

## Village With a Split Personality

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Barta'a, a small Arab Muslim village with over 7,000 residents, straddles the Green Line, the pre-1967 Jordanian border in the Wadi Ara region of Israel. A few kilometres from the main Ara basin valley road, Barta'a residents are out of the way of those travelling the heavily trafficked Hadera-Meggido highway. However, this small place in the middle of nowhere is a village with a split personality and a microcosm of the deep divide between Israeli Arabs and their Palestinian brethren down the road – or in the case of Barta'a, possibly next door as some of the houses on the Israeli side of the divide are only a matter of twenty metres from the first of the Palestinian abodes on the West Bank side.

In 1949, on the island of Rhodes, representatives of the fledgling State of Israel and neighbouring Jordan defined where the border (commonly known as the Green Line) between the two countries would be situated. At that time Barta'a was a small, peaceful farming hamlet inhabited by the Kabha clan, who then numbered 400 people, with the majority living on the slope of a hill leading down to the wadi below where there was a fresh water spring. The rest of the Kabha clan lived on the flatter land to the west of the spring.

At the Rhodes meeting, they either did not know, or did not care about Barta'a village as they placed the Green Line straight through the natural valley separating those Kabhas on the slope from those down below, splitting them physically until the 1967 war brought about a reunification of sorts. 'I was told that they used a relief map and the valley to them was a perfectly natural border anyway it would seem', said Riad Kabha, the present day mukhtar (village mayor) of the Israeli west side of Barta'a. When the line was drawn Riad's grandfather was the mukhtar of Barta'a and had two wives, one living on the slope and one

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Israel Affairs, Vol.7, No.1 (Autumn 2000), pp.87-93  
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

living in the flat land below. As Riad recounts 'my grandfather had to choose between them as suddenly one was about to become an Israeli and the other under the jurisdiction of Jordan. He chose the wife on the east side as she was the one who has given him the most sons', said Riad with a sad little laugh.

#### WHO ARE WE?

Until 1967 Jordanian soldiers patrolled the centre of the village and as a child Riad was called over many times by the Jordanians and asked to get them cigarettes from the shop on his side of Barta'a. 'I remember one incident in particular. It was Independence Day and in school the teacher asked me and my friend to hoist the Israeli flag in the school playground and we felt so proud at having been chosen to do this. After school, a Jordanian soldier called me and my friend over and we thought that he wanted something from the shop', recalled Riad, a graduate of the University of Tel Aviv, who is a staff member of the Givat Haviva Institute Jewish Arab Centre for Peace.

'The soldier asked me who had hoisted the flag in the school and I proudly answered that I had and he suddenly grabbed me and slapped my face. When I asked why he had done that, he said that I should remember that I am an Arab and the Israeli flag is not the flag of my people. I was very upset and then on my way back, an Israeli soldier called me over and asked me what the Jordanian had said and when I told him he slapped me as well!'

Thus, not surprisingly, this forty-something village leader finds it difficult to explain exactly who he is. A Palestinian muslim citizen of Israel seems to be the most comfortable description he can find.

#### UNITED DIVISION SPLIT BY DIFFERENCES

'In 1967 Israeli troops rushed through the whole of the West Bank, including East Barta'a, and we found ourselves able to meet freely, but it was very difficult as there were cultural, political and economic differences between the people', said Riad, in a manner that made it obvious that he was remembering the first emotionally draining meetings of close and not so close family members after reunification. The majority of male folk on both sides of the village have the family name of Kabha and there is a great deal of inter-marriage within the clan with first cousins marrying each other. 'There was a great strain in the relationship between us, the Israeli citizens in West Barta'a and those over there during the intifada as they participated fully in the uprising and we, as law-abiding Israeli citizens, refused'.

Riad added that his side of the village did help, but only with the permission of the Israeli authorities, when their relatives in East Barta'a

were under closure with the rest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip for long periods'. He then got more specific:

We helped by providing food, medicine and fuel during the winter, but nothing more than that. They of course tried to influence those on this side into actively participating in the disturbances but nobody did. It was extremely difficult to explain to our children why they couldn't and shouldn't throw stones at the Israeli troops like they saw their young cousins doing on the other side.

As a fellow Givat Haviva Institute staff member often bringing groups of students and adults from overseas to visit Barta'a village, I well recall a visit during the intifada when a very agitated Riad came rushing up to me, waving his hands around and before I could say anything he asked me how many pairs of hands he had. Rather puzzled I answered 'one pair like everybody else' and began to turn towards the alighting passengers. 'Then please tell me', Riad countered, 'how can I put one pair of hands over the ears of a few hundred children so that they don't hear all the incitement to riot against Israelis coming out of the mosque on the other side?' Although this incident occurred several years ago I can still feel the intensity of Riad's blazing eyes straight through me as I struggled to respond.

