

Coexistence Initiatives in Israel

Background

A 2008 Harvard Kennedy School study¹ of relations between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel found that:

- A great majority of both Jewish citizens (73%) and Arab citizens (94%) want Israel to be a society in which Arab and Jewish citizens have mutual respect and equal opportunities.
- 68% of Jewish citizens support teaching conversational Arabic in Jewish schools to help bring Arab and Jewish citizens together.
- 77% of Arab citizens would rather live in Israel than in any other country in the world.
- More than two-thirds of Jewish citizens (69%) believe contributing to coexistence is a personal responsibility; a majority (58%) of Jewish citizens also support cabinet level action.
- Arab citizens and Jewish citizens both underestimate their communities' liking of the "other."
- Urgent action on coexistence in Israel is desired: 66% of Jewish citizens and 84% of Arab citizens believe the Israeli government investments should begin now, and not wait until the end of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Examples of activities promoting coexistence

An example of coexistence on the 'macro' level can be found in the city of Haifa, Israel's 3rd largest city. Unlike other cities in Israel where Jews and Arabs tend to live in their own ethnic neighborhoods, Jews and Arabs in Haifa live together in the same apartment buildings and work together at the port, at the city's Rambam hospital and at Haifa University. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Arabs and Jews huddled together in bomb shelters in Haifa.

On a smaller scale, examples of coexistence can be found in a growing number of bilingual and multicultural schools for Israeli Arab and Jewish students, joint Arab-Israeli businesses, college campuses and programs that promote mutual understanding through the arts.

Over 300 NGOs address the issue of coexistence in Israel. The following are examples of coexistence programs working with 1) Arab and Jewish Israelis; 2) Jews in Israel and Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza or 3) Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians.

1) Coexistence activities between Arab Israelis and Jewish Israelis

The population of Israel is made up of 75.5% Jewish Israelis and 20.1% Arab Israeli citizens.

Givat Haviva²

Givat Haviva is the national education center of the Kibbutz Artzi Movement, a federation of 83 kibbutzim throughout Israel. Its overriding goal is to foster the creation of a shared society, resisting racism and all forms of discrimination and fostering greater understanding between different groups in Israeli society and among nations, through educating for peace, democracy, coexistence and social solidarity. Examples of programs include:

- In-depth yearlong activity in grades 8 and 9 at Jewish and Arab schools. Activities are related to acceptance of the other, equality of worth, familiarity and friendship, ideals of democracy and equality.
- 2-year in-depth training of Jewish and Arab professional women who work with women's groups
- Teacher training for Arab and Israeli teachers in the areas of: Arabic language, democracy, pluralism, Middle East studies, peace studies, active citizenship

The Center for Jewish-Arab Economic Development³ (CJAED), established by Jewish and Arab businesspeople, works to increase Jewish-Arab economic cooperation in Israel. Examples of CJAED initiatives include:

- Employment and Business Development Centers (EBDC), including a facility and activities to support small business development and train the local workforce for employment
- Support for Lakiya Negev Weaving (the Bedouin women weavers' cooperative)
- Women's empowerment activities through skills training and support

2) Coexistence activities between Israelis and Palestinians

There are 3.9 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. Connections between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are more difficult than with the Arab citizens of Israel. Security restrictions effect travel and the stigma of talking to the enemy severely limit the ability of Palestinians to attend dialogues that are usually held inside Israel.

The Peres Center for Peace⁴ was founded with the aim of furthering the vision of people of the Middle East region working together to build peace through socio-economic cooperation and development, and people-to-people interaction. Examples of Peres Center initiatives include:

- The Palestinian-Israeli Peace NGO Forum promotes ongoing cooperation and interaction between active Palestinian and Israeli Peace NGOs, facilitated by Israeli NGO the Peres Center for Peace and Palestinian NGO Panorama – the Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy & Community Development.
- Support for the creation of an independent Palestinian Pediatric Oncology Center through Palestinian-Israeli cooperation at Augusta Victoria Hospital in East Jerusalem.
- Business to business (B2B) initiatives such as participation of Palestinian companies at Israeli trade shows and conferences.

Ir Amim⁵ “City of Nations”

Ir Amim is an Israeli non-profit founded to engage in those issues impacting on Israeli-Palestinian relations in Jerusalem and on the political future of the city. Ir Amim aspires to a stable Jerusalem, equitably shared by the two peoples; a city that ensures the dignity and welfare of all its residents and that safeguards their holy places, as well as their historical and cultural heritages. Some of Ir Amim activities include: engagement in legal and political advocacy, working with civil society organizations in East Jerusalem to advance a more equitable Jerusalem and monitoring and exposing critical developments in Jerusalem.

3) Coexistence efforts between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians

Arava Institute of Environmental Studies⁶

The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES) is the premier environmental education and research program in the Middle East, preparing future Arab and Jewish leaders to cooperatively solve the region's environmental challenges. Affiliated with Ben-Gurion University, AIES houses academic programs, research, and international cooperation initiatives on a range of environmental concerns and challenges. With a student body comprised of Jordanians, Palestinians, Israelis, and students from around the world, AIES offers students a unique opportunity to study and live together for an extended period of time; building networks and developing understanding that will enable future cooperative work and activism in the Middle East and beyond.

The above is a sampling of coexistence efforts.

¹ Pittinsky, Todd L., Ratcliff, Jennifer and Maruskin, Laura, Coexistence in Israel: A National Study, Center for Public Leadership, Harvard University, 2008.

² <http://www.givathaviva.org.il/english/>

³ <http://www.cjaed.org.il/>

⁴ <http://www.peres-center.org>

⁵ <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/eng/>

⁶ <http://www.arava.org>

