak quickly. We are part of the Palestinian people, and in a certain sense, also part of the Palestinian issue. If you ask any Arab citizen in this country what was the best period since 1948, ninety percent will answer: from 1992 to 1995. And if you ask them what was the worst period, they will say: from October 7 until today, with absolute certainty, over 90 percent. If Oslo defined that better period, then it belongs to the Palestinian issue. And if October 7 and the war on Gaza define this darkest period, that too is part of the Palestinian question. We are inseparably tied to it — this is obvious.

In Israeli media, however, we are asked not to speak about the Palestinian issue. But let me ask you: in fifty years, have you ever heard a Jewish interviewer ask a Jewish politician, “Why are you talking about the Palestinian issue? Why don’t you deal with internal problems instead of Gaza and the West Bank?” This question is posed only to Arab citizens. Why? Because the system wants to shape us into “Israeli Arabs.” By the way, have you ever heard the phrase “Israeli Jews”? There are Jews in the world, so why is there no such category? Why only “Israeli Arabs”? This construction seeks to detach us from our Palestinian identity, to reduce us nationally and to deny us full civic status. If you are not a Jew, you cannot aspire to be a full citizen of the Jewish state. Thus, the “Israeli Arab” is designed to be incomplete — both nationally and civically. What we want is different: to be 100 percent part of the Palestinian people, and 100 percent citizens of a democratic state. That is our equation. Between our equation and the establishment’s equation, there will always be deep tension.

When it comes to Gaza, Arab citizens of Israel have witnessed terrible things. We saw the atrocities of October 7: the murder of innocents, people dancing at a party, people sleeping in their homes. None of the crimes of the occupation justify the killing of even one innocent person. And none of the crimes of October 7 justify the killing of even one Palestinian child. Yet Arab citizens live under a cruel hegemony that seeks to convince us that a Jewish life is worth more than a Palestinian one. Imagine an Arab doctor sitting in a hospital lounge. A Jewish colleague describes the terrible suffering of Jews — rightly so, for suffering must be acknowledged. But if the Arab doctor decides to talk about the atrocities against Palestinians and the Jewish colleague tell him not to compare, then most often the Arab doctor falls silent. But I believe none of us should accept that silence.

What my mother sees on television — I don’t watch myself — I truly don’t know how she manages to remain sane. Yet despite everything, I have a kind of built-in optimism. Why? Because history shows that things can change. Look at New York after 9/11, how Muslims were treated. Only a few years later, Democrats elected Zohran Mamdani, a Muslim, as their representative. In today’s world of social media, change can come even faster. Look at Austria in 1945, after the cursed Nazis. Fifteen years later, they elected Bruno Kreisky, a Jew, to be chancellor — three times. Or take the French underground fighters in World War II: imagine one telling the other that in seven years they will build a common European market with Germany. You would have thought he needed a psychiatrist — yet it happened.

In Israel too, things once thought impossible have happened. Until 1992, no leader was more hated by Arabs than Yitzhak Rabin. He was the hawk of the dominant party, the hardline security figure responsible for the Ramleh massacre, for occupying East Jerusalem, and for breaking bones during the First Intifada. No one in the world could have imagined that only two years after 1991, he would shake Yasser Arafat's hand. But it happened. And let me say a word in favor of Israelis. In 1999, after three years of Netanyahu in power and three years of Rabin in power, 57 percent voted for Ehud Barak on one issue alone: to continue Oslo. This happened! In 2006, a sweeping majority voted for parties supporting a historic compromise, while Likud and Netanyahu won only 12 seats. In 2008, during negotiations between Olmert and Abu Mazen over Jerusalem, I did not see protests in the streets. There was a difference between Oslo and the Olmert–Abu Mazen talks: back then, there was almost popular peace, and people rejoiced. Olmert and Abu Mazen, by contrast, were already loathed. But the important thing was to reach a compromise.

I recall Haidar Abdel-Shafi, who led the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 alongside Jordan's Abdelsalam Majali. When Dr. Abdel-Shafi returned to Gaza, the city erupted in celebration, carrying him on their shoulders. Why? Because the peace process had begun. This is Gaza. This is Gaza.