

# Israeli Arabs and Jews: Dispelling the Myths, Narrowing the Gaps

*By Amnon Rubinstein*

Among the vociferous accusations leveled against Israel, one that is directed at neither its occupation of the West Bank nor its treatment of the Palestinians is the charge that the Jewish state mistreats its own Arab citizens. This indictment, which reached its peak at the infamous UN-sponsored Durban Conference against Racism in 2001, is repeated habitually and ranges from accusations of rampant anti-Arab discrimination to condemnation of Israel as an "apartheid state." So widespread are these accusations that for some they have become a self-evident truism.

The purpose of this study is to examine the truth of this truism.

## **Gaps between Arabs and Jews inside Israel**

Arabs in Israel enjoy equal political rights, but are exempted from military service. Their communities suffer from lower budgetary allocations, lower average per capita incomes, and a lower rate of participation in public life. Above all, there is a sense of total estrangement, if not animosity, between the two communities.

These gaps are indisputable, and it would require a tremendous national effort to abolish them. One must take into consideration that this is a minority that identifies with and belongs to the hostile Arab majority population that surrounds Israel. Indeed, in recent years, especially since Yasir Arafat launched his terror campaign against Israel in 2000, some Arab members of Knesset have missed no opportunity to denounce the very existence of Israel.

But the significant and generally unknown fact is that, despite worsening relations, the gaps between Arabs and Jews in Israel are, to a large degree, inherited from British Mandatory Palestine; more importantly, under Israeli sovereignty the gaps have been narrowing in a very dramatic way. This is certainly true with regard to two all-important indicators—health and education.

## **Differences between Muslim and Christian Arabs**

In examining these gaps, we must distinguish between Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs. Christians form a small but significant minority within Israel—2 percent of Israel's population, 9 percent of its Arab population. Two facts about this minority are generally unknown: First, among all Middle Eastern countries, Israel has the only

Christian community that is growing in numbers. Secondly, this community has notched the most impressive advances in the areas of education and health of any group within Israel.

Following the Israeli War of Independence—which was a particularly devastating experience for the Christian villages of the Galilee, including land confiscation and deportation—the Christian population in the country plummeted, reaching a meager 34,000 in 1960. However, since then, their numbers have steadily increased, totaling 111,000 by 2000. They are the only Christian community in the Middle East to have grown numerically—though not proportionally—in the post-World War II period.

Of course, the proportion of Christians to Muslims and of Christians to Jews in Israel has not kept pace because Christians have a lower birth rate than Muslims, and have had no significant immigration, as have the Jews. Between 1967 and 2001, the Israeli Christian population increased by 1.8 percent per annum, as compared with 4.4 percent per annum for the Muslims. Whereas Christians comprised 21 percent of the Arab population in the '50s, they are less than 10 percent today.

Paradoxically, the very same factor—small family size—that has reduced their proportion of the general population has been responsible for the extraordinary achievements of this minority. For example, the infant mortality rate among Christian Arabs in Israel in the 1996-99 period was 4.9 per thousand births, as compared with 9.5 among Muslims and 4.8 among Jews. Over the years, infant mortality in this community has steadily declined. By 2001, it recorded one of the lowest rates in the world—2.6 per thousand—the same as Scandinavia and Japan.

In the realm of higher education, Christians go straight to the head of the class. They attend university at the rate of 323 per thousand (for those born in the years 1965-69) as compared with 108 per thousand for Muslim and Druze and a national average of 131 per thousand.

Although Christian Arabs comprise 9 percent of all Arabs living in Israel, they represent more than a quarter of the Arab work force, due to the higher rate of participation of women in the work force. While there are no reliable data on their individual economic status, the economic ranking of Christian villages is strong, in contrast to other rural Arab villages. For example, the Christian villages of Jish and Mi'ilya are ranked in sixth place on a one-to-ten scale, similar to Jewish Arad, and the village of Fasouta is in fourth place, like Jewish Safed. Muslim rural villages are generally ranked in the lowest place, tenth.

These data are of interest for two reasons: First, they refute the argument that Israel is racist in the way it treats its Arab citizens and that it is essentially an "apartheid" state. These data do not refute allegations of discrimination or deprivation in budgetary allocations to local authorities, nor do they speak to the underrepresent-

tation of Arabs in commercial, public, and governmental bodies. But they indicate that other factors—such as family size and the decisions of the local authorities—bear some of the responsibility for the gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

### **Educational Differentials between Arabs and Jews in Israel**

It is impossible to speak of the educational gaps between Arabs and Jews without considering the educational system inherited at the establishment of the State of Israel.