#### OVER HERE AND OVER THERE

Immediately when Riad begins to explain about his village one notices the 'split terminology'; the use of 'over here' and 'over there' coupled with 'we' and 'they' as well as the most descriptive use of Israeli and Palestinian to describe which side of the village a person comes from. Since the Oslo Agreement of 1993, the atmosphere has become very different in the two halves of Barta'a. The 1967 war might have seen the Jordanian soldiers flee the centre of the village, but it certainly did not create a reunification in the true sense of the word - just made them more accessible to one another. The only source of employment for the East Barta'ans is in Israel where the majority of them work as builder's labourers or house painters. In the main they drive cars with blue number plates like other Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza, and their papers are checked by Israeli soldiers manning road blocks when they leave their area. If there is a closure, then of course they are not allowed out of Barta'a and into Israel, which, in turn, creates great hardship for their families.

However, there are different types of closures. During the ten years that I have been frequenting Barta'a and the surrounding area the majority of closures were circumvented by the Palestinians simply by crossing over between the trees to the left of their half of the village and walking to the main Wadi Ara road where whomever employed them, mostly Jews but also Israeli Arab citizens, particularly from the villages

in that area, would pick them up and drop them off at the same place at the end of the working day and once more they would dart between the trees, dodging the Israeli border police patrols and well out of sight of the border police manning the checkpoint at the entrance to Barta'a.

The closure with a difference was definitely the one following the devastating bus bombings in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Palestinians stayed in their half of the village and no one was seen crossing between the trees. When I pointed this out to a local resident he told me that they were afraid that if they were caught crossing then, the Jews might have beaten them up as the atmosphere at the time was so volatile. During the long months they were under closure once more the Israeli Kabhas's mobilized to help and basic foods were provided through the mosque and the mukhtar, Riad Kabha.

In the last few years young Palestinian children have become a daily sight on the main Wadi Ara highway. They stand at the traffic lights and when cars pull up they try to sell shoe laces, plasters or tissues to the drivers. They also 'work' the Israeli Arab villages in the Wadi Ara region. They have become so much part of the scenery, that they are really only noticeable to many when they aren't there. Israeli Muslim residents of the area have very mixed feelings indeed about the 'over the border' brood of Oliver Twists who accost them on their doorsteps. In the beginning they would either buy the items from the children whether they needed them or not, or just give them money as a charitable gesture. In the hot summer months they would also allow the children to take afternoon siestas on their shady verandas. These days, though, when I ask about these children most locals say they are fed up with the constant pestering; in their houses, on the village streets and whilst stopping at traffic lights. As for the Jews that take the main highway, they also have a mixed reaction to the children of the lights. It varies from occasionally giving a few coins, to disgust that their parents let them risk their lives darting between cars in order to bring a few shekels home at the end of a 'working' day.

#### PLAYING BALL

As one enters the Israeli side of Barta'a, a well-kept pitch is visible, enormous floodlights majestically bending over the high fence around the only real patch of greenery on either side of the village. The Israeli Barta'a Football Club play in a lower league which is made up of both Arab and Jewish teams, and some, like Barta'a, are mixed Arab-Jewish teams. Barta'a field three or four Jewish players who come from local towns and, of course, get reimbursed financially for their efforts.

Almost immediately after the Oslo Agreement I accompanied a group of British students to the village and we entered as a game was in progress, hundreds of supporters enthusiastically cheering on the teams. Riad approached and asked, practically demanded, that I bring the

students to see the game. Puzzled at his insistence I jokingly replied that they were British and had Arsenal, Spurs and Manchester United, and hardly thought that they would be impressed by the level of Barta'a football. After watching the game for a few minutes, Riad explained why it had been so important for us to join the jubilant crowd. 'This is what Oslo has meant to us, the team in red are East Barta'a and those in blue, West Barta'a. We could not have played this game last week!'

At a later stage Riad told me that the new football kit of the Palestinian players had been purchased through a special fund from his side of the village as the people 'over there' could ill-afford to buy the kit for themselves. Since that memorial game Palestinians stream over to the Israeli side to support their Israeli brethren whenever there is a game. After a winning goal was scored by one of the Jewish players in a league game, those carrying the player on their shoulders for a lap of honour were in actual fact from the Palestinian side and a local Israeli Arab resident told me that he had spotted the same youths a few days before throwing stones at soldiers in the area.

