

ISRAEL-OPT: Upping sticks and heading for Ramallah

JERUSALEM, 7 September 2012 (IRIN) - An increasing number of Palestinian citizens of Israel are moving to Ramallah in the West Bank in search of jobs, education or what they perceive as a more congenial environment.

"They are not running away, they are trying to create a future for themselves. And if that requires them to go elsewhere instead of staying in the state that discriminates against them, what can we do?" said Rania Laham-Grayeb, deputy director of Mussawa, the Advocacy Centre for Arab Citizens in Israel.

While marital reasons and the desire to live in an Arab-only environment are other motives for making the move, marginalization in Israel is also a significant push factor.

"This development has to do with discrimination against Arabs in Israel," Samer Salame, head of the employment unit in the Palestinian Authority's ministry of labour, told IRIN. "They come to the West Bank to work in the IT sector, academia, open businesses, or study. They often live here as well."

However, fearful of losing their citizenship or residency in Israel, most do not register their change of work or living place - there are no official figures for the number of Palestinian citizens of Israel living in the occupied Palestinian territory, though Salame said there were at least 1,000 Israeli citizens running businesses or employed in Ramallah, not counting students and artists.

As of 2011, there were about [1.5 million Palestinians in Israel](#), comprising about 20 percent of the population of 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 status.

Israel's Arab citizens are politically [marginalized](#) and economically underprivileged, according to a recent International Crisis Group [report](#).

Adalah, an NGO giving legal aid to Palestinians in Israel, [says](#) 30 laws in Israel discriminate either directly or indirectly against Palestinian citizens. "That puts Israeli democracy under a big question mark," said Mussawa's Laham-Grayeb.

The Citizenship and Entry to Israel law - prohibiting Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza who are married to Israeli citizens from acquiring Israeli residency - is another reason why Israeli-Arabs are leaving for a new life in the West Bank. "They have no other choice. Family considerations are a big emigration factor, as it is impossible for Palestinians in Israel to get married with someone from the West Bank and live together in Israel."

Employment

Israeli citizen Saed Nashef, who grew up in a mixed neighbourhood in Haifa, graduated from an Israeli university in electrical engineering, and then worked for years as an IT-specialist in the USA and Jordan. When he came back to look for work in Israel, he found it difficult, he said.

"I applied for more than 100 jobs. Once, the interviewer said: 'Oh you are an Arab from Nazareth. Unfortunately, we are doing stuff for the Israeli army, I am sorry'," Nashef told IRIN. Being refused positions for security reasons is a common reality for many Palestinians in Israel.

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The Israeli Foreign Ministry told IRIN Israel does not discriminate against people due to their ethnicity, but that an army-related background might be required for certain positions. This applied not only to Palestinian Israelis, but also new immigrants who had not done military service in Israel.

Today, Nashef is running his own company in Ramallah. "But salaries here are much lower than in Israel and the environment is less exciting," he said. "I would like to work in Israel. It is more challenging, more cosmopolitan. But until those racist barriers disappear, you don't feel the cities are welcoming you."

Reacting to these allegations the Israeli Ministry of Labour told IRIN that Israel's labour legislation is "very progressive in terms of equal opportunities". Recently an equal employment opportunities commission was established. National commissioner Ina Soltanovich-David told IRIN: "We see the subject of discrimination against the Arab population in the workforce as one of the main issues and therefore invest a big part of our resources in eliminating the forbidden phenomena."

Education

Mahmoud Mi'ari, who was to have taken up a post at Haifa University in 1972, left Israel long ago.

"Only 10 days before I was supposed to start teaching, the Shin Bet [Israeli secret service] cancelled my appointment," said Mi'ari, a professor at Ramallah's Birzeit University. He was rejected for security reasons. Mi'ari said he never found out what exactly was held against him. "The general feeling of marginalization and discrimination just made me want to move to the Palestinian side."

Other Arab intellectuals highlighted the marginalization of Palestinian scholars in the Israeli academic system as the main reason for leaving, noting the requirement to work in Hebrew. Majid Shihade, another professor at Birzeit University who is an Israeli citizen, told IRIN. "Our skills are worth more here."

Students are also turning their backs on Israeli universities. According to the [Israeli Kneset Research and Information Centre](#) (link in Hebrew), some 1,300 Arab students are currently studying at West Bank universities, including some 800 enrolled at the American University of Jenin, and 400 mostly Bedouin students at the university in Hebron. Some 5,400 Palestinian Israeli students are pursuing university education in Jordan.

The research centre also notes that Palestinian students who graduate from Israeli universities find it difficult to get jobs if they have not completed military service.

Cultural ghetto?

"Artists, authors, all kinds of people in the culture field move to the West Bank. There is simply more potential here than in Israel, where the Ministry of Culture spends less than 3 percent of its budget in support of cultural organizations," Laham-Grayeb said.

Artist Elias Nicola from Haifa is one of those Palestinians with Israeli citizenship who came to live in Ramallah for cultural reasons. He is managing a restaurant attached to the al-Kassaba Theatre in Ramallah, after having run a bar in Haifa before. Teachers, artists, students, and businessmen dealing with traditional handicrafts were all attracted by the cultural environment, he added.

However, Nicola expressed concern that Palestinian emigration from Israel is what the government might want, saying: "They would be happy to see all of us live in Ramallah."

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