

Civilian Service in Israel's Arab Society

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Introduction

The subject of civilian service by young Arabs in Israel has of late become a pressing issue. It assumed prominence on the public agenda when the Tal Law was canceled and public debate of the subject broadened, particularly the issue of equalizing the burden of compulsory service. While the issue assumes different points of focus when it engages the Jewish public and the Arab public, it is currently one of the main questions occupying the Arab population. It is also one of the topics reflecting the deep division between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel. The demand and expectation that the Arab public embrace the idea of sharing the burden has prompted a discussion of the rights and duties of Israel's Arab citizens, which in turn is sometimes used by right wing political groups to attack the entire Arab public.

In February 2007, the government decided to establish a state agency for civilian service, in which young Arabs would be able to volunteer in larger numbers than previously (there were about 300 volunteers at the time, mostly young women). In August 2007, the government approved the establishment of the Authority for National-Civic Service (NCS), which initially operated in the Ministry of Welfare, later moved to the Prime Minister's Office, and from there moved to the Ministry of Science and Technology. Since then, a growing number of young Arabs, especially young women, have applied for civilian service. According to National Civic-Service figures,¹ about 3,600 positions are now filled. Of the Arab volunteers, some 10 percent continue their service for a second year.

At the same time, the establishment of the Authority aroused skepticism and drew both distrustful responses, mainly among the public and political leadership, and expressions of harsh opposition to the idea. The High

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Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel expressed firm opposition to civilian service in the current format. An opposition campaign was conducted, primarily through field workers from Baladna (the Society for Arab Youth and Young People), the distribution of a short film and posters opposing the idea, and intense use of social media. Most of this activity took place in schools and homes. The public and political leadership stated that the idea of civilian service was nothing but a trick to enlist Arab youth into a framework of some kind of military service.

While expressing firm opposition to any idea of civilian service, this leadership is unwilling to conduct an open debate on the issue of civilian service among the Arab public. Ostensibly, this sharp opposition is surprising, because civilian service for Arabs is completely voluntary, takes place mostly within the Arab community, and contributes to both the community and the volunteers. Joining this opposition are similar sentiments of young Arabs belonging to and organized by civil non-profit organizations, which are conducting a shrill attack against civilian service and which at times extends to vitriolic attacks on the volunteers themselves.

Civilian Service

In Israel, civilian service is an alternative for those exempt from military service. By contributing to the health, welfare, educational, environmental, internal security, and rescue services, it is a way of realizing values of volunteerism, communal responsibility, and active citizenship. It is also a means for personal development for the volunteers participating in the program. The program consists of one year of voluntary service for those 17 years or older, and can be extended for another year, provided the volunteer is still under the age of 24. The volunteer can withdraw from the program at any time.

National service was originally designed in 1971 as a substitute service for girls from the religious sector, but at the recommendation of the Ben Shalom Committee it was expanded in 1997 under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare. The Tal Law, which was passed in 2002, expanded civilian service to include ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students, though the initiative itself was not implemented until 2008. An interim report by the Ivri Committee in 2005 recommended that the government allow national civilian service for all residents of Israel exempt from or not drafted for military service. The Committee proposed establishing a government framework to handle national civilian service in Israel in order to regulate the existing national

service and expand the framework to include young people from sectors that are not called for military service, among them the Arab population.² In 2007, following government approval of the Committee's conclusions, the National Service Administration was founded.³ Today, national service is run through seven non-profit organizations that in practice connect the volunteer to the place where s/he performs the volunteer work: the Volunteer Association; Bat-Ami; Shlomit; Aminadav; the National Service Unit in the Jerusalem Municipality; National Service; and the Society for Social Equality and National Service – the only one of the seven under Arab management.

Integration in the Framework of Civilian Service

According to Benziman and Mansour, the story of integration of Israeli Arabs in the framework of military service began as early as 1954, when the Israeli authorities issued a registration order that included the Arab population for service in the security forces. The order was received with some enthusiasm by many young Arabs, who reported for duty at the military induction centers. Once registered, however, nothing happened, and the Arab youths were not inducted.⁴ While there is no unequivocal answer as to why they were not inducted, the reason was likely linked to the conflict between Israel and most of the countries in the Middle East. The fact that they are part of the Palestinian people and the greater Arab world is by itself enough to define them as belonging to the state's potential enemies, despite their being Israeli citizens.