#### MARRYING IN

These days some 120 Palestinian residents of East Barta'a have Israeli citizenship having married Israeli Arab women, many of whom are their close relatives. Not only has this enabled them to gain citizenship but it has also given them the right to exchange the blue Palestinian number plates on their cars for yellow ones allowing them to drive around Israel without being constantly stopped by the Israeli police. There have also been numerous incidents of West Bank or Gaza plated vehicles being vandalized whilst left unattended in Israel, especially after terror incidents.

The children of Palestinian/Israeli marriages are actually entitled to education on the Israeli side of Barta'a and some 80 youngsters walk daily down to the centre of the valley, cross over the Green Line and attend junior school with their Israeli-born cousins and peers. The curriculum by which they study is of course that set out by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Those going to school in East Barta'a have for decades studied under the auspices and curriculum of the Jordanian Ministry of Education which is now being phased out slowly and replaced by a Palestinian Authority programme. In a recent discussion with Riad Kabha of the complexities of educating children from the Palestinian side under a curriculum that embraces such subjects as the Hebrew language, the Bible, Jewish history and Zionism, he mentioned that Barta'a junior school does not receive financial allowances for the Palestinian/Israeli pupils from the Israeli Ministry of Education because they are resident in East Barta'a! The cost of their education is absorbed by the school, which reduces their already scant resources.

Enquiring how local people felt about the rather thin edge of the educational stick their children were receiving, Riad just shrugged his shoulders and replied 'what can you do?' What will happen to these children once they finish junior school? There is no high school in West Barta'a, the students either attend high schools in neighbouring Israeli villages or travel to Haifa. Because of family ties, the villagers of West Barta'a are resigned to the fact that East Barta'an children will be educated at their children's expense but it is doubtful whether any neighbouring village would accept such a situation. As Riad says 'None of the children have reached high-school age as yet, and we will have to cross that bridge when we come to it'.

#### WHAT WILL BE, WILL BE

Resigned to the fact that there is no easy solution for their split personality village, Kabha clan members on both sides of the divide are emphatic in their wishes not to return to the pre-1967 situation. But at the same time they realise that in their case two halves may not become one whole, united under one collective state roof. If one suggests to those on the Israeli side that they might become annexed to the 'other side' in order to solve the problem, one receives a swift and sometimes angry reaction as they are not prepared to give up their Israeli citizenship. Likewise, the Palestinian Barta'ans, who these days fall under the Israeli controlled Area C, react strongly to the suggestion that they might possibly be annexed to the Israeli side. Their burning wish is to be part of a possible future Palestinian state or at least to come under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority.

To this day Israeli Barta'a does not come under the auspices of any local council and therefore is not entitled to financial support for municipal services such as a sewage system, the paving of roads, street lighting and the collection of household refuse. All attempts to form a council have failed miserably, partially because of the inability of various villages to solve their own inter-clan differences. Not so long ago these differences were more or less ironed out, and the government accepted the formation of a local municipality to serve the needs of the Arab villages. However, this attempt also came to nothing when understandably the Israeli Arab area residents refused the government demand that the council be headed by a number of religious Jews from the nearby Israeli town of Hadera.

In the meantime, the cost of improving living conditions on their side of Barta'a falls squarely on the shoulders, and bank accounts, of the tax paying Israeli Arab residents, who receive little in return for their financial contributions to the state coffers. Riad Kabha is a little too young to be the wise old man of his half of Barta'a where he is expected to come up with all the answers. In his daily work at the Givat Haviva Institute Arab-Jewish Centre for Peace, Riad is in constant contact with

Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza and co-ordinates and organizes seminars on their behalf held at Givat Haviva. He has been through stressful times trying to organise seminars for Palestinians on subjects such as democracy, tolerance, co-existence, and education, whilst their areas came under closure and permits to cross over the Green Line, a mere handful of kilometres from Givat Haviva, were refused by the Israeli authorities. Being the village mukhtar brings no pay, just many duties, such as responsibility for the building of roads, being a go-between between west and east Barta'a and the village representative to various government agencies.

Riad jokes: 'I find it difficult enough explaining to my own children our history, who we are and where we belong, taking on all the other problems of the village is just not for a youngster like me'. Yet, what of the future? 'What will be, will be...Inshallah (Please God)...it is not in our hands', Riad proclaims, lifting his arms toward the ceiling, and beyond.

(1997)