

# **Relations between the Jewish Majority and the Arab Minority: Progress toward Integration?**

Ephraim Lavie

After years of social and cultural interactions, the Arab-Palestinian community in Israel has come a long way in adapting to life with the Jewish majority. The sector has undergone processes linking it inextricably to the State of Israel in many aspects of life, and the Jewish majority is the main reference group for them.<sup>1</sup> The trend toward integrating Arabs into Israeli society and the Israeli economy continues, despite the crises that often affect the relationship between the two groups for social and economic or national and religious reasons – for example, the IDF's operations in the Gaza Strip in recent years or the violent confrontation that began in September 2015 over the status quo on the Temple Mount. This essay analyzes the trend in an attempt to understand its robustness.

There is no consensus among Arabs on how they wish to define their status in Israel. Nonetheless, there is broad agreement that they should not give up Israeli citizenship in exchange for some other alternative. Israeli citizenship appears to provide them with hope and with possibilities that are preferable to any other existing model, such as annexation to a future Palestinian state or the Religious Islamic Movement's idea of establishing an Islamic state.

---

This article was prepared within the framework of the INSS Program on the Arabs in Israel.

Although 65 percent of Arabs in Israel are still employed in manual labor such as construction, agriculture, and other non-professional jobs,<sup>2</sup> Arabs are integrated into the Israeli job market in many branches of commerce, education, and health services. While their numbers in the public sector are still low, more and more Arabs are employed in government ministries, and businesses are gradually beginning to realize the benefits of investing in Arab society.<sup>3</sup> Recent years have seen increasing numbers of Arab engineers recruited by the Israeli hi-tech industry – Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Circassian. The number of young Arabs choosing to study engineering and science has also increased consistently, and a wave of technology entrepreneurship among the Arab population has resulted in several startups.<sup>4</sup>

Arab men and women are involved in culture, theater, movies, television, and sports, sometimes representing Israel in these and other fields internationally, and in recent years, the intercultural dialogue through the arts has expanded.<sup>5</sup> This relates to all forms of joint creativity in the theater, the plastic arts, film-making, music, and dance. These activities serve as agents of social and political change and promote reconciliation, dialogue, and coexistence between Arabs and Jews, which allows the ability to imagine a future of peace.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, the joint creative processes in binational theater productions allow for conditions of equality between Arabs and Jews and provide creative artists and actors with public legitimacy to express different approaches and controversial points of view. These include Arab narratives and symbols not commonly found in Israeli political and social discourse, and they enable Arabs to face the dilemmas involved in their integration into Israeli society and the decision to link their fate with that of the country.<sup>7</sup>

In sports, there are a growing number of Arab athletes joining Israeli soccer teams, and more Jews play for Arab teams. The Bnei Sakhnin soccer club, which has made Jewish-Arab coexistence its credo, has become a symbol of integration and legitimacy for Arabs in Israeli sports. Arab athletes on the Israel national soccer team represent Israel abroad.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Israeli media devotes extensive coverage to Arab soccer teams and players thanks to their growing prominence and professional success. The media tends to have a positive attitude toward the integration of Arabs into sports, stressing its inherent advantages and demonstrating their rejection of racism.

It recognizes, and hence affirms, that violence and chauvinistic politics threaten a sports culture that promotes coexistence.<sup>9</sup>

In Israel, proximity and everyday encounters between Jews and Arabs play a decisive role in the structuring of intercommunal social relations, even beyond that played by state apparatuses. Various types of Jewish-Arab cooperation take place in public spaces where the two groups encounter each other, such as shopping malls and markets, national parks, and beaches. Such places sometimes have features that neutralize national identities, so that encounters create a routine involving work and commercial relations and a social dynamic that humanizes the other.<sup>10</sup> Experience shows that during exceptional times, such as wars or outbreaks of violent conflict, such activities slow down. However, this does not lead to a rift, and economic considerations such as work, making a living, and consumption tip the scales. When the exceptional event ends, there is a rapid return to normalcy.

