Israel’s Arab citizens: Key facts and current realities

Introduction

Israel’s Arab population currently constitutes twenty per cent of the overall Israeli population (numbering 1.7 million citizens) and includes Muslim and Christian Palestinian-Arabs, Bedouin and Druze communities.

In the government-backed Orr Commission report published in 2003, it was recognised that more needed to be done to better integrate the Arab population into wider Israeli society. 50% of Arabs live in poverty compared to 20% of all Israelis and socio-economic gaps between Israel’s Arab and Jewish populations are increasing year-on-year to the detriment of the Arab population. The reasons for this are multiple and complex but it is widely recognised that narrowing these gaps will benefit Israel for four main reasons:

1. Equality will safeguard both the Jewish and democratic principles upon which Israel was founded, in accordance with the Declaration of Independence, which promises that the state “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.”
2. Equality will ensure a stable and peaceful future for Israel, improving social relations and breaking down barriers and prejudices.
3. Equality will strengthen Israel’s economy. The lost potential to Israel’s economy as a result of the failure to utilise the potential of the Arab workforce amounts to 31 billion shekels (£5.2 billion) a year.
4. Equality will bolster Israel’s global standing and increase the chances of regional peace.

Since 2003, the Israeli government has begun to introduce a range of initiatives to try to improve the situation, including economic development plans, investment funds for the private sector, and affirmative action policies.

Key Facts:

- **Demographics:** Projections by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics show that the Arab population will grow to 1,952,300 by 2020 (21.4 % of the total population) and 2,614,800 by 2035 (22.9% of the total population).
- **Land:** Arab municipalities control only 2.5% of the overall land within Israel and while the government has created over 700 new Jewish communities since the formation of the state, no new Arab communities have been authorised to cater to natural population growth, leading to large housing shortages.
- **Employment:** According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, Arab citizens contribute only 8% to Israel’s GDP, despite constituting 20% of Israel’s population. This disparity is partially due to the low level of Arab women in the workplace (20.5%) compared to Jewish women (56.7%).

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• **Health:** A 2012 report by the OECD on Israel’s health system identified inequalities between Arabs and Jews in accessibility to healthcare, resulting in lower healthcare outcomes. For example Arabs have life expectancy that is 4 years lower than Jewish men and 3.2 years lower than Jewish women.¹

• **Education:** In Israeli universities today, around 12% of undergraduate students and between 4-8% of advanced degree students are Arab, with only 2% among academic staff.⁵ The High Court and various Knesset Committees have identified education gaps in unequal allocation of budgets, higher drop-out rates, lack of sufficient school facilities and lower education achievements (matriculation rates) and funds for special education.

• **Politics:** There are 12 Arab Members of the Knesset out of 120, representing 10% of MKs. Arab participation in elections rose to 56% in the January 2013 election, from 53% in 2009.⁶ However, the number of Arabs participating in the democratic process since the formation of the state has dropped significantly, from a peak of 91% in 1955 and 77.6% in 1996.⁷

• **Attitude:** According to a 2012 survey by Professor Sammy Smooha of Haifa University, 55% of Arabs would prefer to live in Israel than in any other country in the world. Yet only 12% feel that Israeli citizenship, as compared to religious affiliation or Palestinian peoplehood, is their most important component of their identity.⁸

**Quotes from a range of political, religious, security and business leaders in Israel, relating to these issues:**

“How many times does it have to be said that integrating the large minority population is the major challenge facing Israeli society? A challenge more urgent and more difficult even than reaching a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Whereas peace with the Palestinians depends on decisions, difficult as they may be, to be taken by the Palestinian and Israeli leadership at the appropriate moment - the integration of the minorities in Israeli society is a long-term process, to be achieved over many years, that can be carried out only as the result of a determined and consistent government policy dedicated to that aim. No single decision can do it.” Moshe Arens, former Israeli Minister of Defence and Foreign Affairs for the Likud Party, June 2011

