

# The Islamic State and Israel's Arab Population: The Scope of the Challenge and Ways to Respond

Mohammed Abo Nasra

The Islamic State (IS) embodies a sociopolitical phenomenon that reverberates throughout the Arab world and the world at large. This essay explores how Arab citizens of Israel view the Islamic State, and to what extent this view is influenced by political, civic, and personal factors. The study also examines the positions of Arab citizens on the global war against the Islamic State, the status of the organization in the Muslim world, the chances of its survival, and its effect on Israel's national security.

Discourse about the positions of Israel's Arab citizens on various matters began with the founding of the state. Since the nation's birth, the Jewish majority and the establishment have viewed the Arab sector as a population whose loyalty to the state is questionable and as such is liable to cooperate with hostile elements and be involved in actions undermining state security.<sup>1</sup> The persistent and fundamental suspicion of Arabs has its roots in some deep-seated factors: first is the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Arab world in general, and the Palestinian people in particular. Second is the basic identification of the Arab population in Israel with the Palestinian people and its demands for a nation state.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, over the years an attitude to the Arab population took hold regarding security matters that shaped the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. This attitude had a profound effect on the socioeconomic and political status of the Arab citizens and their integration into Jewish society.<sup>3</sup> Overall, most Israeli Jews and Arabs have only distant relations, characterized by distrust and alienation, leading to a deep divide.<sup>4</sup>

Mohammed Abo Nasra is a Neubauer research associate at INSS. This essay was written within the framework of the Arabs in Israel Research Program at INSS, which is supported by the Neubauer Foundation of Philadelphia.

Against the background of this ongoing historical reality, it is possible to examine the effect of developments that have occurred since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the emergence of new terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State. As perceived in Israel, the danger of these elements, combined with the wave of terrorism that began in late September 2015, raised new questions about the Arab population in the context of security and threatened once again to stretch the sensitive fabric of relations between the two populations.

Very few studies have examined the status of the Islamic State in Israel's Arab society. Mandelbaum and Schweitzer focused on the few Arab citizens of Israel who joined IS, and showed that these 24 individuals had no common personal profile.<sup>5</sup> This essay seeks to go further and examine the positions of Israel's Arab population on the Islamic State and the factors affecting these positions.

### **Support for the Islamic State in the Arab Population**

Founded in 2014, the Islamic State is a religious Sunni terrorist organization that broke away from al-Qaeda in Iraq and emerged out of the region's political instability, its lack of security, and the collapse of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes. The rise of the organization is a direct outcome of regional and international political factors, led by the political vacuum in the Arab states, the failure of the traditional Islamic movements to fill that vacuum, the lack of an action strategy by the West and the reluctance of Western nations to take steps to deal with the new reality, and the inability of moderate opposition organizations to cooperate and formulate a joint vision.<sup>6</sup> The religious character of the organization and its call to establish an Islamic religious state as the foundation of a caliphate attracted many believers in Salafist jihad from all over the world. In this essay, "support for the Islamic State" includes many forms of support, from fighting in the organization's ranks to recruitment of new recruits and financial support for them, ideological identification with the organization, dissemination of organizational propaganda, and contact with organization members.

The connection between individual members of Israel's Arab population and the Islamic State began with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the attack on the Assad regime. The exact number of Arab citizens who have left Israel to fight for the organization is unknown, and estimates are based on information issued by the defense establishment. According to a 2015 Israel Security Agency report, 32 Arab citizens have joined the Islamic State,

seven of whom were killed in fighting. In addition, since the beginning of 2015, 41 Arab citizens were arrested and interrogated about their support for IS. Among these were three young residents of Yafi'a, who established an Islamic State cell in order to carry out attacks in Israel. They bought weapons, trained with firearms, and planned to fire on IDF bases, throw Molotov cocktails at police vehicles, and attack Arab businesses selling alcohol. Other Islamic State supporters were reported to be organizing in the Negev: six residents of Hura, including four teachers, were involved in dissemination of organizational ideology, and among the six were those who intended to leave Israel to fight for the Islamic State in Syria.