In many cases, the integration of Arabs into different fields of work has created a situation in which professional values become norms of conduct dictating Arab-Jewish relations. Trust is built between Arabs and Jews working together when they cooperate and help one another in their jobs, without regard to differences of religion or nationality. This is known to occur particularly in Israeli hospitals, where daily reality serves as a model for a society in which there are not only national and religious rifts and tensions, but also mechanisms promoting cohesion and unity.

As for integrating young Arabs into national service, progress has been made in the last decade, despite the Arab leadership's opposition because of the initiative's connection to security. At present, national-civic service is arranged through seven NGOs that connect volunteers with appropriate programs.<sup>11</sup> According to national service records from 2013, since the inception of the Authority for National-Civic Service there has been a steady increase in the number of volunteers: 240 in 2005-2006; 289 in 2006-2007; 628 in 2007-2008; and about 3,600 in 2012-2013. At present there are some 10,000 young Arab graduates of the program. According to figures from the authority, some 90 percent are women, and some 75 percent volunteer in Arab towns and villages close to their homes. Three-quarters of all volunteers are placed in the north, with the rest split fairly evenly between the center

of the country and the south. Ten percent of the volunteers opt for a second year of national service.<sup>12</sup>

University of Haifa sociologist Sammy Smooha concludes that according to data from indexes relating to Jewish-Arab relations, there is a solid foundation for Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel. As such, most Arabs believe in living together, accept the state within the Green Line as the place where the relationship will be played out, feel that Israel is a good place to live, are committed to democracy as the mechanism for regulating their relations with the state, and agree that civil equality is the foundation for coexistence and an important objective of the state. According to Prof. Smooha, this reality refutes the commonplace public perception and the opinion of most policymakers and university researchers that Israel's Arabs are undergoing radicalization and are on a collision course with the Jews and the state.<sup>13</sup>

Predictably, most Arabs in Israel do not identify with the state and its Jewish symbols – official holidays, the national anthem, the flag, the Star of David. At the same time, most are satisfied with being citizens of the state and with their living conditions in general. They conduct social and political struggles to improve their status and promote their rights in the same way as other citizens, using democratic tools. This is the primary catalyst for their political and social activity; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is only a secondary motive, and Israel's Arab citizens usually limit themselves to expressions of solidarity with their brethren. This conclusion is supported by the 2015 Alienation Index Survey, which showed a dramatic increase in the percentage of Arabs in Israel who identify with the Israeli flag (55 percent compared to 37 percent in 2014) and a decrease in the percentage who identify with the Palestinian flag, even among Muslims, for whom the figure dropped from 34 percent in 2014 to only 8 percent in 2015.<sup>14</sup>

The fact, then, is that Arabs in Israel have avoided playing an active role in the Palestinian national struggle. During the first and second intifadas, while they expressed sympathy and participated in public relations activities and propaganda, they did not play an active violent role. This has considerable importance in an assessment of their connection to the state and their sense of belonging. Furthermore, patterns of protest by Arab citizens of Israel during violent flare-ups in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent years and in the context of their socioeconomic status have been non-violent.

This is particularly striking given that Arab society possesses collective willpower and the potential for mass popular protests, particularly among young people, who have the ability to run decentralized protests, allowing different groups from various movements and locations to cooperate. This is done through use of the internet and social media, which enable them to bridge distances and unite different population groups around specific issues and causes. Arab civil society organizations use the internet in much the same way.

These patterns of protest undermine the authority of the Arab political parties and challenge traditional institutions such as the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee and the National Committee of Heads of Arab Local Councils. Such organizations tend to oppose protests and disturbances, which they fear will disrupt daily life and damage economic interests. Furthermore, the use of new media undermines the media of the established leadership, making it possible to enlist public opinion and lead the public in a way that seems, at least on the face of it, to be more democratic and equal. This protest model has been in evidence on various occasions in recent years. One example is the demonstrations against the Prawer Plan in late 2013, when groups of young people without a party affiliation organized protests and recruited other young people from around the country. Another example is the internet petitions circulated by civil society organizations during Operation Protective Edge and the open letters they issued calling for an end to the war, condemning the killing of civilians, and appealing to the UN. A third example is the protests throughout October 2015 in response to the violent confrontations sparked by rumors of a change in the Temple Mount status quo.