“Halakha underscores the right of minorities to live among us peaceably and with security. It says that members of these groups have the right to choose their places of residence, without anyone discriminating against them or injuring them with words or deeds… Carrying out development plans that enable these citizens to realise their rights… are obligations that are incumbent upon Israel’s government and its Jewish majority in their dealings with Arab citizens. Honouring these obligations constitutes the appropriate Jewish, Zionist and human response to those who try to undermine the existence of a Jewish nation-state. Israel’s existence as the independent state of the Jewish people will be judged by its success in integrating its minorities into society on the basis of equality, and the protection of their human dignity.” Rabbi Naftali Rothenberg, senior research fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Rabbi of the community of Har Adar, November 2010.

“The main challenge facing the Israeli government is how to connect Arab citizens with the State of Israel… In recent years the Shin Bet has taken upon itself the role of serving as a voice for assisting Arab-Israelis constructively.” Former Chief of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security service, Yuval Diskin, 2008

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⁵ Prof Sammy Smooha, ‘Still Playing by the Rules Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2012’, published by the University of Haifa and the Israel Democracy Institute (June 2013: p. 12, 18), accessed at: [http://en.idi.org.il/media/2522696/Arab-Jewish-Index-2012-ENG.pdf](http://en.idi.org.il/media/2522696/Arab-Jewish-Index-2012-ENG.pdf)
“We must create conditions that will enable the full integration of Arab sector academics in the labour market... The Arab sector is a main growth engine for the Israeli economy, which has yet to be fully utilised, and I believe that their integration into the labour market will contribute not only to the Arab sector, but to the State of Israel as a whole.”  Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, June 2012

Frequently asked questions:

1. Who are Israel’s Arab citizens?

Israel’s Arab population is comprises of communities who were living in Israel prior to the formation of the state, previously living under Ottoman and then British Mandatory rule. They currently constitute 20% of the population, numbering 1.7m, the religious majority of which are Muslim (84%), with large Druze (8.1%) and Christian (7.8%) populations.

Most Arab citizens live in the north of the country, in majority Arab towns. Around 60% of the Christian Arab population are concentrated in Nazareth and Haifa, while the Druze live largely in the Galilee and Carmel regions. The Druze have traditionally rejected Arab-Palestinian nationalism, favouring strong affinities with their country of residence, making them the most well-integrated of the Arab minority in Israeli society, strongly identifying as Israelis and well-represented in the political, military and public sectors.

Within the Muslim Arab group there are around 200,000 Bedouins, descended from formerly semi-nomadic tribes, who have a range of cultural traditions that distinguish them from other Arab Muslim groups. Most Bedouin live in the Negev region of southern Israel, with a sizeable population in the Galilee in northern Israel. The majority have permanently settled in towns and villages purpose-built by the Israeli government, although a significant number live in unrecognised villages. Unrecognised villages are not recognised as a
legal form of settlement by the government and so are ineligible for municipal services, such as connection to the electrical grid, water mains or refuse collection.

2. How do they identify themselves?

Israel’s Arab population are often referred to in official and public discourse as ‘Israeli Arabs’, ‘Arab citizens of Israel’, ‘Palestinian Arab’ or as ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’. Identity is particularly complex for Arabs living within Israel, and they tend to identify by ethnicity and religion rather than nationality. Research conducted by Professor Sammy Smooha for the University of Haifa’s Annual Index of Jewish-Arab Relations has shown that in 2009, 42.1% of the overall Arab population identified themselves in a form that incorporated the term Palestinian. While as recently as 2003, the majority (53%) defined themselves as Israeli Arabs without the Palestinian identifier. This shift is seen to be symptomatic of increasing tensions between the Jewish and Arab population groups in Israel.