Other support for the Islamic State includes financing volunteers' departure to Syria;<sup>7</sup> the dissemination of Islamic State propaganda (two indictments were handed down in 2015 against Arab citizens in this context); and support for the organization on social media (which in August 2015 resulted in indictments against 14 Arab citizens).<sup>8</sup> Only in a few isolated cases has support for Islamic State ideology crossed the line to plans and/or participation in terrorist attacks against Israeli security targets – and only a small fraction of those who were investigated have actually been indicted in the context of supporting IS.

It is impossible to draw a uniform profile of Islamic State supporters from Arab society based on the few cases that have come to light. Volunteers range in age from 19 to 30, and they come from different types of Arab population centers. The number of women is particularly low (in August 2015, Iman Kanajo was arrested en route to joining IS). Some of the supporters are educated; some are teachers, and at least one is an attorney (Adnan Said al-Addin, who recruited young people and saw to their training to carry out attacks in Israel against Jews and members of the Druze community).<sup>9</sup>

### **Attitudes toward the Islamic State among Israel's Arab Citizens**

Surveys on the Arab population's attitude toward the Islamic State have shown varied results, though all have demonstrated decisive opposition to the organization. The Ahva College survey of 2015<sup>10</sup> revealed that 86 percent of Arabs in Israel oppose the Islamic State and feel that it is detrimental to Islam's image; 82 percent view it as a radical terrorist organization, and as Arabs, they are ashamed of it. Nonetheless, the survey noted that many in the Jewish population think that at least 30 percent of Arabs in Israel identify with IS. In a different survey, by the Pew Institute,<sup>11</sup> 91 percent of

Israel's Arab public reported a negative attitude toward the Islamic State, and only 4 percent had a positive opinion toward it.

These surveys, however, provide far from a full picture. They shed no light on the attitude of Arab civilian or religious leaders to the Islamic State, and do not relate to factors that affect the attitudes surveyed. This section will focus on these issues, based on the 2015 Arab-Jewish index<sup>12</sup> and the Peace Index survey compiled by the Israel Democracy Institute. The analysis of the Jewish-Arab relations index is based on the responses of 550 Arabs; that of the Peace Index is based on the responses of the 140 Muslim Arabs who participated in that survey. The analysis of the attitudes of Arab civic and religious leaders is based on articles and interviews in the media. For a list of the research's variables, the questions measuring each of the variables, and the sources of the data, see the Appendix.

An analysis of the findings shows that 84 percent of Muslim Arabs oppose the Islamic State and are ashamed of what they view as a terrorist organization. This is a significant, definitive statistic that clearly reflects reservations if not outright condemnation among Israeli Arabs of the phenomenon known as the Islamic State. Several factors affect those who do identify with IS.

*Political/identity factors:* Of those who characterize themselves as Islamic State supporters, 42 percent identify as Arab or Palestinian. In no way do they consider being Israeli as part of their identity; 81 percent view Palestinian and/or Muslim as the key element in their identity. Moreover, some 69 percent are dissatisfied or insufficiently satisfied with being Israeli citizens. Fifty percent support the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement,<sup>13</sup> and in the recent Knesset election, 91 percent voted for the Joint List. The significance of the data is twofold: one, the negligible minority of those who support or identify with the Islamic State deny their Israeli identity from the outset, in contrast to the overwhelming majority (70 percent<sup>14</sup>) of Arabs in Israel who see themselves (also) as Israeli; and two, there is an ideological connection between those who identify with the Islamic State and those who identify with the more extreme component of the Islamic Movement. One cannot, of course, conclude on this basis that the supporters of the Islamic Movement also identify with the Islamic State, and indeed, the contrary seems to be the case.

