

Palestinians - Minority Rights Group

Profile

Approximately 1.8 million Palestinians form around 20.8 per cent of Israel's population. However, their population is growing faster than the population as a whole. Though the majority are Muslim, there is also a sizeable minority of Palestinian Christians as well as Druze. While some surveys have suggested that the majority of Palestinian Israelis identify positively with Israel, many feel excluded because of its identity as a Jewish state. Many remain segregated from the Jewish majority, with most concentrated in Palestinian-majority towns that are among the poorest and more marginalized areas in Israel.

Historical context

Following Israel's victory in 1948, Palestinian Israelis were kept under military government until 1966, dependent on permits to leave their villages or obtain work outside them. In this way it was impossible to organize any protest or civil resistance. They were also co-opted to support the system by the offer of certain benefits, that is, employment or educational opportunities, in return for service to the state or a political party. Since Palestinian Israelis were overwhelmingly farmers, the state deliberately sequestered over half their farmlands in order to destroy any independent economic viability, encourage emigration and concentrate food production in Jewish hands. Military government was abandoned in 1966 to allow free movement of labour in support of Israel's economic expansion, but Palestinian Israelis generally found it impossible to integrate into the mainstream of Israeli society, except as cheap labour.

The Six-Day War in 1967 and the resulting expansion of Israeli control over newly occupied territories led to increased contacts between Palestinian Israelis and Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. As their grievances persisted, Palestinian Israelis also became more involved in political and sometimes militant opposition to the Israeli government.

The first *intifada* (uprising) from 1987 to 1991 began in Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza and quickly spread throughout the occupied territories. The rebellion and Israeli security response placed an additional burden on the relationship between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. Peace talks between Israel and Palestinian leaders initiated in 1991 ended the *intifada*, and the 1993 Oslo Accords offered some hope that increased representation for Palestinians in the occupied territories and movement toward a Palestinian state would also help to improve acceptance in Israel of its Palestinian citizens. However, Jewish and Palestinian extremists found a common enemy in the accords. A right-wing Jewish assassin murdered Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and Palestinian militants launched suicide attacks in Israel with increasing frequency. Israeli voters elected a new government in 1996 led by Oslo opponent Binyamin Netanyahu, who pursued the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. The careful process of building mutual trust

gave way to a downward spiral of attack, counter-attack and increasing distrust in Israeli government and society not only of Palestinians in the occupied territories, but also of Palestinian Israeli citizens.

Amid rising Palestinian resentment in 2000, a renewed US-led peace initiative failed in July and was followed in September by a highly provocative visit by right-wing Israeli politician Ariel Sharon and other members of his Likud Party to the Temple Mount, a site holy to both Judaism and Islam. Surrounded by hundreds of armed guards, Sharon was ostensibly asserting the right of Jews to visit the site. The following day riots erupted in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and the second *intifada* began. The uprising by Palestinians in the occupied territories sparked protests of solidarity by Palestinian Israelis that also expressed anger at their own unequal treatment within Israel. Police killed 13 Palestinian Israelis and injured hundreds more at one protest in October 2000.

Palestinian Israelis boycotted the 2001 elections that made Ariel Sharon prime minister in protest of their ongoing marginalization within Israel and Israeli responses to the *intifada*. In 2002 the government began erecting a separation wall between Israel and the West Bank (while also incorporating parts of the West Bank). The barrier, built in the name of security, has had the effect of separating many Palestinian citizens of Israel from family members on the other side.

The so-called Orr Commission, named after the Israeli High Court justice that served as its chair, was established to investigate the rioting that broke out within Israel in October 2000 and released its report in September 2003. Among its conclusions, the Orr Commission found neglect and discrimination by the Israeli government with regard to its Arab population. The government responded by setting up a ministerial committee to implement the Orr Commission's recommendations and adopted that body's proposals in June 2004. However, many problems of discrimination remain.

In July 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon in response to Lebanon-based Hezbollah militants' abduction of two Israeli soldiers. Palestinian and Jewish Israelis maintained fundamentally different views of the ensuing month-long conflict, as well as the continuing turmoil in the occupied territories. Palestinian Israeli antipathy towards the Israeli government's treatment of their ethnic kin spiked again at the end of 2008, as Israel launched air strikes on Gaza that paved the way for a land invasion in January 2009. Israel said it was responding to ongoing rocket attacks by Gaza's ruling militant group Hamas, but mounting civilian casualties shocked the world. The offensive also threatened to defer prospects for a lasting political settlement even further, ensuring that tensions between Palestinian Israelis and their government would not abate in the near future.