In practice, since Israel gained independence, most of the Arab population has not been called to national service, neither in the framework of the IDF nor in a civilian framework, and the Arabs have been excluded from all discussions or legislation on the subject. Although the Arab community – Muslim, Christian, and Bedouin – has not been drafted, compulsory service has been imposed on members of the Druze and Circassian communities, after the leaders of these groups expressed their wish in the 1950s to have their sons recruited by the IDF.⁵ Volunteer work by Israeli Arabs in civilian service began in 2007-2008 under the Authority for National-Civic Service.

According to the records of national-civilian service in Israel from 2013, since the NCS was founded, the number of volunteers for service among the Arab population has risen steadily. From 240 volunteers in 2005-2006 and 289 volunteers in 2006-2007, the number of volunteers doubled to 628 in 2007-2008 and reached approximately 3,600 in 2012-2013; to date

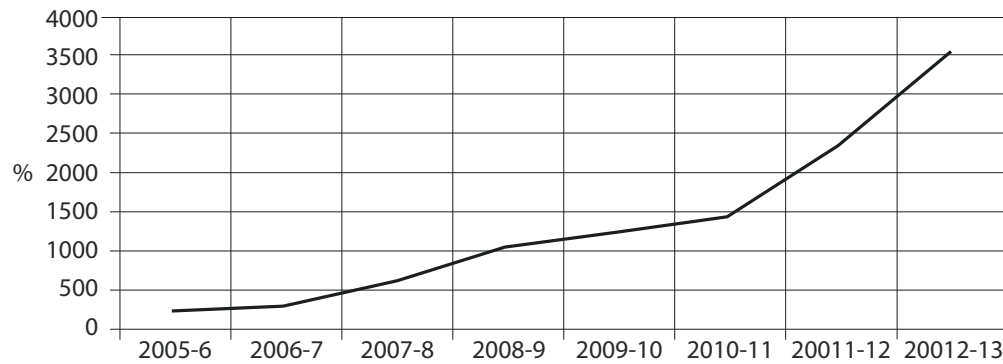


Figure 1. Number of Civilian Service Volunteers among the Arab Population

approximately 10,000 young Arabs have gone through the program (figure 1).⁶ According to an NCS report, the vast majority of the volunteers were girls (about 90 percent of all the volunteers), and most (about 75 percent) volunteer in Arab communities and villages close to their homes, while the rest worked outside their communities. Most of the volunteer activity (where three quarters of all the volunteers were placed) occurred in the north, and the rest was divided roughly equally between the central region and the south. Ten percent of the volunteers choose to continue for a second year.⁷

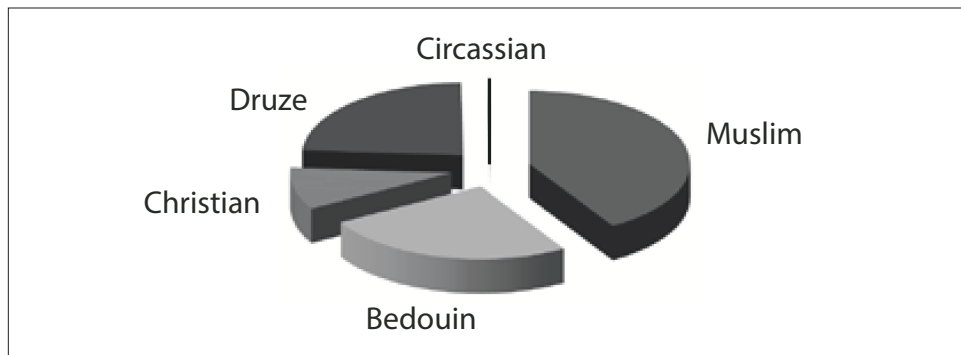


Figure 2. Volunteer Activity per Sector, 2014

Divided into sectors (figure 2), those currently performing civilian service include 1,091 Muslims (41 percent), 671 Bedouin (26 percent), 626 Druze (24 percent), 428 Christians (9 percent), and 5 Circassians (0.1 percent). These figures show the growing trend toward national civilian service activity among Bedouin, Druze, and Christians (the corresponding figures for these groups in 2012 were 19 percent, 17 percent, and 10 percent, respectively). The volunteers worked mainly in education (56 percent), community police and prevention of violence (17 percent), and health

