

# Bayan بیان ביאן The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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## From the Editors' Desk

This issue of *Bayan* contains three essays. Yussri Khizran sheds light on recent civil and political developments in Arab society, against the backdrop of the Arab events of the beginning of the decade. Maha Karkabi Sabbah deals with marriages between Arab women and Jewish men in Israel. Alexander Jacob Shapiro analyzes the circumstances of the establishment of a joint Arab-Jewish municipal coalition in Lod following the recent municipal elections.

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**The Editors**

## Yusri Khaizran / Civil Trends in Israel's Arab Society in Light of the "Arab Spring"

Arab public figures recently announced the establishment of a new party – *min ajlina* ("For Us" in Arabic) – which boldly declared its willingness to partner in the future government coalition.<sup>1</sup> In tandem, the Abraham Fund published a survey demonstrating that 64 percent of Arab society in Israel supports the participation of Arab parties in the coalition.<sup>2</sup> These trends clearly indicate the intensification of civic discourse in Arab society and are consistent with the insights presented in a forthcoming book from the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, which examines the effects of the "Arab Spring" uprisings on the internal dynamics of Arab society in Israel as well as their effect on the attitude of the state and its positions toward the Arab population.<sup>3</sup>

The outbreak of the so-called "Arab Spring" aroused great enthusiasm and expectation for democratization in Arab society in Israel, but it gradually dissipated following NATO intervention in Libya. The uprising in Syria divided Arab society in Israel in an unprecedented way, and the divisions deepened as the uprising deteriorated into violence; as the war in Syria worsened, it exposed along with it not only the fragile fabric of the Arab state, but the fragile fabric of Arab society as well. In contrast to the prevailing approach found in much of the research on Arab society in Israel, which focuses only on relations between the Arab minority and the state, the forthcoming book offers a new perspective, weighing the impact of ongoing trends in the region – namely instability and the disintegration of the Arab region – both in terms of the internal dynamics within Israel's Arab society and in its relationship to the state.

Neither the Israeli state nor the Israeli public has remained indifferent to what is happening in the Arab world. Although from the outset the state adopted a policy of minimal intervention in the surrounding region, its attitude toward the "Arab Spring" was not consistent at all. In Israel, the outbreak of the revolution in Tunisia did not garner much interest,<sup>4</sup> while the outbreak of the revolution in Egypt naturally aroused great interest, both because of its peace treaty with the largest Arab state and because of its justified fear of the Islamist alternative. The outbreak of the uprising in Syria somewhat eased Israel's fears because it was perceived as a development that could lead to the fall of the Ba'ath regime in Syria, which from an Israeli strategic standpoint, could lead to the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the weakening of Iran's power in the region.<sup>5</sup>

For Israel, the importance of the "Arab Spring" is not limited to politics or strategy; the "Arab Spring" also impacts internal factors, namely the Arab minority and its relations with the state. This insight is reinforced by leading research on Arab society

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<sup>1</sup> *Kull al-Arab*, 15 January 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Haaretz*, 40 January 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Yusri Khaizran and Muhammad Khlaile, *Left to its Fate: Arab Society in Israel Under the Shadow of the "Arab Spring"* (Tel Aviv University: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Moshe Dayan Center, 2019) [in print].

<sup>4</sup> Elie Podeh, "Do Not Underestimate Tunisia," *Haaretz*, 26 January 2011 [in Hebrew].

<sup>5</sup> Lior Lehrs, "Egyptian Darkness or Window of Opportunity? Israeli Discourse on the Arab Spring," in: Elie Podeh and On Winkler (editors), *The Third Wave: Protest and Revolution in the Middle East*, Jerusalem: Carmel, 2017, pp. 224-246 [in Hebrew].

in Israel. Amal Jamal describes the political experience of the Arab minority in Israel as “a dual consciousness”: the Arab minority has cultivated a sense of emotional and national attachment to the nation of Palestine and the broader Arab world, yet it is instrumentally and rationally bound to an Israeli reality.<sup>6</sup> This description supports the core assumption of the aforementioned research, which notes that the Arab minority in Israel maintains a close bond with Arab space despite its rational attachment to Israeli space. The 2016 I’lam Center strategic report by Arab researchers and academics<sup>7</sup> emphasizes the organic connection between Arab society in Israel and the surrounding region, and even views this as a natural and rational phenomenon that is essential to Arab society, in which the minority’s belonging to the broader region is an inextricable aspect of its political, cultural, and social identity. The rational explanation for the Arab minority’s attachment to the surrounding region stems from its attempt to break free from the bonds of structural weakness placed upon it as a national minority in the Jewish nation-state.

