



Arab Israelis

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Arab Israelis

Israel is home to a highly diverse population from many different ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds. Of its 6.3 million citizens, over one million, constituting nearly 20 percent of Israel's population, are not Jewish. Almost all are Arab Israelis, mainly residents from before the establishment of the State of Israel or their descendants.

The Arab Israeli Sector:

Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, the Arab Israeli sector includes a number of different groups - primarily Arabic-speaking - each with its distinct identity.

Muslim Arabs, the largest group, constitute three-quarters of the Arab Israeli sector and most are Sunni Muslims. Nearly one-tenth of Israel's Muslim Arabs are Bedouins, formerly nomadic shepherds. Christian Arabs form the second largest group in the Arab Israeli sector. Although many denominations are nominally represented, the majority of the Christian Arabs are affiliated with the Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The Druze, some 100,000 Arabic-speakers living in 22 villages in northern Israel, are a separate cultural, social and religious community. The Circassians, comprising some 3,000 people, are Sunni Muslims, although they share neither the Arab origin nor the cultural background of the larger Islamic community. While maintaining a distinct ethnic identity, they participate in Israel's economic and national affairs without assimilating either into Jewish society or into the general Muslim community.

Legal and Political Status:

Arab Israelis are citizens of the Israel with equal rights. In 1948, Israel's Declaration of Independence called upon the Arab inhabitants of Israel to "participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions".

The political involvement of the Arab sector is manifested through both national and municipal elections. Arab citizens run the political and administrative affairs of their own municipalities and advance Arab interests through their elected representatives in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. Arab Israelis have also held various government

positions, including that of deputy minister. At present a member of the Druze community is serving as a government minister.

The Declaration also promises that Israel will "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" and guarantees "freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture".

Israel has extensive anti-discrimination laws. Moreover, since the founding of the State, the status of Arab Israeli women has been significantly improved by legislation stipulating equal rights for women and prohibition of polygamy and child marriage. Israel remains one of the few countries in the Middle East where women enjoy equality in rights and personal freedoms, including the right to vote and be elected to local and national office.

The only legal distinction between Arab and Jewish citizens is not one of rights, but rather of civic duty. Since Israel's establishment, Arab citizens have been exempted from compulsory service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). This exemption was made out of consideration for their family, religious and cultural affiliations with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world, given the on-going conflict. Still, volunteer military service is encouraged and IDF service was made mandatory for Druze and Circassian men at the request of their community leaders.

Pluralism and Sectoral Identity:

Israel is not a melting pot society, but rather more of a mosaic made up of different population groups coexisting in the framework of a single democratic state.

As a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, Israel has a high level of informal segregation patterns. While groups are not separated by official policy, a number of different sectors within the society have chosen to lead a segregated life-style, maintaining their strong cultural, religious, ideological and/or ethnic identity.

The vast majority of Arab Israelis have chosen to maintain their distinct identity and not assimilate. The community's separate existence is facilitated through the use of Arabic, Israel's second official language; a separate Arab/Druze school system; Arabic literature, theater and mass media; and maintenance of independent Muslim, Druze and Christian denominational courts which adjudicate matters of personal status.

While the development of inter-group relations between Israel's Arabs and Jews has been hindered by deeply rooted differences in religion, values and political beliefs, the future of the Arab Israeli sector is closely tied to that of the State of Israel. Though they coexist as two self-segregated communities, over the years Jewish and Arab Israelis have come to accept each other, acknowledging the uniqueness and aspirations of each community and participating in a growing number of joint endeavors.

An excellent example of such a venture is the Citizen Accord Forum, established last year by the Deputy Foreign Minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior (then Minister of Israeli Society and the World Jewish Community). The goal of the Forum is to reduce the schism existing between Jews and Arabs in Israel and to develop the country's civil society. The Citizen Accord Forum, which has over 500 active volunteers, has encouraged coexistence between Jewish and Arab citizens and the development of a relationship based on values of respect and mutual understanding.