(15 percent), with a smaller proportion in welfare positions (6 percent), senior citizen care (4 percent), law (1 percent), and other tasks.⁸ Eighty-five percent of those who completed their service were accepted in education programs or found jobs. According to a study by Smootha and Lechtman, the volunteers come from the middle two quarters of the Arab population regarding educational achievements and socioeconomic background, and therefore constitute only a partial cross section of the Arab population in the 17-24 age bracket. Almost all of the youth volunteering have a complete high school education (compared with only 70 percent of the general Arab population in this age bracket), and 80 percent of them have matriculation certificates (compared with only 29 percent of the general Arab population in the same age bracket). None of them are among the 40 percent of young Arabs in Israel who neither study nor work. Most of the Arab population is unaware of the particulars of civilian service, and only 35.8 percent of the Arab public in 2012 feel they had adequate information about it.⁹

Opposition to the Program

In 2012, following the publication of the Plesner Report, the issue of Israeli Arab social integration gathered momentum and reached the headlines. The Plesner Committee urged that Israeli Arabs be gradually integrated in civilian service, with the following targets: 3,000 volunteers by 2013, 3,700 by 2014, 4,500 by 2015, 5,200 by 2016, and 6,000 volunteers by 2017. The committee also recommended that the government instruct a special committee to carry out comprehensive staff work and examine the array of issues involved in applying the principle of “everybody serves” in the long term. The committee’s actions drew criticism from the political right, with the Yisrael Beitenu party stating, “The Committee’s decision favoring the Israeli-Arab public by not requiring them to carry out civil service goes against equality in the burden of service,” and from the political left, with the Arab parties saying, “You can’t talk about equal sharing of the burden when Arab citizens don’t enjoy equality.”¹⁰

Excluding the Arab leadership from decision making leaves it skeptical, and aggravates concern among them that the civilian service program is yet another plot by the government against the Arab population and a mechanism for making equal rights conditional.

Opposition among the Arab public and political leadership emerged due to the program’s link to the security establishment and the fact that the program was devised by the Ministry of Defense. The money granted

to those completing their service actually comes from the discharged soldiers fund (a NIS 3,200 discharge award and a NIS 6,700 deposit for each year of service).¹¹ Similarly, a volunteer who completed his period of service is referred to a center for career counseling operated by the Discharged Soldiers Fund in the Ministry of Defense. Whether or not this is the reason, some of the Arab population believes that the purpose of the program is to pave the way for including the Arab population in the armed forces and to strengthen the young volunteers' identification with the state, at the expense of their Arab national identity. In order to oppose the emerging initiative, the Council of Arab Mayors offered its own initiative to institutionalize volunteer activity among young Arabs through the Arab local authorities, and continued to express its opposition to the proposed national civilian service format.¹²

Opinion Surveys

An initial reference to civilian service appeared in an opinion survey conducted by the Carmel Institute for Social Studies in 1994.¹³ The survey found that between 75 percent (boys) and 81 percent (girls) of all young Arabs expressed a positive opinion on national civilian service, even though most of them supported only voluntary service. A survey by the Guttman Center for Surveys in 1995 yielded similar results.¹⁴

In 2001, the Carmel Institute conducted a comprehensive survey¹⁵ among young people aged 16-21, including Arabs, on the subject of national service. Although the survey was conducted shortly after the events of October 2000, it found that 34 percent of the Arabs surveyed said that if they had an opportunity to volunteer for national service, they would do so. Another survey conducted in 2007 by students at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya¹⁶ showed that 48 percent of all young Arabs were willing to serve in civilian service, even though one fourth of them said that such a decision would create a problem for them in their surroundings. The same year, a different survey conducted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation found that the same percentage of Arab respondents expressed support for civilian service for Arabs.¹⁷

Nevertheless, even though the campaign against civilian service has not been especially effective (only 19 percent stated that the campaign had influenced them against civilian service), the degree of support for the program is declining (from 78.2 percent in 2007 to 62.2 percent in 2011. The study by Smootha and Lechtman indicates that this phenomenon is

affected by the opposition broadcast by opinion makers, such as the Arab leadership and the Muslim religious leadership, and negative opinions of the program among close family members. In an opinion survey of Arab public figures, support in 2012 for volunteering for civilian service by young people in exchange for specific benefits was expressed by 78.2 percent of the public, 75.3 percent of young people, and 77.8 percent of public figures linked to the Jewish establishment, but only 7.8 percent of public figures not linked to the Jewish establishment.¹⁸

Nonetheless, a comparative look at the findings from the various surveys over the past two decades shows that the degree of willingness among young Arabs in Israel to consider participation in the civilian service framework has moved in a positive direction and fluctuated between 40 and 50 percent, with an additional 20 percent expressing general support for the program's activity. The relatively high prevalence of support in the Arab public over time indicates a stable basis of favorable opinion.