### **The Arab Spring: Division in Arab Society**

The perception of space as a cultural and moral anchor among the Arab minority largely explains the schism in Israel’s Arab population that was precipitated by the uprising in Syria. The Arab Spring, and especially the Syrian uprising, divided the Arab political community in two – between a camp which supports the current regime (or at least has reservations about the insurgency), and a camp that supports the opposition and longs for the fall of the regime that plunged Syria into a brutal, bloody, and prolonged civil war. At the head of the dissenting camp, which is opposed to the term “Arab Spring” and supports the Syrian regime, is the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash Party) and its constituents. Leading the opposing camp is the Islamic Movement, which adopted an unequivocal position calling for Assad’s overthrow. The discourse of the Islamic Movement with regard to Syria is consistent with the discourse of other Islamist movements throughout the Arab Middle East.

It is unsurprising that the National Democratic Alliance (Balad Party) adopted a stance that identifies with the “Arab Spring” given the views of its spiritual founder, Azmi Bishara.<sup>8</sup> For years, Bishara kept close ties with the Ba’ath regime in Syria as well as with Hezbollah, but eventually broke his ideological alliance with them by consistently expressing support for the uprising against the Syrian regime.<sup>9</sup> Bishara’s change of heart is closely linked to his residence in Doha and the connections he forged with the Qatari monarchy, who has unreservedly supported the popular uprising in Syria. The same Qatari regime that provided political, diplomatic, financial, and media support (vis-à-vis Qatari-owned al-Jazeera) to rebel movements

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<sup>6</sup> Amal Jamal, *The Arab Public Sphere in Israel: Media Space and Cultural Resistance*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> I’lam – Arab Center for Media Freedom, Development and Research, *Strategic Report: The Palestinian Arabs Inside the Green Line* (Nazareth, 2016), p. 19 [in Arabic].

<sup>8</sup> Amal Jamal, “Dual Consciousness and Delayed Revolutions: On the Political Dilemmas of Palestinian Citizens in Israel in the Shadow of the Arab Spring,” *The Public Space*, 13 (2017), p. 114 [in Hebrew].

<sup>9</sup> See Azmi Bishara's comprehensive account of the uprising in Syria: Azmi Bishara, *Suriyya: Durub al-Alam nahwa al-Hurriyyah* [Syria: The Path of Suffering towards Freedom], Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013 [in Arabic].

in Syria helped Bishara was able to establish the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, perhaps the most consequential research center in the Arab world.<sup>10</sup>

The confusion, bewilderment, and divisiveness of the "Arab Spring" did not miss Israel's Arab intelligentsia. It is possible to distinguish three groups with different patterns of discourse surrounding the Arab Spring. The first group of intellectuals views the "Arab Spring" in a positive light and characterizes it as a historic opportunity to bring about democratic change in the Arab world. The second group judges the "Arab Spring" according to the chaos it has instigated since 2011 and views the popular uprisings as a reprisal of Western conspiracy against the Arab world, a conspiracy that has reached its peak in Syria. The third group places morality at the center of its determinations; it identifies with the popular dynamics of the "Arab Spring" and with the Arab peoples' right to rise up, but it has reservations about the uprising in Syria and the anarchy that the "Arab Spring" provoked.

It would be a mistake to try to divide Arab intellectuals between those who support or sympathize with the uprising and those who oppose it on religious or ethnic grounds. The dispute over the uprising crosses ethnic and religious lines and is stranded between two camps of intellectuals with different religious and ethnic affiliations. As such, this appears to be disagreement of principal, related not only to reciprocal relations with the Arab space, but to the ideological orientation and moral compass of Israel's Arab society.

