

Topic: **National-Civic Service**

Updated: **June 2014**

- All Arabs are exempt from service in the military, but the question of whether they should be conscripted for mandatory national service or have an opportunity to volunteer has been widely debated in recent years.
- In 2007, the government established a new unit in the Prime Minister's office, the National Service Administration (now National-Civic), to explore avenues other than the military to integrate the Arab population more fully into mainstream Israeli society.<sup>2</sup>
- Under one proposal, Arabs would volunteer to work full time in the fields of education, welfare and health for one to two years, in return for which they would receive a \$150 monthly stipend and up to \$2,000 upon the completion of their service.<sup>3</sup>
- Dr. Reuven Gal, former head of the National Service Administration, said such service would give youth an opportunity to make a contribution to their own community. "Being part of a larger system", he said, "strengthens the volunteers' connection to the State."<sup>4</sup> He also believed that this was a step toward trust building.
- MK Ran Cohen (Meretz) maintained that Arab society has much to gain from communal activity carried out by non-government agents. He said community service can serve as a real model for civic and social solidarity.<sup>5</sup>
- Israeli lawmakers have called for a universal national service law to be implemented, which would require all Israeli citizens who do not serve in the IDF to complete national service in a civic framework.<sup>6</sup>
- In late 2007, Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit came out in support of the idea, and called the Arab sector to join the national service. "Israeli citizens need to be equal in every respect: in their rights and in their obligations," he said.<sup>7</sup>
- According to a 2012 study by the University of Haifa, the National-Civic Service Administration noted an appreciable rise in Arab volunteers each year, from 240 in 2004-2005 to 1,050 in 2008-2009 and to 2,399 in 2011-2012.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled by Prof. Elie Rekhess, Associate Director, Crown Center for Jewish and Israel Studies, Northwestern University

<sup>2</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Sinara*, September 10, 2007; *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> *Maariv*, September 8, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times of Israel*, May 23, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Ha'aretz*, November 13, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *Civil Service*, University of Haifa, press release, May 8, 2012. <http://newmedia-eng.haifa.ac.il/?p=5825>.

- Conversely, the aforementioned study showed that 40% of Arab youth in Israel were personally willing to volunteer with the civil service in 2011, compared to 53% in 2009. It also showed a drop in public support for the civil service: 62% today as compared to 68% in 2009 and 78% in 2007.<sup>9</sup>
- Professor Sammy Smooha, the main author of the Haifa study, explained the apparent discrepancy, saying that “the major factor in the drop of support is the exacerbation of the Arab public’s attitudes toward the state because of the political impasse in the Palestinian question, the wars and the hostile atmosphere in Israel toward Arabs since 2009.”<sup>10</sup>
- The 2012 University of Haifa Study revealed that 90% of Arab volunteers are girls, rendering educational and welfare services in their own communities. The researchers concluded that “For the time being the civil service as a state undertaking does not fulfill one of its chief goals of drawing Arab youth nearer to the state, because so far only youth who are identified with the state and completed high school volunteer.
- 75% of the volunteers serve in Arab towns and villages and do not come in contact with Jews. Moreover, the percentage of volunteers, although growing, is still too small and has not reached the critical mass for affecting change in the status of the Arab minority in Israel.”<sup>11</sup>
- MK Dr. Jamal Zahalka of BALAD (NDA, National Democratic Alliance) defined whoever participates in national service as a leper and an outcast.<sup>12</sup>
- Leading Arab figures expressed objection to national service, arguing that the State of Israel has inflicted historic injustice on Arabs in Israel, and therefore there is no moral justification for any kind of service.
- The urge to enroll Arabs in the program is seen by some as another step in the policy to enfeeble the national identity of Palestinians in Israel.
- One of the main themes of the Arab campaign against national service is the perception that this is merely military service in disguise: that it is some sort of detour on the road to implement the government’s intention of conscripting Arabs into the military.
- A public opinion poll conducted in September 2009 among young Arabs aged 17-20 showed that 63.7% of the respondents believed that national service was an impractical solution for achieving equality between Arab and Jewish Israeli citizens.<sup>13</sup>
- Ayman Odeh, chairman of the Committee against National Service, maintains that “The link to the Ministry of Defense and other national security offices” is the main reason for opposing the idea.”<sup>14</sup>
- Jamal Abduh, an activist in the ‘Sons of the Village’ movement declared: “This is the first stage to enlisting Israeli Palestinians to serve in IDF. We will not collaborate in this Israeli plan to make us lose our identity.”<sup>15</sup>
- In August 2009, Minister of Interior Gideon Sa’ar (Likud) announced a new plan to encourage

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *The Times of Israel*, May 23, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> University of Haifa, press release, May 8, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> [www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com), October 27, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Ha’aretz*, September 15, 2009. See: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/poll-more-than-half-of-israeli-arab-youth-oppose-national-service-1.7832>.

<sup>14</sup> *Sonara*, October 19, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Israel Hayom*, October 28, 2007.

higher enrollment in National Service. Sa'ar reportedly said that "schools with high army and national service recruitment rates will be rewarded with funds, for teachers as well."<sup>16</sup> However, Arab political and public figures rejected Sa'ar's plan, calling it a "political" and not a "pedagogical" measure.<sup>17</sup>

- An attempt to condition social benefits on national service was also made by Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu party, which introduced the slogan: "No National Insurance benefits without National Service."<sup>18</sup>
- In December 2009, IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi expressed support for a national service system that would draft all Israelis, some of whom will be eventually recruited to serve in the Israeli army. The need to recruit all Israelis is not just for security reasons, Ashkenazi explained, but also for promoting social justice in Israeli society.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ynetnews.com*, August 26, 2009. See: <http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3767291,00.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Makor Rishon*, January 9, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *Ha'aretz*, December 2, 2009. See: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/idf-chief-wants-to-enlist-arabs-haredim-in-national-service-1.3018>.