According to Prof. Amal Jamal, a political scientist at Tel Aviv University, although protest patterns among Arabs in Israel were influenced by the Arab Spring, their enthusiasm is dampened by a fear of losing the resources and standard of living they have managed to acquire despite the state's discriminatory policies. Jamal notes that they have worked hard to survive in recent decades, meaning that they are especially unwilling to jeopardize their achievements by deviating from the norms of protest for an unclear future and political horizon at a time when the Arab world around them is collapsing.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the practical possibility of recruiting large numbers of people for popular protests exists, whether because they oppose the occupation and identify with the population in the West Bank, or because of religious motivations (such as the al-Aqsa issue) or a sense of discrimination by the state. Nonetheless, compared to the events of October 2000, the protests of recent years have been controlled. In most cases the police have shown restraint, as have the protesters; this was also true during the October 2015 protests over the status quo on the Temple Mount. At that time, local and national Arab leaders expressed solidarity with their brethren but acted responsibly and judiciously, calling for a one-day national strike and holding a major rally in Sakhnin, while Joint List Knesset members postponed their visit to the Temple Mount to avoid inflaming passions. The protests by the Arab community appear to reflect situational radicalization.

It is clear that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will lift a weight from the shoulders of Arabs in Israel. Allegations that they sympathize with and support the PLO and the Palestinian leadership hinder their chances of advancement in Israeli society because they are seen as identifying with the enemy. Their solidarity with their fellow Arabs in East Jerusalem and the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, which is manifested at times in demonstrations, protests, and anti-Israel statements on the conflict, hinders their ability to negotiate with the establishment and Jewish society to advance their status.

In general, the state's actions to advance Israeli Arabs' status and integrate them economically have been implemented slowly, and not as part of an overall design to promote fundamental, comprehensive civil equality. Furthermore, against the backdrop of their ongoing struggle for equality, initiatives for cultural and political exclusion of Arabs have multiplied. Demands to weaken the position of Arabs and limit their civil rights have grown more strident among Israeli Jews. This has been manifested, *inter alia*, in new legislation designed to strengthen and stress the Jewishness of the state and has caused increasing hatred and racism against Arabs. As a result, despite the programs formulated and implemented in the past decade and the resources invested, and despite the equality of Arabs before the law, the Arab community is still excluded and faces discrimination in various ways.



This situation causes a dilemma for Arabs concerning their future and their status in Israel. On the one hand, they have adapted to the Jewish majority after extended social and cultural experience, and are clearly willing to become integrated within the country's social and economic life. On the other hand, they seek to ensure that they will attain full civil equality and that integration will not mean a loss of cultural, ethnic, or national identity.

In conclusion, despite the ongoing national conflict with its ideological and religious baggage and enmity, and despite the lack of full civil equality, relationships between Arabs and Jews are increasing in many areas, and both are leading their daily lives in a common space. These connections are based on mutual interests with economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological aspects, which in turn affect the consciousness of both societies, contributing to mutual recognition and stabilizing relations. This is evident from public opinion polls taken over the years. There is concern that Jewish-Arab relations in Israel could be damaged by several developments: the wave of Palestinian terrorism that started in the fall of 2015, in which a small number of Israeli Arabs participated to show their solidarity; reports of Israeli Arab citizens joining the Islamic State; and the Jewish public's response to these developments. But integration in recent years has become strong, and this crisis most likely will be overcome. Israel's recognition of the centrality of the Arabs' adaptation and integration since the establishment of the state, and the formulation of a long-term policy toward the community, could achieve two goals. One is to make a positive contribution to the Arabs' sense of belonging, of being citizens with full rights and responsibilities, and the other is to deepen assimilation within the society and the economy, without damaging their cultural and communal identity.