The division of the Arab political arena has generated ideological and moral confusion in the Arab intellectual community. As previously discussed, the discourse focuses on two central issues: the historical importance of the "Arab Spring" on the one hand, and on the other, the degree of morality to be applied in taking a stance on the war taking place in Syria. Here, morality was instrumental largely because it was linked to claims of the immorality of Israeli occupation and the struggle against the state in the name of civil morality. Ideological confusion was overshadowed by the question of how to support the Ba'ath regime, which spared no cruelty in its repression of the popular uprising, while placing the issue of morality at the center of the discourse opposing Israel's policies toward the Arab minority and the continuation of the occupation in the Palestinian territories. Even those who hold sympathetic positions toward the Ba'ath regime link it to the Palestinian issue, however, from another perspective – opposition to Israel. These attitudes toward the issue of Syria therefore reflect the ongoing dialectic in Palestinian society in Israel between instrumental morality and national commitment to the Palestinian struggle. The third position among Arab intellectuals is one of frustration and disappointment in the Arab region; it expresses reservations both about the destructive influence of the "Arab Spring" and rejects the Ba'ath regime, which it perceives to have lost its legitimacy. The contentious discourse between Arab intellectuals and political circles attests to a feeling of severe crises in Arab society, to a sense of the loss of the moral anchor that the Arab world once provided the Arab minority in Israel. Even if these feelings of confusion and disappointment in the Arab world do not exercise real influence on the official discourse of the intellectual and political elite regarding the state of Israel, they do have recognizable influence among Arab citizens.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the research center that Bishara heads, see:  
<https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Pages/index.aspx>



## **The Young Generation and Society in the Shadow of the** **"Arab Spring"**

The "Arab Spring" drew attention to the crucial role of young, educated people in the Arab world. The political events that unfolded in the Middle East – the protests and patterns of organization, the clever use of social networks and technological developments and their mobilization for the purposes of protest movements – are all legacies of the younger generation. The technologies and social networks that broadcasted the on goings in the Arab world introduced young Arabs in Israel to the discussions that preoccupy the Arab world at large and its young people in particular. Indeed, many of the organizations and youth movements established in recent years were directly influenced by the connection between the Arab population in Israel (especially its young population) and the turmoil that has engulfed the Arab Middle East since 2010.

It is possible to point similarities between political and social movements in the Arab world and the movements among Palestinian citizens of Israel through a considerable number of patterns of action and organization as well as in slogans. Such similarities attest to the close connection between Arab space and the Arab public in Israel and prove their reciprocal connection.<sup>11</sup> The founders of protest movements and activists who initiated demonstrations, especially those who mobilized against the Prawer Plan,<sup>12</sup> succeeding in establishing new political discourse in the public arena by importing alternative protest patterns and demonstrating their ability to mobilize the masses. New political movements built new politics, bypassing established, traditional politics and a considerable amount of their activities were conducted through non-traditional channels. Some created local civil rhetoric that was a-political and anti-partisan in nature, while other movements chose to participate in the political arena, running for positions in local councils in Arab towns; *Shabab al-Taghyir* ("Youth for Change") ran in 2013 in Nazareth, and *Kifah* ("Struggle") ran in Taybe in 2015.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the protest movement in the Arab world, and despite the success of the young Arab protest movements in instilling a new political discourse, mobilizing many young people, and challenging traditional political frameworks, they failed to bring about meaningful change in the situation of Israel's Arab minority. The change in public space was limited in scope and faded over time. Today, these movements have nearly disappeared from the public sphere and have no real presence or influence. The youth-led movements inspired by the "Arab Spring" failed to survive or develop into organizations or political organizations, nor did they challenge the existing political parties. Nevertheless, their importance should not be trivialized. They presented a new model of political activity and protest centered on simple political slogans, with

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<sup>11</sup> Jamal (Note 8 above), p 102.

<sup>12</sup> Prawer Commission was established in 2009 by the government to arrange Bedouin settlement in the Negev. The report's main innovation was to extend only 50 percent compensation for land that a landowner holds. For claims on land that was not in possession of the claimant, it was decided that monetary compensation would be paid, and that it could be converted for the purchase of residential land plots in Bedouin towns. For more information, see Thabet Abu Ras, "The Arab Bedouin in the Unrecognized Villages in the Naqab (Negev): Between the Hammer of Prawer and the Anvil of Goldberg." *Adalah's Newsletter*, Vol. 81 (April 2011): [https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/upfiles/2011/Thabet\\_English\\_2.pdf](https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/upfiles/2011/Thabet_English_2.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> For more on the youth movements, see: Hemat Zuabi, "Al-Hirak al-Shababi al-Filastini" ("Protest Movements of the Young Palestinian Generation"), *Jadal*, 22, Haifa: Mada al-Carmel, 2015. See also: Jamil Hilal, *Al-Harakat al-Shababiyyah al-Filastiniyyah* ("Movements of the Young Palestinian Generation"), Ramallah: Masarat, 2013 [in Arabic].

intelligent use of spoken Arabic, by means of new media and social networks. The causes of the failure of any social or protest movement may be rooted in internal and even external factors; in this case, it seems that the external factor that produced these movements may also explain their rapid decline. Despite the fact the protest movements of the younger generation failed to bring about substantial or structural change in Arab public sphere, in essence, the rise and fall of these movements reflect the reciprocal connection between Arabs in Israel and Arab space.