3. Do they recognise Israel’s right to exist?

The 2012 Index of Jewish-Arab relations, released by the University of Haifa, has found that 55.9% of Israel’s Arab citizens accept Israel’s definition as a nation with a Jewish majority, with 55% preferring to live in Israel than in any other country in the world. Other polls have found that a majority were willing to recognise Israel as a Jewish state as long as they were given full rights and protected against discrimination. Whilst many Arab citizens of Israel are sympathetic to Palestinian self-determination and statehood and are often critical of Israeli policy in Gaza and the West Bank, the majority do not support violence against the state, and have no interest in conflict.

4. Do Arabs have equal rights in Israel?

Israel’s Declaration of Independence vowed to form a state that would “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex” and provide Arab citizens with “full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.” Arabs have the right to vote and equal rights protected by the Israeli legal and judicial system. Despite being equal in law, the government-backed 2003 Orr Commission report identified a widespread imbalance in the distribution of public funds between Jews and Arabs and stated that more needed to be done to alleviate discrimination and reduce unequal access to state services between Jews and Arabs.

5. Do Jews and Arabs have the same standard of living?

Socio-economic gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel are growing year on year to the detriment of the Arab population and an analysis of the 2012 State Budget by an Israeli NGO that advocates for Arab rights, Mossawa, found that despite constituting 20% of the population, Arab citizens of Israel receive less than 6.25% of the State Budget. This is a contributing factor to poverty with just over twice as many members of Israel’s Arab community as Jews are below the poverty line. The Israeli government is seeking to reduce these inequalities through investment and state-sponsored schemes, working alongside NGO’s and civil

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society initiatives. Another report released by Sikkuy in September 2011 found that 60% of Jewish Israelis believe it is in Israel’s interest to promote equality for Arab citizens. Moreover, 53% of Jews polled were disturbed by the inequality and 40% said that they would be willing to pay a personal price to reduce the socio-economic gap between Israel’s Arab and Jewish population.\textsuperscript{12}

6. What kind of jobs do they do?

Arab citizens are under-represented in the civil service, business, high technology and financial sectors, whilst over-represented in low-skilled trades that are more poorly paid. For example, out of 150,000 employees in the high-tech sector only 460 are Arab. Arabs contribute about 8% to Israel’s GDP, despite accounting for 20% of the population. The average income of an Arab household is between 57-70% of a Jewish household, partly because Arabs are under-represented in highly skilled and better paid careers, but also because female unemployment in the Arab sector is much higher than for Jewish women. According to the Israeli government, the failure to utilise the Arab workforce costs Israel 31 billion shekels (£5.2 billion) a year.

7. How are Arabs represented in the political system?

Arab members of Knesset (Israel’s parliament) have been elected at every general election since Israel was founded. There are 12 Arab Members of the Knesset out of 120, representing 10% of MKs. Arab participation in elections rose to 56% in the January 2013 election, from 53% in 2009.\textsuperscript{13} However, the number of Arabs participating in the democratic process since the formation of the state has dropped significantly, from a peak of 91% in 1955 and 77.6% in 1996.\textsuperscript{14}

8. Do Arabs serve in the IDF?

Military service in Israel is currently compulsory for Jews and Druze, with exemptions for ultra-orthodox Jewish students and most Arabs, although any citizen can volunteer for military or national service. Druze serve in either a Druze battalion or mixed infantry and Special Forces units, with several rising to the rank of Major General, one rank below the most senior position in the IDF. Thousands of Bedouin serve in the IDF, partially encouraged by financial and educational incentives. Although Christian and Muslim Arabs are not obligated to serve in IDF, there are 400 that choose to do so. An additional 3,000 volunteer for non-combat services\textsuperscript{15}, sometimes called ‘national’ or ‘civil’ service, for example with the Israeli police or prison service. By 2016 the Israeli government would like to double the number of Arabs that volunteer for non-combat positions.\textsuperscript{16} A study published by Haifa University’s Jewish-Arab Centre on 7 May 2012, found that more than 90% of Arabs who had participated in non-combat service said they were satisfied with their experiences and some 95.8% said they were proud to have done so.