

Israel's Arab Citizens and Foreign Policy

Summary of a workshop conducted by
Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies,
The Abraham Fund Initiatives, and Nazareth Academic Institute

Nazareth, January 28th, 2014



A workshop entitled “Israel’s Arab citizens and foreign policy” was held at the Nazareth Academic Institute on January 28th, 2014. The workshop was a joint initiative of [Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#), [The Abraham Fund Initiatives](#), and the [Nazareth Academic Institute](#) (NAI). The workshop was attended by over 20 Jewish and Arab experts.

Discussions focused on the following questions: **Has the Arab Spring created new opportunities for increased involvement of Israel’s Arab-Palestinian minority in regional politics and diplomacy? What are the challenges of, and the obstacles to involvement of Arab citizens in Israeli foreign policy?**

Following opening remarks by Prof. George Kanazi, President of NAI; Kamal Hassan, Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute; and Amnon Be’eri Sultzeanu, Co-Executive Director of The Abraham Fund Initiatives, attendees participated in a discussion facilitated by Mitvim Chairman Dr. Nimrod Goren. This paper summarizes the main issues and positions discussed in the workshop.

A. Arabs in Israel and Israel's Official Foreign Policy

Israel's Arab citizens generally lack fair representation in State and societal institutions – both qualitatively and quantitatively. Their feeling is that the state excludes them from public discourse, treats them as “unwanted,” and that various arguments and excuses are used to justify ever-worsening attitudes towards them.

In recent years, increasing attempts have been made to undermine the legitimacy of the Arab minority's involvement in state affairs, including the legitimacy of their Knesset representatives, and their involvement in significant national processes such as foreign policy decision making. In Arab society, this situation is perceived as organized exclusion. These feelings are reinforced by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's remarks on population exchanges in a future peace agreement.

In his previous term as Foreign Minister, Lieberman **also took action to make it more difficult for Arab citizens to join the Israeli Foreign Service**. In 2009, he tried to introduce military or civic service as a requirement of admission into the Foreign Ministry's cadet course. **However, several Arab diplomats are in fact members of the Israeli Foreign Service**, and several have even served as ambassadors to foreign countries. They, however, are the exceptional few who are willing to represent Israel and explain its policy around the world. They are the target of criticism by Arab society.

The Arab diplomats in the Foreign Service find it difficult to meet the obligations of their positions. Most are extremely talented individuals, but they are trapped in an impossible situation due to the fact that Israel's current foreign policy poses many challenges for its Arab citizens. These Arab diplomats are considered to have been cast in the role of fig leaves, rather than professionals who have the potential to influence policy in some way. Even if their numbers doubled, they would not represent meaningful participation in the Israeli Foreign Service.



Members of Arab society find it difficult to represent the state in light of the lack of civic equality and the conflict with the Palestinians. **Most express no interest in becoming involved in official foreign policy**. The objections to such involvement are similar to the objections to military and civic service. Arab citizens are distrustful of the State, they call for the abolishment of discrimination and the Occupation, and are suspicious of attempts to increase Arab representation in the Foreign Service, which they view as a move designed to subordinate the Arab minority to the interests of the Jewish majority.

Workshop participants stated that in principle they would and could act as ambassadors, but only “of a state that does not discriminate against us, that respects us, and that is not a conqueror of our people.” Today they are unable to stand before the world as Israel's representatives and say things they do not believe in. **“I hope for the day when I can be an ambassador,”** said one of the participants. **“But in the current situation, until it is rectified, I will be an ambassador of my own people and its concerns.”**

Several participants spoke of **the preliminary demand for equal rights**. “First of all, I need to feel that I am a citizen of equal rights who identifies with the State,” said one of the workshop participants, “And only then will I be able to express this opinion to the outside.” Participants also urged the promotion of an egalitarian civic discourse and a push to gain fair representation in a wide range of domestic institutions,

such as corporate directorates and administrative faculties of universities; Then, they argued, it would be much easier to promote Arab citizens' involvement in foreign policy.

Other voices were also heard at the workshop, including the call to assume a **more active approach to changing the situation** rather than merely pointing out the problems and waiting for the State to resolve them. These participants urged Arab society to take a stand against isolationism, take initiative to create change, promote an ideological debate by Arab society, conduct a dialogue with various stakeholders in Israeli society, and develop a new cadre of leaders.