Fear of anarchist tendencies, combined with disappointment in the Arab world's failure to transition to democratic rule has led to the strengthening of realist-pragmatic trends in the Arab public. The strengthening of these trends was reflected in a survey conducted by Ha'aretz in February 2015, which found that 70 percent of Arabs in Israel assign greater importance to improving their socio-economic situation than they do to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, more than 60 percent of Arab citizens are interested in seeing Knesset members from the Joint List partner in the coalition, and around 70 percent believe that improving the economic situation is preferable to digging around for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>14</sup> Another survey carried out by the Statnet Institute in 2016 revealed that 61 percent of Arab citizens agreed to support the political party seeking partnership in the government coalition. Moreover, the findings of a 2016 survey conducted by Injaz – Center for Professional Arab Local Governance in Israel – showed that 71 percent of Arab citizens want Arab Knesset members to work on issues related to the living conditions of the Arab public more often than they deal with political issues or the Palestinian issue.<sup>15</sup> These figures indicate that the Arab public has grown accustomed to the fact of Israel's existence, and has found that its integration into the country is preferable to other options, especially in light of the breakdown of sovereignty in various Arab states and the civil wars in some of them since 2010. The findings of a survey conducted in the autumn of 2015 by Mano Geva and Mina Tzemach in cooperation with Statnet on behalf of Channel Two revealed a similar trend: 54 percent of respondents believe that the Arab members of the Knesset do not represent the Arab public faithfully, while 42 percent agree that they do faithfully represent it.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the resignation of Ta'al from the Joint List in January 2019 and its leader, Ahmed Tibi's attempts to recruit Arab public figures to his list – even people without political affiliation – also attests to the mood in the Arab public. Tibi's announcement at his party's general conference last month in Arara that he is willing to partner in blocking the future government coalition in exchange for a 64 billion shekel development budget for the Arab population, is consistent with the recent trend that most of the Arab public wants to see its elected officials as partners in the governing coalition. Such trends clearly indicate strengthening in civil discourse toward the state.

## **Conclusion**

The pragmatism of the Arab public in Israel and its rationalization of coming to terms with its relationship with the state against the backdrop of the "Arab Spring" does not

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<sup>14</sup> See: Jacky Khoury, "Most of the Arab Public in Favor of Joining the Government," *Haaretz*, 20 February 2015 [in Hebrew].

<sup>15</sup> Wadea 'Awawdy, "A Survey of Palestinian Citizens of Israel Reveals Two Important Facts." *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16 February 2017 [in Arabic].

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaiyQNuOhcQ> [in Hebrew]

solve the problematic nature of the existence of a national minority within the framework of a Jewish nation-state. This pragmatism does not indicate the Arab public's recognition of the ideological basis of the state or acceptance of Zionist ideology. To put it simply, this pragmatism reflects the internalization of reality, but not the internalization of Zionism. The Arab minority demonstrates impressive pragmatism in its behavior and its patterns of political and popular discourse, but this pragmatism does not negate its national identity or its basic positions towards the Zionist narrative. In response to the disintegration of Arab space, Israel's Arab minority is aiming to strengthen the discourse of citizenship on the basis of utilitarian considerations, since the national discourse has not led to an improvement in its status or to a fundamental change in its relations with the state and the Jewish majority.<sup>17</sup>

In view of ongoing deadlock and the discord in Arab space, the Arab minority in Israel is attempting to derive as much utilitarian benefit from its civic identity as possible. The emboldening of civic discourse stems from frustration and from a growing sense that Arab space surrounding Israel has ceased to be a mental or moral anchor.

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<sup>17</sup> Jamal (Note 8 above), p. 135.



## **Maha Karkabi Sabbah\* / Ethnoreligious Mixed Marriages Among Palestinian Women and Jewish Men in Israel: Negotiating the Breaking of Barriers**

Scholars agree that intermarriage is one of the most important tests for determining societal structure and exposing the flexibility of social, racial and religious boundaries. In the crossing of racial, ethno-cultural, religious, or class boundaries through partnering, intermarriage not only tells us about individual choices, but also reveals the scope of social divisions and the relationships between groups within a society<sup>18</sup>. Jewish-Palestinian intermarriage is a unique case that offers the opportunity to shed some light on the implications of ethno-religious mixed marriages among spouses who differ in ethnicity, religion and culture and enhances our understanding of intermarriages in the context of ethnically divided societies.

