



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

**Nation-State Law:  
Arab, Druze, Government and Civil Society Responses**

August 9, 2018

The new ***Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*** is widely perceived within Israel's Arab society and among shared society organizations as a turning point in Jewish-Arab and state-minority relations and its passage has been met with strong opposition. [In an earlier briefing document, the Task Force detailed the discourse for and against the law, and controversy surrounding its substance.](#) This update summarizes Arab and civil-society response in the weeks since its passage; government and political leadership responses in return; and actions taken by shared society organizations.

**Druze Community**

The first organized and forceful response from within Arab society came from the Druze community—a [small \(approximately 130,000 people\) and distinct subset of Israel's Arab population](#)—and centered on their 'blood covenant' with the State of Israel which includes male participation in Israel's security forces. Many Druze perceive the law as "[an end to the delusion of having a shared fate](#)" and of "[equal and shared citizenship](#)" in Israel.

Druze MKs were the first to [file a petition against the law with the High Court of Justice](#), and Druze mayors and community leaders quickly established a *Special Forum Against the Nationality Law*, which was joined [by 100 Druze IDF reserve officers](#). Additional Druze criticism came from [high-ranking Druze IDF officers](#), [bereaved families](#), resignations by [Druze soldiers](#), and others. The Forum called for a [major demonstration on August 4<sup>th</sup> in Tel Aviv](#). Tens of thousands of Jewish, Druze and Arab citizens gathered to hear from prominent Druze and Jewish speakers.



[August 4<sup>th</sup> demonstration in Tel Aviv. Credit: AP](#)

The Druze protest became a focal point for much of mainstream debate in the first couple of weeks, dividing opposition to the law into two main lines of criticism: one based on implications for equal citizenship for all, and another based on rights for non-Jewish citizens who serve in the security forces.

Government leaders including [Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), [Minister of Education Naftali Bennett](#), [Minister of Finance Moshe Kachlon](#), and others who promoted the law quickly acknowledged

Druze concerns. PM Netanyahu offered to rectify the omission with additional legislation and an economic development package.

While currently it looks as though Druze leadership is choosing to reject the offer and to focus on [the underlying issue of equal citizenship for all](#), there is still varied discussion within the Druze community, including critical new voices emerging from younger leadership and [Druze women](#), about whether [to accept an offer from the Prime Minister](#). Minister of Communication Ayooob Kara, a Druze, who supported the law, continues to defend his vote, claiming the law "[does not turn \[the Druze\] into second class citizens](#)." Kara has been under severe criticism from within the Druze community, and according to reports has [even received death threats](#).

Most leaders in the wider Arab and civil society have come out against any conditions placed on equal citizenship—be it on military service or anything else. Among Bedouin, many of whom also serve in the military and police, some [discourse has emerged about acknowledging their service](#) as well.

The Druze protest engaged Israeli security officers not normally vocal in Israeli politics in the debate. Current and former [military generals and officers](#), [chiefs of police](#) and [other security personnel](#) have come out publicly in support of the Druze and in some cases, all Arab minorities, whose rights they say need to be protected.

### **Wider Arab Society**

[Several protests were held](#) in Arab cities and in Haifa, but a unified and coordinated response from Arab leadership has taken longer to formulate. Some say this is due to initial shock, while others attribute the delay to [disagreement and diversity of ideological positions behind the scenes](#).

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, in a press conference, the [Higher Arab Monitoring Committee in Israel along with a coalition of other Arab groups](#) announced the filing of a petition with the High Court of Justice. Mohammed Baraka, chairman of the committee, said that these actions "[are in the name of the entire Arab population in Israel, not only a particular party or group](#)." This is the fifth petition filed against the law in the High Court (others filed by [Druze MKs](#), political party [Meretz](#), [Bedouin former IDF officers](#), and by a group [of Arab and Jewish lawyers and academics](#).)

Additional actions organized by the Arab leadership include daily protests in Arab localities; an emergency Jewish-Arab convention held in Haifa on July 29<sup>th</sup>; and a [major protest in Tel Aviv planned for August 11<sup>th</sup>](#). Arab leadership is also pursuing [international advocacy against the law](#) via UN High Commissioner for Minority Rights, Dr. Fernand de Varennes, and several embassies. [MK Yousef Jabareen \(Joint List\) sent a letter to the OECD](#) claiming the nation state law "contradicts the principles of equality and fairness ... enables excessive resource allocation to the Jewish majority at the expense of the Arab minority" and thus "goes against the OECD's recommendations to integrate the Arab minority in education, welfare and employment."