*Civic factors:* Of Islamic State supporters, 76 percent feel that the government treats Arabs as hostile citizens unworthy of equality or as second-class citizens. Forty-three percent have personally been subjected

to threats, humiliation, or beatings by Jews, 48 percent support illegal demonstrations, and 40 percent support the use of violence. These figures reflect the trend of those who support and identify with the Islamic State – of whom about one third are academics – expressing strong anti-Israel rhetoric and ascribing responsibility for their support of IS to the government and its discriminatory policies.

Table 1 refers to the attitudes of Israeli Muslims toward the Islamic State. The findings relate to the rate of Muslims who agreed with each one of the questions generally and with a breakdown according to three variables: religiosity, endorsement of the Joint List, and academic education. The table shows that 98 percent of Muslim Arabs in Israel feel that the majority of Muslims in the world do not support IS. Of these, 50 percent are religious; 28 percent voted for the Joint List in the last Israeli parliamentary election; and 39 percent have an academic education. In addition:

- a. Just over one half of Muslim Arabs (55.4 percent) believe that IS does not represent a real threat to Israeli national security. Of these, 52 percent are religious; 81 percent voted for the Joint List; and 32 percent have an academic education.
- b. Some 25 percent of Israel's Muslim Arab citizens feel that the chances that the Western and Arab forces fighting against IS will succeed in dismantling the organization in the foreseeable future are slim. Of these, 41 percent are religious; 25 percent voted for the Joint List in the last Israeli parliamentary election; and 53 percent have an academic education.
- c. Some 32 percent of Israel's Muslim Arab citizens feel that even if IS is defeated, the radical Islamic ideology it represents will not be weakened. Of these, 38 percent are religious; 7 percent voted for the Joint List in the last Israeli parliamentary election; and 47 percent have an academic education.
- d. Some 64 percent of Israel's Muslim Arab citizens feel that the Obama administration and the American public are insufficiently determined to eliminate the Islamic State. Of these, 41 percent are religious; 88 percent voted for the Joint List in the last Israeli parliamentary election; and 50 percent have an academic education.
- e. Within the Muslim Arab public in Israel, there is broad consensus (64 percent) that Islamic State members are determined to continue fighting until they achieve victory. Of these, 40 percent are religious; 83 percent

voted for the Joint List in the last Israeli parliamentary election; and 10 percent have an academic education.

**Table 1.** Positions on the Islamic State among Muslim Arabs in Israel (percent)

	Total	Religious	Voted for the Joint List	Have academic education
Muslims around the world do not support IS	98.0	50.0	28.0	39.0
IS does not represent a real threat to Israeli national security	55.4	52.0	81.0	32.0
Western and Arab forces fighting IS will succeed in dismantling the organization in the foreseeable future	25.0	40.0	25.0	53.0
If IS is beaten and conquered, the radical Islam it represents will not be weakened	32.0	38.0	7.0	47.0
The Obama administration and the American public are insufficiently determined to eliminate IS	64.0	41.0	88.0	50.0
IS members are determined to continue fighting until victory is achieved	64.0	40.0	83.0	10.0

### Attitudes among Arab Civic and Religious Leaders in Israel toward the Islamic State

Like the civilian population, Arab civic and religious leaders have come out strongly against the Islamic State and its criminal activities. Mazen Ghanaem, the head of the Arab Local Government Council and the mayor of Sakhnin, called the Islamic State a murderous terrorist organization that flies in the face of the values of Islam: "We are opposed to Arab citizens joining organizations such as ISIS. Our religion differs from their criminal actions."<sup>15</sup> MK Ahmad Tibi also rejected the Islamic State, stating it is not a Muslim organization, and declared that the Muslim world must fight IS and do everything in its power to stop the organization's continued assaults on the world.<sup>16</sup> Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint List, likewise condemned IS murders and attacks: in his words, members of the Islamic State "are the enemies of all humanity, and the Arab world must shun

them and lead to the regional states' victory for the sake of a just peace and democracy."<sup>17</sup> Even Raed Salah, leader of the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement, has stated that IS actions are not in keeping with Islam, and that the organization's objective is to damage the image of Islam and Muslims. Salah further claimed that IS threatens the region, especially the Gaza Strip, and said that the entrance of organizational members to the Gaza Strip would lead to civil war.<sup>18</sup> Yet along with these clear sentiments, Salah has also expressed his opposition to the war waged on the organization by the United States and the Arab coalition, claiming it could divide and destroy Syria and Iraq and rip apart the Arab and Muslim world.<sup>19</sup>