Using ten in-depth interviews with Christian and Muslim Palestinian women who live in Israel and are married to Jewish men, three questions stand at the core of this research: 1. What circumstances affect the choice of intermarriage among the Palestinian women in Israel? 2. Are there circumstances that allow women to cross social borders? 3. How do these women negotiate their “breaking of barriers” in their relationships with their community and with their husbands’ community?

### **Theory and Background**

Kalmijn contends that the occurrence of intermarriage depends upon three components: the preference for certain attributes of the spouse (assortative mating), the availability of opportunities for meeting, and the existence of formal and informal sanctions<sup>19</sup>. According to Assortative Mating Theory, intermarriage is more likely to happen among individuals of similar socio-demographic and human capital characteristics, such as age, education, income, and socio-economic background<sup>20</sup>. A number of studies have found that most partners in interracial unions share a similar educational background. The frequency of ethnic intermarriage also depends on the extent to which individuals can meet potential partners. Several reports have pointed out that educational attainment increases the opportunities to meet members of the out group<sup>21</sup>. Another dimension of intermarriage is the existence of formal and informal sanctions. Historically, marrying outside of one’s group was either officially forbidden, or resulted in sanction such as denigration, abuse, and/or a lowering of one’s social status by the group<sup>22</sup>.

Palestinian-Jewish relations have been shaped by a continued conflict that began years before the establishment of the state of Israel. Although Arabs who live in Israel are

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<sup>18</sup> Merton, 1941.

<sup>19</sup> Kalmijn, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid; Lee and Edmonston, 2005, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Sohoni, 2007.

citizens, they are subject to various forms of discrimination that have contributed to social and economic disparities<sup>23</sup>. Despite this, the Palestinian population in Israel has undergone important demographic, social, and economic changes over the past decades, including a decline in birthrate, a weakening of the extended family structure, a rise in individualism and a rise in the standard of living. Particularly important is the expansion of education – especially among women. These changes have affected Palestinian women's marriage patterns, such as delaying marriage and more women remaining single<sup>24</sup>. Overall, however, traditional patterns of marriage and gender roles have been largely preserved.

As a result of extreme segregation, the interaction and meeting points between these groups is limited. Traversing these borders through a romantic relationship becomes impossible and inconceivable for most Israelis. When, despite these barriers, such romantic relations are formed, stereotypes and the Israeli-Arab conflict have a lasting influence on them<sup>25</sup>. The low rate of ethno-religious mixed marriages in Israel have also been affected by the fact that there is no separation of religion and state as far as personal status law is concerned. There are no alternative procedures or mechanisms in place for conducting civil marriages. Therefore, interfaith marriages are legally accepted only when one spouse converts to the other partner's religion. According to the census data from 2008<sup>26</sup>, only 2.1% of Israeli Jewish men were married to Palestinian women. The percentages vary greatly according to the woman's religion: most of these marriages were with Christian women (97%) and only 3% of these marriages involved Muslim women.

## **Findings**

The study shows that women with higher levels of education shared similar views and attitudes about the importance of religion and ethnic affiliation in the assortative mating process, and that they believed that ethnicity and religious differences between spouses should not affect their choice of who they marry. However, the inherent geographical and social segregation of Arabs from Jews in Israel has affected both Jewish and Arab perceptions of socially eligible partners and potential mates. Therefore, encounters between Palestinian women and Jewish men were still not perceived by the women as expanding the boundaries of the local marriage market. As a result, the interviewees described the way in which they perceived the relationship in the beginning, as being something non-obligatory and in which marriage did not appear to be a realistic option.

The women, both Christian and Muslim, negotiated their marriages with the families. They described varied social sanctions, including rejection, anger, and in some cases, the breaking of all contact (the interviewee who experienced this sanction commented that it softened over time). Since Palestinian society is a collective one, women in intermarriages are compelled to deal with both their nuclear and extended family's reactions. However, there are some different circumstances that influence the social responses from the woman's family, such as, the absence of a patriarch, growing up in a secular environment, and the family's desire to avoid their daughter's singlehood.

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<sup>23</sup> Khamaisi, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Sabbah-Karkabi and Stier, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Hakak, 2016, 976-980.

<sup>26</sup> Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, Census data, 2008.

