

# The Involvement of the Arab Palestinian Citizens of Israel in Foreign Affairs

Summary of a research by Sana Knaneh\*

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The Palestinian citizens of Israel have the potential to influence and shape Israel's foreign affairs, especially in regards to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and to Israel's ties with Arab and Muslim countries. However, their involvement in these issues is minimal.

The research examines why this is the case, and how it can be changed. It analyses attitudes among Palestinian citizens of Israel regarding their involvement in issues related to foreign affairs. It is based on interviews with approximately thirty key opinion leaders in Israel's Arab society: Members of Knesset, scholars, civil society leaders, and journalists. A parallel research, focusing on the attitudes among Jewish-Israeli leaders of the peace camp, was conducted by Inbal Ben-Ezer.

The research identified three main fields in which Palestinian citizens of Israel can be involved: (1) Advancing their status as a minority in Israel through advocacy and engagement in the international arena; (2) Promoting better relations between Israel and its neighbours in the Middle East; and (3) Supporting Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. In each of these fields, actions can be taken by Members of Knesset, internal institutions of the Arab society (the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel and the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Localities), and civil society organizations.

According to the research, increased Arab involvement in issues related to Israel's foreign affairs can produce a set of benefits: (1) Their deep and unique understanding of both Israelis and Palestinians can advance the dialogue and relations between both sides; (2) Their involvement can produce a more positive attitude towards the Palestinian citizens of Israel in the eyes of the Arab world and increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and Gaza; (3) Their involvement can raise international awareness to the status of the Palestinian citizens of in Israel and support efforts to promote equality; and (4) Their involvement can assist Israel's Arab citizens to achieve a more influential public role, and therefore gain importance and legitimacy.

Despite these potential benefits, three main barriers stand in the way of increased involvement by Palestinian citizens of Israel in issues related to Israel's foreign affairs:

- 1. Ideological barriers** - These barriers stem from the complex identity of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and from characteristics of the Israeli society. They include the tensions among the Arab society between those prioritizing the quest for equality within Israel, those prioritizing efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian

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conflict, and those claiming that both issues should be dealt with simultaneously. Additional ideological barriers that were mentioned in the interviews, were the definition of Israel as a Jewish state, the continued occupation, discrimination against the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the dominant role of security considerations in the shaping of foreign relations.

2. **Structural-organizational barriers** - These barriers stem from characteristics of the Arab society and of the Israeli Foreign Service. Israel's Arab society does not have a clear vision, strategy and action plan for its future. Its internal mechanisms are not effective enough and lack financial resources. This limits their ability to play a significant role on issues related to foreign affairs. On the governmental level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries dealing with foreign relations do not have the infrastructure nor the motivation to accommodate Palestinian citizens of Israel in roles where they could contribute to the formulation of Israel's foreign policy.
3. **Psychological barriers** - These barriers stem from the lack of trust between the Jews and Arabs in Israel. Palestinian citizens of Israel are suspicious of the government and its mechanisms. The Jewish public increasingly views Israel's Arab citizens as a fifth column and somewhat justifies their discrimination. The Palestinian citizens of Israel feel alienated and marginalized. They fear of being used by the Foreign Service as a fig-leaf in the service of Israel's public diplomacy. In addition, there is a prevalent assumption among Palestinian citizens of Israel that the Jewish population does not view their involvement in foreign affairs as legitimate, and that this is not likely to change as long as Israel is governed by right-wing governments.

The research concludes with the following observations: (1) The Palestinian citizens of Israel have an interest in becoming more involved in national issues that affect their lives, and in which they have an added value. Thus, they have both the motivation and the capacity to assist the peace process and Israel's ties with the Arab world; (2) There is concern among Israel's Arab citizens that increased involvement and participation in issues related to foreign affairs will not mean a higher level of actual impact on such issues; (3) Palestinian citizens of Israel are much more favorable towards participation in informal and independent actions relating to foreign affairs – carried out by civil society organizations, internal Arab institutions, and Members of Knesset – than in official activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government. Independent and informal involvement is seen as legitimate, while official involvement in Israel's Foreign Service is generally seen in a negative light, at times even as treason; and (4) Over time, there is an increase in the involvement of Palestinian citizens of Israel in issues related to foreign affairs. Historically, this change stems from increased exposure to the Palestinian arena since the occupation in 1967, and to the Arab world since the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979 and the peace process of the 1990's. The establishment of the Joint List in 2015, and its' becoming the third largest party in the Knesset, enabled a further increase in the level of involvement, especially through the international activity of the Arab Members of Knesset.