A large majority of religious figures have similarly expressed their opposition to the Islamic State and its activity. One of the sheikhs who participated in a conference of the Islamic Movement said: "ISIS is destroying Islam's reputation. They are committing acts of cruelty opposed to the Muslim faith. If they continue down that road and the United States does not destroy it, I am sure than many Arab citizens of Israel will cross into Syria and be prepared to sacrifice themselves to fight against ISIS."<sup>20</sup>

### **Between a National and a Civic Identity**

Support by Israel's Arab citizens for the Islamic State and their enlistment in the organization's ranks are still marginal. Overall, there is a broad rejection of IS, its policies, and its actions, as well as a deep-seated fear of it. The Arab population and its political and religious leadership, regardless of stream or political party affiliation, speak out against explicitly IS. A high percentage of Israel's Arab citizens feel that the Islamic State does not enjoy wide support in the Muslim world, and that the United States is insufficiently determined to fight IS until it is vanquished, whereas the organization's members are unwavering in their determination to fight until victory is achieved. By contrast, Arab citizens differ in their opinion of the threat the Islamic State poses to Israel's national security and the ability of the Western and Arab forces fighting IS to deal it a mortal blow any time soon.

If, as the surveys say, some 16 percent of Israel's Arab citizens do not oppose the Islamic State, this represents a not inconsiderable potential threat to both Israel's national security and the Arab population in Israel. Even if there is a distinction between passively identifying with the Islamic State and actively aiding and abetting terrorist acts against both Jews and Arabs, it is obvious that the challenge requires preparation, surveillance,

exposure, and enforcement against those breaking the law. Given that support for terrorist organizations is usually considered correlated with risk of terrorist activity, support for IS – including if limited in scope – represents a certain danger, even if indirect.

Results of the surveys allow the construction of a social profile of Islamic State supporters. They tend to be Arab citizens who embrace an Arab/Palestinian identity while rejecting identification as Israelis; claim to have experienced discrimination as Arabs; feel threatened or have experienced threats and/or humiliation at the hands of Jews; are dissatisfied with their lives in Israel; support the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement; and support illegal demonstrations and/or the use of force. This profile relates to two major identity elements: the national and the civic.<sup>21</sup> The civic element refers to the citizenship of Israel's Arabs, including their connection to the state, personal rights, status, political integration, and more. A strong civic identity is manifested in observance of state laws, participation in local and parliamentary elections, socioeconomic assimilation, and so forth. By contrast, the national element refers to the Arab citizens' sense of belonging to the greater Arab world and especially the Palestinian people. Here, the dissimilarity from Israelis and Israeli-hood comes to the fore; one's identity turns on the national axis, particularly in a state that is increasingly stressing its Jewish identity, creating an inherent conflict that affects members of Israel's Arab minority.

This internal conflict could harbor the seeds of destruction, but it is possible to empower the civic and personal elements and thereby offset the destructive potential of the national element. The relative weight of the various elements of identity of Arab citizens is to a great extent affected by their relationship with the state, Jewish society, and their status in Israeli society. A policy of discrimination and alienation – not to mention systemic racism and the exclusion of the Arab population – strengthen, or are liable to strengthen, the national element at the expense of the civic, and vice versa: strengthening the civic element and planting processes of growth, empowerment, and success strengthen the civic element at the expense of the national one.