Encounters with the Jewish family (the majority group) were influenced not only by the women's ethnicity but also by religious affiliation. In most of the cases, the family exhibited opposition to the marriage, mainly reasoning that the spouse's religion would affect the children's religious affiliation. In addition, the women entered ongoing negotiations about the cultural differences between the two groups, such as lifestyle and family relationships. Such negotiations are inherently characterized by social inequality, as the majority group ascribes to "Western" culture, whereas Arab culture is ascribed to the "East." While elements of social inequality were particularly apparent in Jewish families' dealings with Muslim wives, the fact that the divides between Palestinians and Jews are determined by ethnic and religious belonging makes it possible for families from the majority group to deny acceptance to either Christian or Muslim Palestinian women who enter mixed marriages.

## **Conclusions**

My core findings have led to two conclusions. First, ethnic mixed marriage occurs among Muslim and Christian women because of social changes that are taking place in Palestinian society in Israel. These changes result in more mobility for educated women, which has decreased the social control of their community over their personal lives and increased opportunities for meeting partners from the majority group. Second, despite the social changes Palestinian society has undergone, political, social, and economic barriers still define the hierarchical relationship between Jewish and Palestinian society in Israel. As such, the strength of endogamy has weakened among selective groups where several factors facilitate intermarriage. I demonstrated that the association between secularism, mobility and marriage timing makes crossing social and religious borders by women more possible.

Women's negotiations were also affected by the intersections between gender, ethnicity, religion, and class. This provides an explanation for the frequency of mixed marriages among Christian Palestinian women as compared to Muslim Palestinian women, and sheds light on the way in which women of different religions are accepted into (or not accepted into) their partner's Jewish families. Although the similarity in class attributes bridges the cultural gap between Israeli Jews and Christian Palestinians, it has become clear that they do not bridge the ethnic gap.

Despite the changing opportunities in interaction between Jews and Palestinians, the slow increase in ethno-religious mixed marriages (as compared with other ethnically diverse countries) is largely a result of the way Israeli society defines, constructs, and perpetuates its ethnic and religious boundaries. As a result of the social changes taking place among the Palestinian minority, maintaining similarities in ethnicity and religious beliefs between couples remains a crucial component in assortative mating. This assures that while the strength of social change is enabling the crossing of ethno-religious borders differently, as what has been shown in several previous studies, intermarriage in Israel will continue to be a marginal phenomenon.

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## Alexander Jacob Shapiro\* / Examining Newly-Formed Mixed Arab-Jewish Municipal Coalitions

Living in the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Lod for a few months had not made me optimistic about the prospects of improved relations between Israel and its Arab citizens. I arrived to Israel with a commonly held view that political cooperation between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens is unlikely due to their rigid stances on contentious national issues surrounding the Arab-Jewish conflict. In my view, two events last year in particular would impede cooperation: violence between Israel and insurgent groups in the Gaza strip, and the passing of the Nation-State Law, which demoted Arabic's status as an official language of Israel, reinforcing (to some) the notion that non-Jewish citizens are second-class citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Furthering my doubts about cooperation was my experience on the ground in Lod, where I discovered a marginalized Arab community with scores of grievances against the Jewish majority, which is led by a right-wing Likud mayor and a prominent bloc of Jewish religious nationalists. I found that Lod's Jewish and Arab populations are largely segregated and have little desire to integrate. I sat at Shabbat dinner with Lod's Municipal CEO, Aaron Attias, who has once been quoted by saying that his goal is to emphasize Lod's Jewish nature.<sup>28</sup>

I was thus surprised when, following municipal elections in October 2018, local Arab and Jewish political parties joined together to form mixed municipal governing coalitions in Lod and in four other mixed cities: Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa, Ramle, and Akko. This historic union starkly contrasted with what I saw as tense national and local conditions, and constituted Lod's first-ever mixed governing coalition, placing them ahead of the Knesset in terms of political cooperation.

This development raises the question: what makes Arab and right-wing Jewish political parties cooperate, in the context of the Arab-Jewish conflict?

The answer can be found in the pressing needs of daily life; both Jewish and Arab citizens generally tend to care less about national issues like the conflict, while they focus more on everyday concerns, many of which transcend political and ethnic boundaries. Local politics in mixed cities provide a platform for Jewish and Arab citizens to focus on addressing their shared local concerns through mutual cooperation. I propose that future efforts to improve Arab-Jewish relations in Israel should similarly focus on concrete and locally-based actions that relate to daily issues affecting both groups.