Other ideas that emerged **included how to become involved in unofficial foreign policy through channels outside of the Foreign Service**, for example as commercial attachés of the Ministry of Economy, or by promoting an initiative to create new positions in Israel's foreign embassies (attaché for Arab society affairs, for example), or using the discourse on foreign issues (related to membership in multinational organizations and the reforms required for admission in these organizations, for example) to promote a discourse of equal rights and integration in Israel.

B. Arabs in Israel and unofficial foreign policy-related activities

Foreign policy is no longer a domain controlled exclusively by the State. Non-State actors and civil society organizations are increasingly involved in this field. As a result, new channels have been opened for the participation of Israel's Arab citizens in foreign policy-related activities; both as a distinct arena for action by Arab society, and as an arena of joint action with Jewish organizations. In this field, the potential for change seems to be currently greater than in the official channels, as there is no indication that the government policy regarding the Arab minority will change in the near future.

1. Arab society's foreign policy

In recent years, a **parallel system of Arab activities in the field of foreign policy** has emerged in Israel, primarily aiming to promote the economic, political, and cultural interests of Israel's Arab citizens. These activities are largely unconnected to Jewish society's activities, and have little public exposure in Israel's mainstream media.

Organizations and private individuals in **Arab society conduct activities to raise support among the international community for their struggle for equality and their efforts to promote their interests.** For example, efforts have been carried out to recruit international celebrities to raise global awareness for struggles such as that of the Negev Bedouin. This is, in fact, the unofficial foreign policy of Arab society, which is based mainly on briefings to foreign political and diplomatic forums (such as the EU, the US Congress, NATO, and the OECD). The assumption is that these activities are effective tools that might lead international organizations to pressure the Israeli government into reducing the discrepancies between Jews and Arabs.

Additionally, Israel's Arab citizens are carrying out independent activities involving other Middle Eastern countries. Such activities include a humanitarian aid campaign for Syrian refugees in Jordan; delegations of Arab MKs and public figures to Arab countries, Arab-Israel representation in policy planning institutions of the Palestinian Authority, and a growing number of Arab students from Israel who attend Jordanian universities.

However, **these foreign policy-related activities are conducted in a chaotic, sporadic manner, lacking both a central organization to administer or coordinate them,** or a formulated strategy. Workshop participants urged a change in this situation, so that the interests of Arab society in Israel would be expressed by an organization considered to be a legitimate representative of these interests.

The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel was mentioned as an organization that could, in principle, fill this role, although its performance is currently not free of problems. **The Council on Foreign Relations, which operates in major US cities** and unofficially engages in foreign policy, was mentioned as a possible model. Participants also noted how **Catalans in Spain** have opened their own embassies in other countries, to promote Catalan interests, independent of the Spanish Foreign Service.

2. Foreign policy-related activities within civil society organizations

A. Promoting peace and regional integration

Until now, Israel's Arab citizens have not been significant actors in the efforts to promote peace and regional integration. In the past, the term “**bridge to peace**” was coined with reference to the Palestinian minority in Israel, but was never realized. Arab involvement is rare even in peace organizations. The desire of many **peace organizations** to project themselves as Jewish, Zionist organizations also repels Israel's Arab citizens from this arena, despite their potentially significant contribution. Arab citizens of Israel who nonetheless are involved in peace organization activities are typically found on the sidelines of these organizations and not in key roles.

The Arab Spring created opportunities for change, for regional policy dialogue, for promoting peace, and for developing an updated Israeli discourse on the Middle East. Such opportunities create renewed potential for expanding the roles of Israel's Arabs in foreign policy issues. [A public opinion survey](#) initiated by the Mitvim Institute in October 2013 showed that 55% of Israel's Jewish population and 74% of Israel's Arab population believe that Israeli Arabs should play a more central role in improving Israel's relations with the countries of the Middle East.



In the past, the Arab world typically viewed Israel's Arab citizens as traitors, tending to ostracize and refuse all contact with them. This approach is still evident, but the drastic changes in the Arab world in the last three years have led, among other things, **to increasing Arab interest in Israel in general, and in the lives of Israel's Arab citizens in particular.** For example, workshop participants reported on inquiries from scholars in Arab countries interested in studying the development of Islam in Israel under Jewish rule, and how civic studies are being taught in Israel.

