

ARAB ISRAELIS

DEMOGRAPHICS

- ◆ Roughly 20% (1.51 million) of Israel's 7.46 million citizens are Arab Israelis
 - Religion of Arab Israelis:
 - 82% Moslem (mostly Sunni)
 - 10% of Moslem Arab Israelis are Bedouins
 - 10% Christian
 - 8% Druze
- ◆ The majority of Christian Arabs are Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic.
- ◆ There are 100,000 Arabic-speaking Druze living in 22 villages in northern Israel. There are also 3,000 Circassian Sunni Muslims in Israel, who are not Arab and do not share the same cultural background of the larger Islamic community.
- ◆ Arabic is Israel's second official language.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL STATUS

- ◆ Arab Israelis are citizens of Israel with equal rights.
- ◆ Arab Israelis run the political and administrative affairs of their municipalities.
- ◆ Arab Israelis have the right to vote in Knesset elections and have 3 political parties in the Knesset. Israel is one of the few places in the Middle East where Arab women have the right to vote and be elected to local and national office. Arab Israelis have held government positions, including deputy minister.
 - There are currently 8 Arab Israelis holding seats in the Knesset, and 4 Druze in the Knesset.
 - On March 3, 1999, Abdel Rahman Zuabi became the first Arab member of Israel's Supreme Court.
- ◆ The only legal distinction between Arab and Jewish citizens is that Arab citizens are exempted from compulsory service in the Israel Defense Forces out of consideration for family, religious and cultural affiliations with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world, given the ongoing conflict. IDF service was made mandatory for Druze and Circassian men at the request of their community leaders.

PLURALISM

- ◆ Israeli society is made up of coexisting population groups. There is no official policy of separation, but different groups 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 to assimilate. Independent Muslim, Druze and Christian denominational courts adjudicate matters of personal status.
- ◆ The Citizen Accord Forum, initiated by former Deputy Foreign Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior, has over 500 active volunteers encouraging coexistence between Jewish and Arab citizens and the development of a relationship based on values of respect and mutual understanding.

DEVELOPMENT

There have been improvements in the lives of Arab Israelis. From 1961 to 1996 the median years of schooling rose from 1.2 in 1961 to 10.4 in 1996. Infant death rates per thousand live births dropped in the same period: Muslims - 46.4 to 10; Christians - 42.1 to 6.7; Druze - 50.4 to 8.9. A 2008 opinion poll conducted by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government found that 77 percent of Israeli Arabs would rather live in Israel than in any other country in the world.

Despite improvements in the lives of Israeli Arabs, the Israeli Arab reality often falls short of the values of equality espoused in Israel's founding document. Like every democracy, Israel faces challenges in living up to its ideals. According to a July 2008 report released by the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel (Sikkuy), the gaps in health, housing, education, employment and welfare between the Arab and Jewish sectors in Israel have increased in recent years. These gaps are a function of many historical and political factors involving not only decisions of the Israeli government but also those of local Israeli Jewish and Israeli Arab leaders regarding prioritization and allocation of resources. Fifty percent of Israeli Arabs (and 65.7 percent of Arab children) live below the poverty line, while that percentage decreases to 15.7 among Jews (and to 31.4 percent for Jewish children). Jews outpace Arabs in life expectancy and have lower rates of childbirth mortality. The 2007 Sikkuy equality index reported that Israeli Arabs received "only 71 percent of the education resources due to them, based on their relative share in the population; 64 percent of what they are eligible for with regard to job-creation and training; and only 49 percent of their share of welfare funding," and found large gaps in mortality rates and life expectancy, poverty, state employment, and other measurements.

The Israeli government recognizes the need to overcome disparities in Israeli society. In the findings of a commission established to investigate the deaths of a number of Arab citizens during violent disturbances that occurred in the Arab sector in October 2000, it was noted that:

"The treatment of the Arab population is a very important and sensitive internal issue high on the state's agenda... It requires immediate, interim and long term attention. A principal goal of the state must be to attain true equality for the Arab citizens of the state. The rights of Arab citizens to equality derive from the democratic nature of the State of Israel, and equality is one of the basic rights accorded every citizen of the state. Discrimination contradicts the basic right to equality which is embedded, in the opinion of many, in the right of all persons to human dignity. This is all the more important when faced with discrimination on the basis of race or nationality. Therefore, it is in the interest of the state to act to erase the blemish of discrimination of its Arab citizens in all forms and expressions." (Orr Commission, September 2003)

In North America, the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues (www.iataskforce.org) was created to generate awareness of the issues facing Israeli Arabs and to promote advocacy activities among the North American Jewish and Israeli public to advance civic equality in Israel. The Task Force is composed of over 80 member organizations including foundations, Federations, direct service programs, and umbrella groups.