## Notes

- 1 Sammy Smooha, *Still Playing by the Rules: Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel 2012* (Jerusalem: University of Haifa and the Israeli Democracy Institute, 2013), pp. 22-23.
- 2 See Meirav Arlosoroff, "Arabs Employed, but only in Agriculture and Construction," *Haaretz*, April 13, 2010.
- 3 See Hemi Peres, "Affirmative Entrepreneurship," *Globes*, April 19, 2010; Kobi Huberman, "The Economic Integration Engine as Part of a New Policy Proposal to Develop Engines for Integrating Arab Citizens in Israel," in *Economic Benefits*

- of Social Inclusion and Arab-Jewish Equality*, ed. Uri Gofer (Abraham Fund Initiatives, September 2008), pp. 25-43.
- 4 See the current breakdown in *Ma'antak*, a special supplement to promote the employment of Arabs in the hi-tech sector, *Haaretz* Commercial Department, September 2015.
- 5 See information on joint Jewish-Arab film projects, such as *The Boys of Jisr*, a film depicting life in the village of Jisr a-Zarka, <http://arts.tau.ac.il/news/Jisrboys>. See also the work of artists Osnat Bar-Or and Manar Zoabi, which address loaded and controversial topics in Jewish-Arab relations through visual means to engender public discussion and effect social change. "A New Course at the University of Haifa: An Interview with Osnat Bar-Or and Manar Zoabi," *Mabat: Awareness in a Multicultural Society*, <http://goo.gl/qnbddR>.
- 6 From a study by Lee Perlman on the subject, "Acting Side by Side on the Israeli Stage: Jewish-Palestinian Theatre Collaboration in Israel from 2000-2010" (Ph.D. dissertation abstract, Tel Aviv University, November 2011). The study deals with the social, cultural, and political implications of joint theater productions by Jews and Arabs since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada and the events of October 2000.
- 7 According to Prof. Dan Orian's view that the theater is "a public stage representing reality and playing a role in its shaping," such productions contribute to the creation of a multiracial society. *Ibid*.
- 8 Chen Kertcher, *Between Integration and Exclusion: The Reflection of Arabs in the Hebrew-Language Sports Media during Peacetime and Security Crises* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2015).
- 9 *Ibid*. See also Muhammad Hasdiya, "The History of Arab Players," *People in Israel: Guide to Israeli Society*, Shmuel Ne'eman Institute, October 15, 2013, <http://www.peopleil.org/details.aspx?itemID=30301>; Yoram Meltzer, "The World at Turf Height," *Panim: A Journal of Culture, Society, and Education* 16 (March 2001), <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=8685>.
- 10 Researcher Erez Marantz, who pointed out an increased rate of workforce participation and mall visits by Arab women, found that the mall and the everyday contacts that take place there have an effect that contributes to equality. He cites one Arab woman as saying, "Here, we're all equal – Arabs, Jews, Russians. We're all customers here. We're equal because we all have the same money. I know many Jewish store managers by name and we exchange greetings." See Erez Marantz et al., "Israeli-Palestinian Women in the Retail Industry: Social Boundaries and Job Search Techniques," in *Palestinians in the Israeli Labor Market: A Multi-disciplinary Approach*, eds. Nabil Khattab and Sami Miaari (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 146.



- 11 Nadia Hilou and Idan Haim, "Civilian Service in Israel's Arab Society," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 1 (2014): 57-68, [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/Hilou%20and%20Haim\\_adkan17\\_1ENG4.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/Hilou%20and%20Haim_adkan17_1ENG4.pdf).
- 12 Ahmad Hatib and Ilan Biton, *National Civic Service in Israel: Survey and Analysis* (Jerusalem: Knesset Research and Information Center, 2011), <http://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m03118.pdf>.
- 13 Sammy Smooha, *The Lost Decade in Israel's Arab-Jewish Relations: Survey of Index Findings 2003-2009* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2010).
- 14 See the findings of the 2015 Jewish-Arab Alienation Index Survey conducted by Achva College and published on February 22, 2015.
- 15 Amal Jamal, "The Fluidity of the Palestinian Political Lexicon in Israel in the Shadow of the Arab Spring," *Eretz Acheret* 69 (May 2014), <http://goo.gl/g93wA9>.