Current issues

Israel has employed discriminatory planning policies against its Palestinian citizens, leading to significant housing inequality. The Israel Land Authority has issued tenders for the construction of more housing units in the illegal settlements in the West Bank than it did for Palestinian communities in Israel, despite there being more than double the number of inhabitants in these villages than Jewish residents living in the occupied West Bank. As a result, in contrast to the extensive planning

and development of Jewish localities, Arab neighbourhoods in Israel have urbanized without any overarching strategy in place to meet the needs of the population.

Incitement to violence and racist language on social media directed at the Palestinian minority in Israel rose dramatically during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, as did incidents of abusive graffiti and attacks on private property. Palestinians were also harassed and physically attacked by ultra-nationalist gangs during demonstrations against Operation Protective Edge. The hostile atmosphere was aggravated by provocative statements from public figures and by attempts to pass legislation undermining the rights of Palestinian Israelis.

Ahead of Israel's elections in March 2015 subsequently won by Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud Party, Netanyahu issued a much-publicized warning that 'Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls'. This reflected a broader atmosphere of racist incitement against Palestinian Israelis that played a critical part in the election's outcome. Nevertheless, the election was unprecedented in the inclusion of a major Palestinian party. Following a January Supreme Court ruling raising the minimum electoral threshold for parties to enter Israel's parliament, the Knesset, Palestinian Israelis integrated their four main political parties into a Joint List with a common platform in order to achieve political representation. While their political concerns gained significance in discourse surrounding the election, the Court's ruling also effectively forced the abandonment of their participation through multiple parties with diverse ideologies and agendas. Nevertheless, Palestinian Israeli representation grew stronger following the 2015 election. The number of Arab Knesset members (MK's) increased from 12 to 17, with 13 belonging to the Joint List.

A rise in violence between Israelis and Palestinians was sparked in Jerusalem on the eve of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, in mid-September 2015 when Israeli security forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and clashed with Palestinian youths. Violence subsequently spread throughout Israel and the occupied territories, with widespread confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinians. Near-daily attacks on Israeli security personnel and civilians took place, primarily in the form of stone throwing and stabbings, while systematic violence against Palestinians intensified. Human rights organizations raised concerns about attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinians and excessive use of force by Israeli military and police, condemning repressive police acts and extra-judicial killings.

In November 2015, steps were taken by Prime Minister Netanyahu to use legislation to erode the rights of non-Jewish minorities in Israel by advancing the 'nation-state' bill, first proposed in 2011, which defines Israel as 'the nation-state of the Jewish people', not of its citizens, of whom around one-fifth are non-Jewish Palestinians. Similar ethno-nationalist concerns appear to guide other policies of the Netanyahu government.

Israel has continued to adopt legislation curtailing the rights of Palestinian Israelis, who are subjected to wide-ranging discrimination in housing, social welfare, education, criminal justice and other areas of their lives. In June 2015, the Knesset passed a new 'Anti-Terror Law', which expands the definition of terrorist organization membership to include 'passive members' and likely will be used to suppress and criminalize legitimate political, humanitarian and cultural activities by

Palestinian Israelis. Just two days prior, an emergency provision to Israel's Family Reunification Law was renewed, preventing Palestinians from the occupied territories from obtaining or passing on to their children legal status in Israel or East Jerusalem through marrying Israeli citizens or residents.

The 'nation-state bill' was finally debated by the Knesset in 2018. By the summer, the Knesset was debating a portion of the draft text that would allow communities to protect their unique identity 'on the basis of their religion and nationality'. The proposal was seen by critics as paving the way for legal segregation. A revised draft, later adopted, proposed that the government would 'encourage' Jewish-only communities. The bill was finally adopted in July 2018 by a vote of 62-55 and two abstentions. The new law establishes that, 'Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and they have an exclusive right to national self-determination in it.' It also strips Arabic of its status as an official language alongside Hebrew and downgrades it to having a 'special status'. The law was heavily criticised by opposition MK's, especially those belonging to the Palestinian Israeli minority, and human rights groups.