### **National vs. Local Focus**

Academics and the general public interested in the Israeli-Arab conflict tend to focus their attention on national politics, honing in on subjects like the conflict between Israel and Hamas, Israeli settlements, and Knesset activity.<sup>29</sup> Through a national-

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<sup>27</sup> Lynfield, 2018

<sup>28</sup> Ben Simon, 2013

<sup>29</sup> Radai and Rudnitzky, 2017, 3.

political lens, political cooperation between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel seems unlikely, as their national issues seem to be insurmountable and of central importance.

However, the formation of a mixed Jewish-Arab municipal coalition in Lod brings the supposed centrality of national politics into question, and points to cooperation on shared local issues.<sup>30</sup> Both Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel prioritize local issues over national ones. For example, polls have shown that both parties think strengthening the education system and economy are more important than reaching peace with the Palestinians.<sup>31</sup> This common belief is a key factor in explaining the formation of Arab-Jewish municipal coalitions in mixed cities in general.

Local politics in mixed cities supply an effective platform for Arab-Jewish political cooperation, as Jewish and Arab citizens can focus on their shared local concerns, rather than on divisive national issues. While national politics tend to hinge on security - "a code word for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict"<sup>32</sup> - local elections are dominated by local concerns like education, infrastructure, the economy, the functioning of local authority, and community development.<sup>33</sup> Political cooperation is thus harder at the national level, where Arabs and Jews are driven apart by their historically stiff positions on divisive national issues; conversely, cooperation is easier at the local level, where Arabs and Jews can temporarily overlook national issues in favor of addressing shared local concerns.<sup>34</sup>

### **Arab Emphasis on Local Politics**

Local politics are especially important for Arab citizens, who do not feel that their everyday grievances are addressed at the national level and have shown resignation about their efficacy to impact the national political situation.<sup>35</sup> The last ten years saw a "worrying downward trend in the participation of Arab citizens in Israel in national politics."<sup>36</sup> Today, "representation of Arab citizens in national politics and centers of power is practically nonexistent."<sup>37</sup> With little power at the national level, Arab citizens across Israel turn to local politics as an avenue to address their grievances. 85% of Arab citizens voted in the 2018 local elections, compared to a 64% voting rate among Arab citizens in the 2015 national elections.

To hold power in critical local arenas, Israeli political parties must join municipal governing coalitions, as non-coalition opposition parties wield little influence. In mixed cities, this means that for Arab parties to have significant power, they must join coalitions with majority Jewish parties.

### **The Case of Lod**

Through the lens of Israeli national politics, Lod does not seem like a likely place for Arab-Jewish political cooperation. Author Ari Shavit described Lod as "the very

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Monitor, 2015; Radai and Rudnitzky, 2017, 13; Haaretz, 2015; Peace Index, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Peace Index, 2017; Radai and Rudnitzky, 2017, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Zeveloff, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Alhalabi, 2018; Zeveloff, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> IAT, 2015, 1.

<sup>35</sup> TAFI, 2015, 3.

<sup>36</sup> TAFI, 2015, 3.

<sup>37</sup> IAT 2018, 5.



epicenter of the Arab-Israeli conflict.”<sup>38</sup> Lod’s Arab and Jewish populations live largely separately, and according to local mediator, Dror Rubin, both communities have shown little interest in traditional attempts at dialogue on national issues. Lod’s mayor, Yair Revivo, is from the right-wing Likud party, and his coalition features right-wingers from Bayit Yehudi and Yisrael Beiteinu. Mayor Revivo’s administration is accused of promoting ethnoreligious gentrification by encouraging Jewish nationalists to move to Lod.<sup>39</sup> Last year, Mayor Revivo received backlash from Lod’s Arab community after he barged into a mosque in an attempt to silence the muezzin’s call to prayer, an act that was possibly inspired by pending national legislation to quiet muezzins across the country.

In spite of being at complete odds with respect to national politics, Arab and Jewish politicians and senior municipal employees in Lod claim that their shared local concerns are more critical than national issues, and that the parties were thus able to cooperate politically at the local level in order to more effectively address their communities’ shared concerns. According to Abed Alkareem Alzabarga, a city council representative, the Arab community in Lod’s most important concerns are “roads, sewage, flooding, electricity, building permits, telecommunications, and public transportation.” After these primary concerns, he mentioned housing discrimination by Jews against Arabs, followed by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Mr. Alzabarga noted that Lod’s Arab parties were thus willing to join the Jewish-majority municipal coalition in order to address their local concerns and “be a partner in the decisions for the future of Lod.”