Meanwhile, many prominent Arab figures have expressed their opposition and disappointment with the law. Former Chief Justice Salim Joubran, who is known for his political restraint, stated he couldn't keep quiet because "[\[t\]here isn't a single word about equality in the law](#)." MK Zohair Bahloul (Zionist Camp) resigned from the Knesset, [explaining in a detailed interview how the law was "the last straw in Jewish-Arab relations"](#). Aiman Saif, the outgoing Director of the Authority for Economic Development of the Arab Sector, who was the responsible for coordinating government economic development strategies for Arab society, warned that the Nation State law

["will deal a death blow to a decade of government efforts to promote economic development" for Arab citizens.](#)" Writer Sayed Kashua wrote ["Israel does not want to be my state."](#) TV anchor Lucy Aharish posted a heartfelt video in which she said ["we \[Arab citizens\] are a fact, and we will not be ignored because we demand equality"](#); Adv. Raghad Jaraisy from the Association of Civic Rights in Israel wrote a piece on ["the language you don't want to hear"](#); journalist and writer Odeh Bisharat who wrote ["those who passed the nation-state law are criminals,"](#) activist Mohammed Darawshe write that ["only Jews can stop this disgrace"](#), among many others.

## Government and Political Leadership

There is no unified government response to the wave of public opposition and calls to amend or revoke the law from Arab society. Below is a selection of actions that have been taken by government and political leaders to either address criticism of the law or to affirm the legislation counter to the opposition.

- Prime Minister Netanyahu has held several meetings with Druze leadership and set up a [Ministerial Committee on Druze, Circassian and Minority Community Members who serve in the Security Forces Affairs](#) to, in his words, "Promote the deep connection with the Druze community and our commitment to it, and show appreciation for all those who serve in the IDF and the security forces." In parallel, the PM is rejecting demands to alter or repeal the Basic Law, stating: ["without the nation-state law we cannot promise that Israel will remain the Jewish nation-state for generations to come."](#)
- [The Knesset convened for a special summer recess session](#) on Wednesday, August 8<sup>th</sup>, following successful collection of 52 signatures by the Opposition, (minimum of 25 needed). In the end roughly 30 opposition MKs and 6 coalition MKs participated in discussion focused on making public statements against the legislation. In her speech, Opposition Leader MK Tzipi Livni said ["the Israeli government is tearing apart the Declaration of Independence and with it the entire nation"](#) as Zionist Camp activists in the Knesset gallery held up copies of the Declaration of Independence and were removed from the plenum. Yesh Atid leader MK Yair Lapid directed his questions to Prime Minister Netanyahu, asking him to ["stop dividing us. Enough of 'us vs. them.' I believe in us. I believe in this nation."](#) Joint List MK Ahmed Tibi said the commitment to equality written in the Declaration of Independence never existed in practicality: "For years," Tibi said, ["there has been discrimination in lands, budgets, education and religious services."](#)
- In an Israeli Army Radio interview, Minister of Justice Ayelette Shaked warned that judicial intervention over the law ["would cause an earthquake between different authorities,"](#) explaining that the Knesset "defines and determines the Basic Laws. [The justices] have to interpret the laws in accordance with the Basic Laws." The statements have drawn concerns about aspects of this law serving [as part of an attack on the independence of the judiciary](#), as well as on its [role guaranteeing Israel's democratic commitments](#). At the swearing in ceremony of Judge Alex Stein, [Supreme Court President, Esther Hayut indirectly responded](#), saying that "In light of the continuing deterioration of public discourse and the use of troubling terminology relating to natural disasters and hostile conflicts, it is important to state in a clear and sober voice that according to the oath of office, Israel's Supreme Court justices ... are committed to carrying out our duties without fear or bias."