Despite all of the problems that the Arab Spring entails, **it has brought about a climate of change and a new beginning to several parts of the Arab world.** There is greater openness and curiosity in political affairs, increasing debates on democratization and rights, and greater willingness to speak to Israelis. The shared moral foundation for a joint discourse is also greater than in the past.

The Arab Spring has led to changes within the Arab society in Israel. There are new voices, openness to new ideas and increased involvement of citizens in public life. In the recent Israeli local elections (October 2013) Arab candidates often used slogans inspired by the Arab Spring.

In response to these regional changes, **ties between young people, intellectuals, and representatives of research and policy institutions from Israel and the Arab world have been**

strengthened. These growing relationships are still limited in scope, and will probably remain so if there is no tangible progress toward a solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. While there is still considerable Arab criticism of and hatred toward Israeli policies, there is also a new reality in which Israel's Arab citizens can play an important role. The Mitvim Institute, for example, has ensured that Arab-Israeli citizens are involved in its regional activities. Despite the sensitivities, this step has met with considerable success.

Furthermore, **the recent regional developments have created a demand in Israel for more information on current events in the Middle East.** This is an opportunity for Israel's Arab citizens to increase their visibility in the Israeli media as **commentators on regional affairs**, thereby helping to shape a more complex, updated Israeli discourse on the Middle East. Although doubt was raised at the workshop as to whether Israeli Arabs could interpret regional events better than Jewish Israeli experts in the field, increased Arab visibility on regional affairs is also expected to increase the public legitimacy of Arab citizens' involvement in foreign policy issues.

B. The relative advantage of Israel's Arab citizens

Although Israel's Arab society has an overall **desire to help establish ties between Israel and the Arab world**, it is **skeptical about the use of the term "bridge to peace/ties."** It has been argued that Israel's Arab citizens cannot realize their potential as a "bridge to peace" between Israel and the Middle East as long as their own legitimacy is limited by both parties: the Arab world is suspicious of them, as Israelis, while in Israel they are delegitimized and subject to exclusionary policies. Any bridge needs strong foundations at both ends, but in this case – the foundations are as yet non-existent. In addition, being a "bridge" is viewed as a passive role ("people walk over a bridge").

In view of this perspective, workshop participants discussed **the need to identify the relative**

advantages of Israel's Arabs in promoting the country's regional relations. Ideas that emerged in the discussion included the view that the Arab public wants to be involved, is committed to the promotion of peace (also based on their understanding that peace will serve their own interests), has far-reaching networks and ties throughout the Arab world; has a unique perspective on and understanding of reality in the region and its trends; and has a complex sense of identity (Israeli by citizenship and Palestinian by nationality and culture) that is an asset for forging relationships with the region and mediating between Israelis and Palestinians.

Furthermore, the sense of pride of Arab workshop participants was prominent. Several participants stated **that Israel's Arab citizens should be proud of what they have to offer the Arab world**, the complexity of their own narrative, the level of Arab society's internal discourse, and the way they cope with their unique and far-from-simple experience of life under Jewish rule.



Nonetheless, **convincing Israeli society of the relative advantages of Israel's Arab citizens in this area is a challenging task** - especially since Israel does not consider itself **and does not particularly aspire to become part of the Middle East**, and as long as Arabs in Israel are considered the enemy by many Jews.

Therefore, workshop participants concluded that, **at this stage, foreign policy activities of Israel's Arab citizens can be optimally conducted through civil and largely unofficial settings**. Civil society offers a significant opportunity to make a difference, and one that may assume different forms. Within civil society organizations, Jews and Arabs can work together to promote peace and regional integration, by expressing the relative advantages of Israel's Arabs, and help promote a new Israeli foreign policy in which Arab citizens assume a significant, active role.

For **media coverage** of the workshop, please see:

- Ariel Ben Solomon, [“New workshop promotes Israeli-Arab voice in foreign policy.”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, February 5, 2014.
- Nimrod Goren, [“Israel's foreign policy needs to speak with an Arabic accent.”](#) Opinion section, *i24news*, February 7, 2014.

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