Development:

In the years since the founding of the State of Israel, the Arab Israeli community sector has made great strides in almost every area of development. For example, the median years of schooling of Arab Israelis rose incredibly over a 35-year period (1961-1996) from 1.2 to 10.4 years. Infant death rates per thousand live births decreased significantly during that same 35-year period. In the Muslim population, the rate dropped from 46.4 per thousand births to 10.0; among Christians the decrease was from 42.1 to 6.7; among the Druze it dropped from 50.4 to 8.9 deaths.

These advances are particularly striking when comparing Arab citizens of Israel to their brethren living in neighboring countries. However, it is also clear that much work must be done to close the gap between Arab and Jewish Israelis.

Minority communities often face developmental challenges, especially when a language different from that spoken by the majority group is used at home and at school. There are several other factors that explain the reason why the gap between economic development in the Arab sector and that of the Jewish sector has yet to be closed, among them:

- The average family size in the Arab sector is far higher than that of Jewish families, greatly reducing the relative number of financial providers per dependent.
- Participation of women in the work force is still very low in the Arab sector, further reducing the average family income.
- Education levels in the Arab sector are relatively lower than those in the Jewish sector, often leading to lower incomes.
- The majority of Arab Israelis live in small communities with limited economic infrastructure. This plays a contributing factor in employment in unskilled or semiskilled fields, as well as the higher overall rates of unemployment.
- The lack of easy access to places of employment can also prevent employment commensurate with the skill or education level of the job seeker.
- Service in the Israeli Defense Forces gives veterans certain economic and other benefits. Although Arab Israeli youth who do not volunteer for army service gain a two-to-three year head start in their higher education or in joining the workforce, this does not always compensate for missing out on the benefits and training enjoyed by veterans.

Meeting the Challenge:

One of the most prominent examples of governmental activity designed to meet the challenge of closing the gap between the Arab and Jewish sectors is the October 2000 decision of the Government of Israel to designate resources for all areas of socio-economic development in the Arab sector communities of Israel.

The decision states that the Government "regards itself as obligated to act to grant equal and fair conditions to Israeli Arabs in the socio-economic sphere, in particular in the areas of education, housing and employment" and "to reduce the gaps between the Arab and Jewish sectors". The total cost of the multi-year plan is NIS 4 billion

(approximately 1 billion US dollars) during the years 2001-2004.

The plan is coordinated by an inter-ministerial team, headed by the Prime Minister's Office, and is based on working jointly with Arab Israeli authorities.

Highlights of the plan are:

- Education projects, including construction of classrooms in pre-compulsory kindergartens, elementary and high schools; pedagogical plans to advance the educational system in the Arab sector; the opening of new courses of study in technological fields; setting up engineering-technician and vocational training courses.
- Construction of family health and dental clinics.
- Funds for the restoration, establishment and development of religious institutions in Arab sector communities.
- Development of public institutions for cultural, social and sports activities. First priority has been given to community centers of various sizes and sports halls in large communities. Funds will also be allocated to assist cultural, artistic and sports activities.
- The advancement of master schemes, outlines and detailed plans in Arab sector communities. These planning tools are vital for without them the physical development of these communities cannot be implemented.
- Development of older neighborhoods, including new infrastructure and improvement of existing infrastructure. Special attention will be devoted to restoring dwellings owned by elderly persons living alone.
- Development of new neighborhoods using high-density public building, mainly on State lands, for a total of 5,000 dwelling units, as well as on private lands located within the bounds of Arab sector neighborhoods.
- Transport projects, including the development of a network of roads in the areas of Arab sector communities, internal road systems and safety projects.
- Six industrial zones in densely populated Arab areas, with the accompanying benefits to be granted to enterprises under the Encouragement of Capital Investments Law.
- Funding for various economic projects, such as development of trade and services areas, tourism infrastructure and holiday units.

Although implementation of the Government's multi-year plan has only just begun, the plan and its generous budget have the potential for greatly advancing development throughout the Arab sector of Israeli society.

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