
ISRAEL: Address inequalities facing Arabs, says ICG

TEL AVIV, 19 March 2012 (IRIN) - Urgent steps should be taken to address the widespread marginalization of Arab minorities in Israel, including Palestinians living in occupied East Jerusalem, to improve their livelihoods and encourage sustainable peace in the Middle East, says the International Crisis Group (ICG).

"Palestinian citizens [of Israel] are politically marginalized, economically underprivileged, ever more unwilling to accept systemic inequality and ever more willing to confront the status quo", the think-tank said in a [new report](#), entitled Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

As of 2011, there were about 1.5 million Arabs in Israel, comprising about 20 percent of the population of around [7.7 million](#). These figures include the 285,000 Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem, most of whom do not hold Israeli citizenship but have permanent residency.

But inequalities between Arabs and Jews in Israel span many fields of public life, and are enshrined in parts of the legal system and [government practices](#).

According to the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (Adalah), about 30 Israeli laws discriminate directly against Arab citizens. One of them, for instance, is the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law, which prohibits Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza who are married to Israeli citizens from acquiring Israeli residency.

In other areas of governance and government practices, discrimination happens less overtly, but nevertheless affects people severely.

"I am not a squatter"

One of the places where Arabs feel marginalized as a result of official housing policies is Jaffa, Tel Aviv. Here, about 40 percent of the Palestinian population live in so called "absentee ownership" properties, designating formerly Palestinian properties taken over by the Israeli state after the 1948 war, after its Palestinian residents had fled, or were expelled.

Currently about 500 of the 2,000 "absentee-property" homes inhabited by Palestinians in Jaffa face eviction orders, because they are considered "squatters" by the Israel Land Administration, the government body in charge of administering national land, which also oversees "absentee property".

"If the government destroys my house in April as scheduled, I will build it up again, and even build another one beside," Esther Saba, who lives on social welfare with her husband and three children in a small house in Jaffa, told IRIN.

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"In Palestinian Jaffa, the poorest people live on the most expensive piece of soil in the country," Judith Ilani from Jaffa's Popular Housing Committee, told IRIN, adding: "Even if I have a doghouse close to the sea, the value of it comes from what you can build once you demolish the doghouse."

Many among Jaffa's Palestinian community expressed certainty that they would never be evicted from their homes if they were Jewish. "If I was Jewish, no one would have let me live without electricity in this shack for five years. I am not a squatter," Esther Saba said.

Indeed, many observers of the situation in Jaffa have pointed out that as part of a wider gentrification process, poor Palestinian residents are being pushed out in order to make space for wealthier newcomers.

Restricted access to land

For most Arabs in Israel, access to land and the continuing Israeli measures to expel them from their homes are highly emotional topics. In this regard, ICG cautiously warns about the potential for escalation.

"In addition to restrictions on Muslim access to holy sites, especially in Jerusalem, discriminatory policies regarding land and housing have potential of sparking localized violence in the future, if the grievances are not addressed," Ofer Zalberg, senior analyst with ICG in Jerusalem, told IRIN.

About 93 percent of Israel's land is nationalized, and much of it is allocated explicitly for Jewish communities. And while Arab citizens constitute 20 percent of the population, only about 3.5 percent of Israel's land is owned by them.

The potential for conflict over land issues is particularly high in the Israeli Negev desert, where Bedouin communities have been struggling over land rights for years now, Zalberg said, adding: "Jewish-Arab tensions within Israel are growing and may dangerously flare up."

To many Arab citizens of Israel, questions of identity, self-definition and education lie at the heart of their perceived marginalization within a Jewish-dominated, Israeli state.

Teaching one's own history

"Discrimination against Arab schools happens on three levels," Yousef Jabareen, head of Dirasat, a policy think-tank for the Palestinian minority, told IRIN. "The first one is allocation of resources. Secondly, Palestinian-Arab identity is not recognized by the education system. And thirdly, there are simply no Arab educators inside the decision-making processes."

Palestinian Arab schoolchildren make up about 25 percent of the country's school students, or around 480,000 pupils. "We expect the Ministry of Education to

allocate the same share of 25 percent to Arab education. Not three times less," Jabareen said, adding: "We are currently facing a lack of about 6,000 classrooms in the Arab sector."

In addition to a lack of classrooms, the drop-out rate among Arab pupils is two times higher than among Jewish students. Only 30 percent of Arabs who take the national matriculation exam needed to enter university also qualify, as compared to 75 percent of Jewish youths.

To Arab educators in Israel, an end to marginalization essentially means the permission to teach one's history.

"One of the most important demands is that the [Israeli] Education Ministry allow Arab students to study their own history - to learn about the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948, about Palestinian protests, and about their own poetry and literature," Jabareen said.

"Finding solutions to national identity issues will be necessary for reaching full reconciliation. Otherwise Palestinian Arabs will continue to feel marginalized, unable to feel that they belong, even if socio-economic equality is addressed," Zalzburg said.

The ICG suggests changes in three stages. First, the Israeli state and its Arab citizens should try to lower tensions, while socio-economic inequalities should be reduced. In a second step, essential questions over the nature of the Arab minority and its status in Israel should be addressed through inter-communal dialogue.

But a grand bargain over rights between Israel's Jewish and Arab communities is unlikely to happen, unless it is integrated into a wider Israeli-Palestinian peace process towards a two-state solution, the ICG report suggests: "Under one possible option, Palestinians would recognise Jews as Israel's national majority with a right to self-determination, while the state would officially recognise Palestinian citizens as a national minority with equal individual as well as specific collective rights."

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