Position of the Arab Leadership

A position paper published in May 2012 by the Abraham Fund Initiatives argues that opposition of the Arab public to civilian service arises because the Arab leadership does not participate in the decision making as it relates to the program, and because of the "coercive" nature of the arrangements involving the Arab population. Representatives of the Arab public repeatedly emphasize that rights should come before obligations; they reject the view that the state's services to its citizens are subject to obligations on their part. In other words, discrimination against Israeli Arabs should be addressed first, and the gap created between Arab and Jewish society in daily life should be eliminated. Any arrangement that does not establish a direct connection between volunteer activity by young Arabs and the need to narrow these gaps will eventually fail.¹⁹

This dispute has created a situation in which, for example, a large number of heads of educational institutions in the Arab population have steadfastly refused to accept Arab volunteers from the civilian service program in the institutions they manage. The volunteers who have been accepted in the program sometimes find themselves without an institution willing to accept them as volunteers.²⁰ This is an absurd situation, because for years the Arab public has complained about a lack of personnel and paid positions in educational and welfare frameworks, but the volunteers are rejected. Excluding the Arab leadership from decision making leaves

it skeptical, and aggravates concern among them that the program is only another plot by the government against the Arab population and a mechanism for making equal rights conditional. This position causes them to regard the young men and women performing civilian service as a way for the state to bury the Arab population's demands, and even as a way of eliminating the promised paid positions for the various services in the Arab local authorities. Despite almost complete agreement with all of the program's goals (volunteerism and contribution to the community, youth development, and others), the way the program is portrayed has proven a weighty obstacle to its advancement.

Preparations by the NSC

In order to solve the problem of the image that has been created, NSC Director-General Sar-Shalom Jerbi and his previous ministerial superior, Daniel Herskowitz, proposed that the budget for grants to volunteers upon completion of their service be managed by the NSC itself, not by the Discharged Soldiers Fund. They also proposed establishing four regional offices for career counseling to those completing their service. The NSC even recommended additional benefits – which have since been enacted – including free public transportation during the period of service, a monthly allowance ranging from NIS 659 to NIS 780, plus travel expenses, and Hebrew lessons at state expense for volunteers who want them.²¹ Those proposing these measures emphasized that the civilian service would remain voluntary and not become compulsory, but they suggested rewarding local authorities who encourage this service.

Nevertheless, there are still problems for which the NSC has not yet found an optimal solution. A letter to Jerbi in 2010 raised the question of an insufficient number of positions for Arab volunteers and the unsuitability of some of the existing positions. It is no secret that some of the positions are considered more attractive for service than others; a similar situation can also be seen in placement in army units. Some of the positions have requirements, such as a matriculation certificate, command of Hebrew at a high level, security clearance, and a record free of criminal convictions. A situation sometimes arises in which there are not enough suitable candidates for the positions offered, which thereupon remain unfilled.²²

NSC figures show that placement and positions are eventually found for every volunteer, but this situation gives rise to additional questions: whether the current format is prepared to absorb every Arab youth who

wishes to volunteer, and whether the NSC framework itself acts as a selection factor. Smootha and Lechtman have shown that the lower percentages in Arab society are not well represented among NSC volunteers. It should therefore be considered whether there are structural factors that encourage this situation.

