

You deserve a factual look at...

The Arabs of Israel

Are they a "persecuted minority?"

The world is once again confronted with violence in Israel and its administered territories. On the pretext of one of Israel's ministers visiting the Temple Mount, the Palestinians erupted in bloody rioting, which has not yet ended and in which hundreds so far have died. Most distressing, Israeli Arabs, citizens of the country, have joined in the rioting and have suffered and caused many casualties.

What are the facts?

Israel is a Democratic Country. Israel is an open, pluralistic, and egalitarian society. Different religions, cultures, and social traditions co-exist. Protection of such diversity is embedded in Israel's traditions and confirmed by the government. About 20% of the population (over one million people) are non-Jews, most of them Arabs, and some Druze. Like all other Israeli citizens, they have full rights to vote and to hold elective office. Both Arabs and Druze hold seats in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

Every Knesset, since the founding of the State in 1948, has had Arab and Druze members. All transactions in the Knesset are simultaneously translated into Arabic, and Arab members may address the Knesset in Arabic.

It is official policy of the Israeli government to foster the language, culture, and traditions of the Arab minority, in the educational system and in daily life. Arabic is an official language in Israel, together with Hebrew. Israel's Arabic press is the most vibrant and independent of any country in the region. There are more than 20 Arabic periodicals. They publish what they please, subject only to the same military censorship as Jewish publications. There are daily TV and radio programs in Arabic. Arabic is taught in Jewish secondary schools. Israeli universities are renowned centers of learning in the history and literature of the Arab Middle East.

Education and literacy of the Arab population in Israel is as high as and probably higher than in any Arab country. The literacy rate among Israeli Arabs is 95%, virtually the same as for Israeli Jews. There are close to 1,000 Arab educational institutions in Israel, with about 300,000 students—just about 25 times as many as in 1948, when the State of Israel was created, Ninety percent of Arab children attend school, probably

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the highest ratio of any Arab population anywhere. Israeli universities and technical institutions are freely available to the Arabs. About 5,000 Arab students attend such schools.

Israeli Arabs Enjoy Full Equality in Law and in Fact. All religious communities in Israel enjoy the full protection of the State. Israeli Arabs—Moslems, as well as many Christian denominations—are free to exercise their faiths, to observe their own weekly day of rest and holidays, and to administer their own internal affairs. Each community has its own religious councils and courts, and has full jurisdiction over religious affairs, including

matters of personal status, such as marriage and divorce. The holy sites of all religions are administered by their own authorities and protected by the government.

In contrast to the non-Israeli Arab world, Arab women in Israel enjoy the same status as men. Israeli law grants women equal rights, including the right to vote and to be elected to public office, prohibits polygamy, child marriage, and the barbarity of female sexual mutilation. It has thus vastly changed the status of women, to far above that of any country in the region. Israeli health standards are by far the highest in the Middle East. Israeli health institutions are freely open to all Arabs, on the same basis as they are to Jews.

There is, however, one difference between the "rights" of Arabs and Jews in Israel. Israeli and Druze men are required to do three years of military service and then serve one month every year until they are 50. Arabs are exempted from military duty and are not required to perform any compensating civilian service. Since the surrounding Arab states are the avowed enemies of Israel and dedicated to its destruction (there is "peace" with Egypt and Jordan), this exemption is granted by the Israeli government to its Arab citizens, so as to spare them conflicts of loyalty and conscience.

Contrary to propaganda and to what many believe, the Arabs in Israel are full-fledged citizens, enjoy every civil right, have the same status in law as Jewish Israelis, and can freely move all over the country without fear of being harassed, attacked, or killed. In summary, they enjoy the highest standards of living and liberty of any Arabs in the Middle East. In a recent poll, 70% of Israel's Arabs declared that they identified with and felt loyalty to the Palestinians, and not to the state of Israel. Significantly, however, the same percentage (70%) declared that they would much prefer to live in Israel than in any other country in the area. It is instructive and sobering to compare the condition of the approximately one million Arabs in Israel with that of the pitiful remnants of Jewry in Arab countries. Jews have been living in Arab countries for almost 2,000 years. Under Arab dominance, they were always third-class citizens and subject to harassment and persecution. There were about 900,000 Jews in Arab countries in 1946—now there are fewer than 25,000. But there are now over one million Arabs in Israel, many more than after the exodus in 1948 – a manifold increase. That alone would seem to prove that things can't be all that bad for Arabs in Israel.

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