- President Reuven Rivlin, who [voiced his criticism prior to the approval of the law](#), said in response to an appeal by Dr. Thabet Abu Ras, co-director of The Abraham Fund Initiatives, that he has to sign the law or he must resign, but that he [plans to sign it in Arabic as an act of protest](#). Rivlin was consequently criticized by a number of MKs including the [initiator of the law MKs Avi Dichter \(Likud\)](#).
- Speaker Yuli Edelstein refused to accept the resignation of Joint List MK Wael Younis, who resigned as part of a rotation agreement in the party, because the letter was written in Arabic. "[I cannot sign a letter if I don't understand its content](#)," Edelstein. "It is only appropriate that in Israel's parliament, the resignation letter will also be submitted in Hebrew."
- MK Benny Begin (Likud) wrote "this isn't the law I wished for" quoting his original suggestion for the law that stated: "[Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, based on the principles of liberty, justice and peace, according to the vision of Israel's prophets, and ensures equal rights to all its citizens](#)." He further wrote that "the stubborn resistance to include in the law the Jewish state's commitment to equal rights for all its citizens is foolish", vowing that "once the Knesset reconvenes", he will suggest a short amendment to the law so that the phrase "[the state] ensures to full equality for all its citizens" would be added to the first clause of the law.
- Meanwhile, numerous politicians from the Opposition have criticized the law. Zionist Camp leaders Avi Gabay and MK Tzipi Livni vowed [to enshrine Israel's Declaration of Independence as the country's de-facto constitution](#) if elected; Yesh Atid Chair, MK Yair Lapid, has repeatedly stated that Yesh Atid "[supports Begin's \[original\] version](#)", [Meretz Party appealed to the Supreme Court](#) against the law, and the Zionist Camp, Yesh Atid and Meretz also endorsed the Druze-Jewish protest on August 4th.

### Shared Society Initiatives

Civil society organizations focused on and activists working for shared society have issued statements and taken actions in protest of the legislation. Select examples are provided below.

- **Petitions:** A number of petitions have been circulated, including [by bereaved father Roni Hirshenzon](#) against the law; [a petition to call on President Rivlin to refrain from signing the law](#); a [petition by around 180 artists and intellectuals](#) expressing "shock and outrage" about the Nation-State Law and a petition of [around 200 linguists](#) voicing their opposition to the law and "to undermining the status of the Arabic language."
- **Events:** [Hand in Hand](#), [the Abraham Fund Initiatives](#), [Sikkuy](#) and [Givat Haviva Standing Together](#) and [the New Israel Fund](#) organized "[the world's largest Arabic lesson](#)" in which over 1000 Jews and Arabs came together in Tel Aviv to learn Arabic and protest the law. Several local initiatives are also promoting Arabic studies for Jews in protest ([Hebrew](#)). Jewish artists of Mizrahi origin have also been protesting the demotion of Arabic ([Hebrew](#)). These same organizations,



[Largest Arabic Lesson in Tel Aviv, July 30](#) Source: Hand in Hand Centers for Bilingual Education

together with [Mahapach-Taghir](#) and [Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam](#), have joined the call of the Arab Follow Up Committee for a Jewish-Arab protest in Tel-Aviv on August 11<sup>th</sup>, issuing a joint call "[No to the Nationality Law! Yes to Partnership and Equality!](#)"

- **On Campus:** Israel's universities and colleges were quick to [issue statements expressing their support for shared society and equality on campus](#) following passage of the law. Following the August 4<sup>th</sup> protest in Tel Aviv, many campuses also [raised Druze flags on campus in a show of solidarity](#).
- **Online:** There have been several viral online campaigns, such as support to [add Arabic to Facebook user profiles](#), or individuals posting a video of themselves saying "[I am ashamed of the Nationality Law](#)" in Arabic.
- **Statements:** Numerous movements, civil society organizations, and activists issued statements and took to social media about the law's negative implications while committing to advancing a shared and equal Israeli society. These include [the Israeli Reform Movement](#); the [Berl Katznelson Educational Center](#); [Hashomer Hatzza'ir Youth Movement](#); Hanoar HaOver Ve'Halomed Youth Movement; [Givat Haviva](#) and participants of its [Heart to Heart program](#); [Standing Together](#) (a Jewish and Arab grassroots movement); [Ein Bustan](#), a Jewish-Arab group in the north, and the [Israeli Democracy Institute](#), which is pushing to add the terms democracy and equality to the Law, among others.



Givat Haviva's Heart to Heart participants' protest against the Nation State Law. Source: Givat Haviva