Hence, the limited support for IS is decidedly informed by the social, economic, and political reality of Arabs in Israel and their relations with the Jewish population. One can demonstrate the complexity of the position of Arab society by the fact that the rate of support for the Islamic State among Israel's Arabs (16 percent) is higher than that in Arab states such as

Jordan (3 percent) and Lebanon (0 percent), or the Palestinian Authority (6 percent).<sup>22</sup> This is not just theoretically significant. A reality of persistent discrimination in the fundamental components of everyday life, seen by many as being intentional, damages the delicate fabric of relations between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority and the chances for progress toward integration and stability. A prominent example is the absence of law enforcement in Arab towns and cities. Rising violence and crime in Arab society damages not only the Arab population but also public order and national security. The distance between crime and terrorism is not all that great.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, to prevent the growth of support for terrorist organizations in general and the Islamic State in particular, Israel must act resolutely to strengthen the civic component in the identity of its Arab population at the expense of the existing national element. This is a shared interest of both the Arab minority and the Jewish majority, and it is the government's job to promote and realize this shared interest. Recently, there have been some encouraging signs that the government understands the reality and the risks, and the way to reduce these risks. Socioeconomic integration is now a recognized, explicitly stated government policy. The only way to realize it is by recognizing discrimination and gaps, and working strenuously to close them fast. In the absence of rapid, unequivocal progress in the December 2015 five-year plan for the Arab sector, a vacuum will open that could well be filled by various jihadist organizations, including the Islamic State. At the same time, the political and religious leadership of the Arab population must embark on a campaign to strengthen integration and its realization in the near future. Those leaders, too, play a crucial role in this critical process.

Thus far, the Islamic State has not made serious inroads into the hearts and minds of the Arab public in Israel. At the same time, the extent to which the organization views such "progress" as a key part of its war against Israel – which itself does not seem to constitute a core objective – is unclear. The noted slowdown of the Islamic State's expansion has certainly not moved the organization to take a greater interest in the Israeli arena. Still, as an organization that greatly relies on creating an atmosphere that cultivates popular support and encouraging terrorism against all of its enemies' weaknesses, Israel too might be a theoretical base of support for the organization, with that support translated into murderous action. Alongside foiling these efforts, a task of primary importance for the country's

security establishment, it is critical to reduce the potential for the penetration of a hostile, aggressive mood on the part of those identifying with IS and its ilk. The path to this crucial goal runs through integration of the Arab minority into Israeli society.

This study emphasizes the Arab population's complex, problematic status in Israeli society and its impact on the security stances within the sector. However, that the study is based on a social survey means that the findings should be approached with some reservations. The reliability of outcomes of surveys dealing with security questions, such as support for the Islamic State – where respondents might be loath to admit their allegiance lest they get in trouble with the law and thus are apt to hide their true sympathies – might be compromised. It is therefore important that future studies differentiate among different levels of support for the Islamic State: sympathy, recruitment of other supporters, and potential for participating in an action connected to the organization.

### Appendix: Variables, Questions, and Data Sources

Variable	Question	Source
Support for IS	IS is a radical terrorist organization and I am ashamed of it	2015 Jewish-Arab Relations Index
Arab world's support for IS	In your opinion, do the majority of Muslims in the world support or do not support the actions of IS?	Peace Index
The forces fighting IS in the West and Arab world will succeed in toppling it	In your opinion, what are the chances that the forces fighting IS (United States, Western Europe, and parts of the Arab world) will manage to topple IS in the near future?	Peace Index
The collapse of IS will weaken radical Islam	If IS is beaten and collapses, in your opinion will the radical Islam it represents be severely weakened?	Peace Index
US determination in fighting IS	In your opinion, are the US administration and the American people sufficiently or insufficiently determined to fight IS until it is toppled?	Peace Index
IS determination in fighting until victory	In your opinion, to what extent are IS members sufficiently or insufficiently determined to continue fighting until victory is achieved?	Peace Index
The danger IS represents to Israel	In your opinion, does IS currently represent or not represent an existential danger to Israel?	Peace Index

## Notes

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