Assessment

Volunteers who have completed their service have not justified the fears of the Arab leadership concerning the program. According to Smootha and Lechtman, the Jewish establishment's vision that civilian service would have the "added value" of drawing Arabs and Jews closer is not exactly realized, but this is mainly because the volunteers in the program already have a positive orientation towards the state. Volunteering for civilian service does not cut them off from the Arab public; on the contrary, it strengthens their commitment to the community, because they perform their services within the community they came from.²³

A detailed examination of the differences in the rates of support among different population groups in 2011 revealed that beyond the support that the program receives from the Arab population that describes itself as Israeli Arab (rather than Palestinian) and Arabs who already have less critical views of the state and the Jewish public, even the support from the groups most critical of the state is far from negligible. For example, 51 percent of those who do not agree that Arab citizens should fulfill any kind of service duty whatsoever; 52.9 percent of those who believe that Israel is not democratic; and 54.3 percent of those who feel that they are alien and rejected in Israel nevertheless expressed support for civilian service. The rate of support for volunteering even rises to 78.5 percent when it is added that "instead of the state handling civilian service, the Arab leadership will handle the year of volunteering with the same benefits granted now."²⁴

In essence, the civilian service currently offered is an alternative mainly for young Arab women with a positive orientation toward the state wishing to engage in activity with social value before entering higher education, without breaking out of the framework of their lives in the Arab community. Yet despite the impressive growth in the number of volunteers, they still constitute an extremely small proportion of all Arab youth, and have not reached the critical mass necessary for a change in the status of the Arab minority in Israel.

A review of the overall picture highlights the following points:

- a. There is a consistent rising trend in the percentage of Arabs volunteering for civilian service.
- b. There is a wide gap between the views of young Arabs and those of the Arab political leadership.
- c. The main reasons for opposition by the Arab leadership to civilian service in its current format include: exclusion from the process of founding the NSC and the lack of involvement in decision making and management of this framework; fear of linkage between obligations and rights, even if the service is voluntary; the link between civilian service and the defense establishment; and rejection of the concept of service to the country, which they believe does not give them equal and inclusive citizenship
- d. Volunteer activity is important for both the community and for young Arabs.

Among the Jewish population, the opinion is gaining momentum that the possibility of increasing a sense of belonging to the country and being entitled to enjoy its benefits also requires a change in the concept of citizenship. The idea of civilian service is not designed merely to fulfill the need to heal divisions between the Arab and Jewish population and bring them closer to each other, but to obtain the positive benefits of volunteering in the community and the state.

In view of the ongoing debate since the NSC was founded, several different ideas and models have been proposed in recent years, including:

- a. The proposal by former Minister of Minorities Avishay Braverman to transfer civilian service to the Ministry of Welfare, which would sever it from the defense establishment, and to make the local Arab authorities responsible for its actual operation. This proposal aroused strong opposition from the NSC.
- b. The proposal by the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, which formulated a different autonomous model of self administration involving the establishment of a community volunteer activity authority under its control. This would ensure that volunteer activity would be exclusively in institutions for the Arab community. The state would, however, continue to finance the volunteer positions and grant benefits to volunteers. This model also arouses concern about the use of clan, ethnicity, and party political criteria in allocating positions and recruiting volunteers, at the expense of adherence to professional considerations.

- c. In June 2011, the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies also proposed a model similar to the autonomous model of the leaders of the Arab local authorities, involving the reconstitution of the civilian service framework for Arabs in cooperation with representatives of the Arab public. This proposal was part of a proposed comprehensive reform in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel.²⁵

In conclusion, the current civilian service format for the Arab population indicates a close connection between civilian service and the defense establishment, and the continued exclusion of the Arab leadership from this venture, despite its practical contribution to the Arab community itself. Ninety percent of the current volunteers are female, a fact that contributes to their integration into higher education and the labor market, and will help improve their personal, social, and economic situation.

In the past, models, initiatives, and alternatives were proposed, whether by government agencies or various civilian groups, based on putting volunteer service in a civilian framework and disassociating it from the defense establishment. It is important to find new channels for integrating and involving the Arab public that will assuage its concerns, and aim at a structure that will increase Arab involvement in decision making on the one hand and facilitate a space for continued volunteering in the community on the other. Creation of a shared platform for government agencies and the Arab public should in itself generate a more comfortable atmosphere, reduce the level of suspicion, and enhance cooperation, while eventually expanding the idea of volunteerism that is beneficial to all. It therefore appears that at this stage, the time is not ripe for making civilian service compulsory; it should be left as a voluntary service.

The debate about civilian service for the Arab public will continue to engage both the Jewish and Arab populations in the coming years. This debate is related to the future of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, and will have consequences for those relations. Both sides should strive to find ways to reinforce the feeling of belonging and integration among Arab citizens, without harming their identification with their culture and community.

Notes

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