Baruch Silver, a Jewish municipal director in Lod, agreed that the city’s Jewish and Arab citizens share ninety percent of the same issues, and can appreciate each others’ perspectives on most of the remaining issues. Mr. Silver and municipal CEO Aaron Attias both asserted that Mayor Revivo personally endeavored to create a unified Arab-Jewish coalition to enable coordinated action on shared concerns.<sup>40</sup> After the election, Mayor Revivo said, “I turn to the members of the Arab faction to join the coalition to be partners in the action and to contribute to the wonderful coexistence that prevails in the city.”<sup>41</sup>

Today, Lod’s mixed Arab-Jewish coalition has already acted together for the benefit of the city. The coalition quickly passed the 2019 city budget with no opposition.<sup>42</sup> According to Mr. Attias, Arab and Jewish city council representatives recently joined together to launch a street cleaning project in the Rakevet neighborhood, Lod’s poorest and most dangerous area. Mr. Attias said the city never saw high-level political cooperation like this before the formation of the mixed coalition.

Indeed, this type of cooperation has proved morally and politically difficult for both Jewish and Arab parties. Due to opposition from both sides, there had never been a mixed coalition in Lod, and there has still never been one in the Knesset.<sup>43</sup> Jewish parties that work with Arab citizens are called “weak” right-wingers. Arab parties that collaborate with Jewish citizens are deemed traitors, especially if they work with right-wing Jewish parties who support settlements and armed conflict.

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<sup>38</sup> Shavit, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Shapiro, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Tabak, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Ezori, 2018 (Hebrew).

<sup>42</sup> Ezori, 2019 (Hebrew).

<sup>43</sup> Haaretz, 2015; History of the Knesset, 2018.

Conversely, Mr. Silver maintained that right-wing Jewish parties and Arab parties in Lod can work together because neither side feels they are betraying their positions on national issues, as the biggest issues in Lod aren't national - they're shared by both Arabs and Jews and are related to "how to make Lod a better city." Faten al-Zinati, an Arab social activist in Lod, said "I don't want to separate us from the West Bank and Gaza, but we need to do something for ourselves."<sup>44</sup> And Mr. Alzabarga similarly noted, "We are part of the Palestinian people, and we care about Gaza and the West Bank. But we need to focus on our immediate needs here. I don't feel that we're offending our values."

## **Lessons and Discussion**

The formation of unified Arab-Jewish governing coalitions in five mixed cities across Israel shows that Israel's Arab and Jewish citizens are willing to work together to address shared local issues. One reason these coalitions were able to form was that the parties involved focused on their similarities (local issues), rather than their differences (national issues related to the conflict). While traditional mediation efforts tend to ask participants to discuss the biggest issues of the day, both the aforementioned political developments and academic literature suggest that a more effective tactic for cooperation and peacebuilding is to bring groups together through actions towards shared goals.<sup>45</sup>

This action-oriented and needs-focused strategy should be utilized across Israel to further increase Arab political participation and integration. Such a strategy could be utilized at the national level, as Arab citizens across the country have already shown an openness to Arab parties joining national Jewish governing coalitions.<sup>46</sup> This reflects a growing willingness by Arab citizens to fully integrate and participate in Israeli political life, even if it means temporarily overlooking national issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>47</sup>

Greater Arab integration could have a number of positive effects for Arab citizens, including: (1) better living conditions and life standards; (2) deepened involvement in society and the economy; and (3) increased sense of belonging.<sup>48</sup> Greater Arab integration can also benefit all of Israel by increasing Arab economic activity and heightening the chances of cooperation and understanding between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens. Situations where Arabs and Jews work together towards shared goals present opportunities to overcome the "sense of threat and fear" that, according to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, "lies at the core of how each side views the other,"<sup>49</sup> and will ultimately set the stage for a more collaborative, peaceful future.

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<sup>44</sup> Faten al-Zinati works at Lod's Matnas Chicago, one of the few community centers in Israel that serves Arab and Jewish beneficiaries. For more information, visit <http://www.matnaslod.org.il/page.php?type=shluha&id=816+> (Hebrew).

<sup>45</sup> Koonce, 2011; Larsen, 2014; Luhmann, 1979; Schiefer, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Radaï and Rudnitzky, 2017, 16; IAT, 2015, 4; Khoury, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Radaï and Rudnitzky, 2017, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Lavie, 2018, 20; Tatari, 2014, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Shamir qtd in Lavie, 2018, 12.

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