These disparities are not bridged overnight. The eighth and last statistical year book published by the British Mandatory government in Palestine in 1945 provides a glimpse at the gaps that existed between Jews and Muslim Arabs at the beginning of the state:

1. In 1943-44 there were 204,000 children attending school in Mandatory Palestine—some 100,000 Jewish students and some 105,000 Arab students, most of whom were Christian. The percentage of children attending school that year was 90 percent to 100 percent among the Jews and the Christians, but only 35 percent among the Muslims.
2. The Mandatory year book explains the gap by noting that under Turkish-Ottoman rule, Muslims relied on the public school system, and under the Mandate, the government had not been able “in spite of its efforts since the occupation [i.e., the British occupation], to meet the public demand for schooling.”
3. A second explanation from the year book: “The average period of attendance at school is shorter [among Muslims] than among the Jewish and Christian communities.... Further the demand for education of girls in Muslim villages, though increasing, has been relatively small.... In all the villages, the inhabitants wish to secure schooling for the boys first.”
4. The year book’s estimate of the percentage of Arab children studying in government (public) schools was: in the cities, 85 percent of boys and 60 percent of girls; in the villages, 60 percent of boys and 7 percent of girls. In non-governmental Muslim schools, the estimates are even lower. At the end of 1943-44, among a total Arab population of over a million, only 958 Arab students—190 of whom were girls—were enrolled in high school. In July 1943, 160 students passed the governmental matriculation exams: 47 in Hebrew, 78 in Arabic, and 35 in English. There was no Arab institution of higher learning.<sup>1</sup>

This is a portrait of an extremely weak educational system. But, in fact, Israel did not inherit even this much of an Arab school network at the beginning of statehood,

because the urban Arab intelligentsia fled the country—or were forced to leave—during the 1948-49 War of Independence. Israel came into possession of a “scorched earth” in the area of Muslim Arab education, a field emptied of both its teachers and its students.

Enormous gains have been made in every sector of the educational system. Today Israelis, naturally, do not compare their schools to either the educational conditions that prevailed during the Mandate period or those of neighboring Arab states. But significantly, not only have both educational systems, the Jewish and the Arab, advanced rapidly, but the gaps between them have narrowed drastically.

In the Mandatory period the ratio of Arab to Jewish students at the elementary school level was 1:3 for boys and 1:15 for girls. In 2001 the gap between Arab and Jewish enrollment in the six-to-thirteen age group was less than 1 percent. At the fourteen-to-seventeen age level, the gap between Arabs and Jews was 17 percent. The biggest revolution has been with respect to girls: The gap between Arab and Jewish girls at the high school level was only 10 percent in 2001. And there is no point in comparing the percentages of Arab Muslim students on the higher education level in Mandatory times and today, because during the Mandate there were virtually no such students in the Muslim community.

Thus, under Israeli rule, despite real budgetary discrimination against Arab schools that existed until the mid-'90s, when it was eliminated, the educational gap between Jews and Muslims has been narrowing at a remarkable rate. This is due to the establishment of a modern educational system in the Arab sector, and because the thirst for learning, even among the rural population, has grown.

### **Comparison of Ethnic-Religious Gaps in Israel and in Europe**

These statistics require further elucidation. The ethnic-religious gap in Israel exists, but is small when compared with the gap between children of immigrants and children of the native-born in Europe.

Thus, in France a mere 4 percent of immigrants' children go to university as compared with 25 percent of the rest of the population, according to a report in the London *Economist* (November 22, 2002). Since about half the immigrants in France are Muslim, one could deduce that the proportion of Muslim immigrants' children attending university in France must be less than 4 percent. It follows that the ratio of Muslim to nonimmigrant French university students is less than the 1:6 ratio indicated by the *Economist*. By comparison, Israel, despite the bitter ethnic-religious conflicts that exist, can boast a ratio of Jewish to Arab admissions to Israeli universities of 3:1—half (or less) the gap in the French data.

This comparison is especially striking because France prides itself on being a republic of all its citizens, a shining model of equality of rights, irrespective of religion and race; it is often portrayed as opposite to the model of Israel, which defines itself as a Jewish state. Furthermore, university admission is free to all those accepted in France. So why is there such a gap in attainment of a university education in a country that belongs to all its citizens?

