The Palestinian Minority Citizens of Israel

A Short Introduction to Our Community

The Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel can be viewed as a national (Palestinian), ethnic (Arab), religious (Muslim, Christian and Druze) and linguistic (Arabic) minority in a state where about 80% of the population is Jewish.

In 1948, in what Palestinians call *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe), the Palestinian populations of more than 450 of the 550 towns and villages that had existed within the area that became Israel (as defined by the Green Line, thus excluding East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza) were driven out by the Israeli army, and in many cases their homes were destroyed. Of a pre-1948 Palestinian population of 950,000, two categories of refugees emerged: 800,000 Palestinians were expelled from the country and forced to become refugees in the neighbouring Arab states, and of the 150,000 Palestinians who remained within the boundaries of the new state of Israel, approximately 25% were displaced from their homes to other locations, thus becoming internal refugees. Until today, the Palestinian IDPs inside Israel hold the status of being "present absentees", a legal absurdity created by the Absentees' Property Law in 1950.

Meanwhile, successive governments have regarded the Arab community as a hostile element in the context of the ongoing violence between Israel and the Occupied Territories. Israel has been in an officially declared state of emergency from 1948 to date, with the state's Arab citizens subjected to military rule from 1948 until 1966. Various pieces of emergency legislation authorise the state to suspend the Arab citizens' civil rights. Especially after the events of October 2000, when 13 Arab citizens of Israel were killed by the Israeli security forces, the situation of the Arab minority has worsened.

The steady right-ward movement of Israeli politics in the new millennium has devastating consequences for the Arab Palestinian minority, and its effects are reflected on all levels of society. The interconnected socio-political developments become manifest in the legal, political and institutional sectors as well as in the Jewish Israeli public.

On the **legislative level**, the Nationality and Entry into Israel Law (Temporary Order), also referred to as the Family Reunification Law, raised major concerns both within the Arab minority and the international community. The law was passed by the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset) in July 2003. It states that it is illegal for an Israeli citizen to marry a spouse who is nationally Palestinian.

Furthermore, the law implies distinctions based on ethnicity. In this context, the issue of Jewish settlements outside Israel's borders – in the Occupied Territories – is worth noting. An Israeli citizen can live in Israel and marry a resident of the Occupied Territories if this resident lives in an "Israeli community in the region". The only such communities that exist are referred to internationally as settlements, and are without exception only available to people who are Jewish. However, the same Israeli citizen living in Israel cannot marry a resident of the same region – the Occupied Territories – who is Palestinian by ethnicity, nationality, or residence.

Discrimination and racially motivated violence is inherent in Israeli **state institutions** as well. Institutional discrimination is exemplified by Israel's segregationist school system. Moreover, the appalling increase in police violence against Arab citizens of Israel proves the worrying trend of growing racism.

Arab Palestinian pupils in Israel are educated in a school system wholly separate from the Jewish majority. Due to biased budget allocations and curricula, the Arab education sector offers fewer facilities and educational opportunities than its Jewish counterpart, which leads to a general education deficit among the Palestinian minority citizens. According to a Human Rights Watch Report (*Second Class: Discrimination against Palestinian Arab Children in Israel's Schools*, 2001); "Palestinian Arab students drop out of school at three times the rate of Jewish students and are less likely to pass the national exams common to the two systems for a high school diploma. Only a handful make it to university. […] Israeli government authorities have acknowledged the gaps between Arab and Jewish education but have failed to equalize the two systems."

The growing number of cases of police violence against Arab citizens is another serious institutional problem. Since 13 minority citizens have been killed by Israeli police in October 2000, 15 more Arab citizens have died by the hands of the police. Currently, the HRA's Research and Reporting unit is

investigating the worrying increase of police violence against the Arab minority.

Especially in connection with house demolitions, excessive violence is being used. On February 25, 2004, Israeli police demolished five houses in the Arab village of Bea'na in the Galilee. Witnesses reported that about 1,500 policemen invaded Bea'na, shooting teargas into the village. Police then entered the village with three bulldozers. Dozens of people were injured by teargas and beatings by police officers. About 30 people had to be hospitalised.

In connection with **government policies**, references to Arabs inside Israel as a 'demographic threat' and the growing acceptance of 'transfer' as a legitimate population policy have upset the Arab minority citizens.

In 2002, the Israel Council for Demography reconvened after five years of inactivity, to formulate a policy that will preserve the Jewish character of the state. The council is a government agency, and one of its main aims is "to increase the Jewish birth-rate by encouraging Jewish women to have more children using government grants, housing benefits and other incentives." The Council's work is supported by public funds. Its reconvening aroused extensive Arab protests against the characterisation of Arab birth as a demographic danger.

In January 2003, the Sharon government announced it had developed a five-year plan, backed by a budget of NIS 1.175 billion (over US$ 250m), to bring an end to the Bedouin land issue in the Negev. Despite current economic concerns, this considerable sum was allocated in the 2003 state budget. The Sharon Plan, as it is referred to officially, is a comprehensive strategy to remove the Bedouin of the unrecognised villages from their land and concentrate them into three townships. A total of 395 million NIS (app. US$ 90m) has been allocated for house demolitions and land expropriation. Since the plan has been launched, house demolitions have increased in the Negev. It should be noted here that the phenomenon of unrecognised villages and regular house demolitions does not only affect the Bedouin in the south. It occurs all over Israel.

In December 2003, a conference on security issues, organised by the Institute of Policy and Strategy of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herziliya, proved that demographics have become a popular topic among Israel's political elite. Minister of Finance and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, "if there is a demographic problem, and there is, it is with the Israeli Arabs who will remain Israeli citizens.[…] We therefore need a policy that will first of all guarantee a Jewish majority – I say this with no hesitation, as a liberal, a democrat, and a Jewish patriot…" He further declared that additional funds will be allocated for the building of the separation wall which is to prevent a 'demographic spill-over' from the Occupied Territories.

This trend towards treating the Arab minority as a demographic threat, the enemy from within, certainly has a major impact on the **Jewish Israeli public** as well. The prevailing hostile attitude of members of the Jewish majority towards their fellow-citizens is expressed by both prominent members of the Israeli intellectual establishment and the general public.

In January 2004, *Ha'aretz Magazine* published an interview with Benny Morris, a famous historian, in which he stated that "[…] he [Ben-Gurion] made a serious historical mistake in 1948. Even though he understood the demographic issue and the need to establish a Jewish state without a large Arab minority, he got cold feet during the war. In the end, he faltered. […] If he was already engaged in expulsion, maybe he should have done a complete job."

Moreover, the Israeli Democracy Institute's 2003 Democracy Index Project revealed that these political sentiments are no longer isolated in the views of hardliners and extremists. For example, the survey found that 77% of Jewish Israelis maintain that there must be a Jewish majority on all critical decisions concerning the state; 57% think that the state must encourage its Arab citizens to emigrate from Israel to other countries; and 69% are against the inclusion of Arab political parties in the government, including having Arab ministers in the Cabinet.

Recently, hate crimes committed by Jewish Israelis against their Arab fellow citizens have increased considerably. The most alarming sign is the current police investigation of a suspected Jewish terrorist cell in Haifa, which has already led to several arrests of Jewish Israelis.

The politics of the current Israeli government have intensified the vicious circle of fear, suspicion and discrimination inside Israel, leading to grave violations of the human rights of 20% of Israel's citizenry, the Arab minority. The current situation is highly alarming and may escalate; the events of October 2000 are still present in our minds. Therefore, we call upon the international community to follow the political and social developments with scrutiny and remind Israel of the international norms it agreed to comply with by ratifying the major human-rights conventions.