

The Involvement of Palestinian Citizens of Israel in the Israeli Peace Camp

Summary of a research by Inbal Ben-Ezer*

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The Israeli peace camp includes thousands of people and hundreds of groups, movements and organizations working to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and bring peace and reconciliation between the peoples. Even so, despite the significant interest Palestinian citizens of Israel have in resolving the conflict, their involvement in the peace camp is perceived to be limited.

The research explores the reasons for this lack of involvement, from the Israeli-Jewish perspective, based on interviews with approximately forty leaders, activists and experts from the peace camp. A parallel research, focusing on the attitudes within the Arab Palestinian community in Israel towards their involvement in issues related to foreign affairs, was conducted by Sana Knaneh.

The research found that the involvement of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the Israeli peace camp is perceived as small in comparison to their part in society as a whole, especially in senior positions in organizations and movements. When it comes to Jewish-Palestinian cooperation, the participation of the Palestinian citizens of Israel is perceived higher in groups and projects that are not directly political – do not hold an organizational political agenda or affiliation or do not attempt to influence the political landscape directly – and that are centered around non-national identity factors, like gender or class.

Most of those interviewed for the research saw great importance in increased involvement of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the peace camp. They believe that the Palestinian citizens of Israel can help advance reconciliation and peace, and that their involvement will strengthen peace organizations. A common attitude was that peace organizations have a moral obligation to involve diverse population groups in bringing about an end to the conflict, and especially those so directly affected by it. A minority of the interviewees saw little importance in increased involvement, claiming that the Palestinian citizens of Israel are obvious supporters of peace and are therefore not a target audience for persuasion. They also claimed that the Palestinian citizens of Israel do not have practical power or special leverage that can help achieve peace.

The research identified three main types of barriers that stand in the way of increased involvement by Palestinian citizens of Israel in the peace camp:

- 1. Ideological barriers** - Jewish and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel have different ideological motivations to get involved in the peace camp. Most Jewish activists feel

* Inbal Ben-Ezer is a researcher at Mitvim Institute. Previously, she has worked as Mitvim's Director of Programs and as a project manager at the Peres Center for Peace. The research was conducted in cooperation with [Freidrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#).

at least some connection to Zionism and view their pro-peace activity as a means to support this vision. Palestinian citizens of Israel, on the other hand, generally perceive Zionism as an ideology which excludes and marginalizes them. For the latter, the Jewish nature of the state of Israel, and the Palestinian quest for equality as a national minority within it, are core issues to resolving the conflict. The Jewish peace activists, however, often convey little knowledge or action when it comes to these, and other, core issues concerning the Palestinian population in Israel. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction within the peace camp between those working to advance cross-border Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution to those focusing on improving Jewish-Arab relations inside Israel. This distinction often requires the Palestinian citizens of Israel to pick between two directions for action, and they usually choose those efforts that focus on their domestic status.

2. **Structural-organizational barriers** - The peace camp is relatively non-accessible to groups in Israel's geographical and socio-economic periphery. This is especially true regarding the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Peace activities usually take place in central locations, which are often distant from Arab population centers. The activities are usually carried out in Hebrew, for a primarily-Jewish target audience, by organizations that are mostly staffed by Jews, and are mostly guided by visions that are more geared towards the needs of the Jewish majority than those of the Arab Palestinian minority. Furthermore, although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict personally affects Palestinian citizens of Israel, they are not directly involved in the conflict. Therefore, they are often regarded by peace activists as a group with neither enough responsibility nor power to effectively contribute to its resolution.
3. **Psychological barriers** - Among the Jewish public, including parts of the peace camp, there is a common distrust of Palestinian citizens of Israel due to their "dual-loyalty" (to Israel and the Palestinians alike). Moreover, Jewish-Israeli peace activists are wary of emotional and practical complications involved in engaging with Israel's Palestinian citizens. Such engagement often challenges their assumptions about the possibility of creating a shared social fabric within Israel, and of reaching mutually-acceptable political solutions. It also highlights just how difficult it is to fulfill their desire for a Jewish state that is also democratic - a challenge that Palestinian citizens of Israel emphasize in discussions of which they are part.

The research also identified possible ways to increase the involvement of the Palestinian citizens of Israel in the peace camp, which include issues of both content and structure:

1. **Content** - The peace camp needs to allow people with different attitudes towards Zionism to act together, increase its focus on issues that are of vital importance to the Palestinian citizens of Israel, create spaces for non-political cooperation with a defined goal beyond dialogue, and see the Palestinian citizens of Israel as genuine partners in designing, not only implementing, pro-peace actions and processes.
2. **Structure** - The peace camp needs a more balanced distribution of power within it, between Jews and Arabs. It should also adopt more inclusive organizational models that recognize and legitimize Palestinian-Israeli identity, create opportunities for Palestinian citizens of Israel to engage with members of Israel's policy elite, make activities accessible through use of Arabic and convene near or within Arab population centers, increase the visibility of pro-peace activities in local Arab media outlets, and reach out to new audiences among the Palestinian citizens of Israel.