Similarly, in Britain, which advocates multiculturalism and has an advanced and well-integrated educational system, the results are not much better. The results of the General Cambridge School Exam (GCSE) taken by sixteen-year-olds were reported by ethnic origin of the students in the 2001 census. Students of Caucasian or Indian origin had a 45 percent to 59 percent rate of success. Students from two Muslim countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, had only a 22 percent rate of success. (The rates for girls taken separately were higher for both groups, but the differences based on ethnic origin were similar.)

The exams needed for university admission in Britain (the A-level exams) yield even worse differentials. According to 1991 data from Birmingham, only 5 percent to 7 percent of students of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin passed these matriculation exams. In Israel, by contrast, the ratio of Muslims to Jews passing the Bagrut (matriculation) exams is 4:5. Of course, within Israel, the Muslim Arabs are a native minority, while in Britain and France they are immigrant communities. Yet in Israel the gap has been narrowing at an impressive rate, while in Britain and France there has been no progress.

### **Comparison of Infant Mortality and Life Expectancy Rates for Israeli Arabs and Jews**

The infant mortality rate in Mandatory Palestine in 1943-44, the last year for which such data were available (from the Mandatory year book cited above), was almost 10 percent for Muslims, 7 percent for Arab Christians, and 3.5 percent for Jews. Thus the infant death rate for Jews was half that of Christians and one-third that of Muslim Arabs. Mortality rates for children up to the age of five were even more shocking: 21 percent among Muslims, 10 percent among Arab Christians, and 4.5 percent among Jews.

In Israel, mortality rates have dropped dramatically since the establishment of the state, and even more significantly have the gaps between the Jewish and Arab sectors declined. In 2001, the infant mortality rate among Jews was 0.41 percent, among Muslims, 0.82 percent, and among Christians, 0.2 percent. Thus the gap between Jews and Muslims narrowed by a third, and the gap between Jews and Arab Christians was eliminated.

Even more dramatic was the narrowing gap in child mortality rates, for children up to age five, between Jewish and Arab Israelis. The Muslim rate sank from a shockingly high 21 percent in 1944 to 0.5 percent in 2001, and the gap between Muslim and Jewish rates shrunk from five times to double, in that period.

This is unprecedented progress—unbeknownst to the general public—and it refutes some of the allegations against Israel. It is worth noting that from the scant information we have about child mortality rates in Europe, Israel is hardly at the bottom of the list. Furthermore, to compare Israeli statistics with those of a European country with a significant Arab population, in France, as reported by Paolo Bollini and Harald Siem of the International Organization for Migration, the stillborn rate for infants of French origin was 8.0 per thousand, whereas for Arab infants born to North African immigrants it was 31.0 per thousand. The perinatal mortality rates were 6.0 per thousand and 14.8 per thousand, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

In general, the disparity in infant mortality rates between minority and majority populations is greater—even when there is no national conflict and even when the country is affluent—than that between Arab and Jewish populations within Israel. In Switzerland the infant mortality rates for the Swiss majority and the Turkish minority are 8.2 and 12.3 per thousand respectively. In Britain the differential between the English majority and Pakistani minority is 7.8 and 15.6 per thousand respectively. The gap, according to the same report, is highest in the United States, where the rate for the white majority is 8.5 per thousand, while for blacks it is 21.3. (All figures relate to the year 2000.)

Israeli Arabs share in the generally high life expectancy rates enjoyed by all Israelis. Here, too, the gap is narrowing constantly. For the years 1980-84, there was a 2.3-year differential between the two communities; in 1995-99 this was reduced to 2.1 years. Thus, male Jews had a life expectancy of 76.5 years compared with 74.4 years for non-Jewish Israeli males. Surprising as it may be, Israeli Arab males enjoy a longer life expectancy than most European males; according to World Health Organization data, the average life expectancy in Europe was, in 2000, 69.6 years. The Israeli Arab male, with a 74.4-year expectancy average, was very close to the figure for Germany, 74.9 years, and for the U.K., 75.6 years.

### **Implications**

Against this background, it seems that Israel's record in improving the lives of all its citizens is impressive, especially given that the country is less wealthy than the European nations to which it was compared and that it is in a state of severe national conflict between the minority and the majority populations. Indeed, viewed from afar, one can see the gaps and the animosity between Jews and Muslims in many countries

growing, while within the besieged island of Israel they are shrinking, despite the lengthy conflict and ongoing hostility.

This has long-term implications: It is incumbent upon Israel to make every effort to eliminate all budgetary discrepancies and all cases of underrepresentation in public bodies between various sectors of Israeli society in general, and between Jews and Arabs in particular.

At a time when Israel is criticized widely, both at home and abroad, as an apartheid state, it is worth pointing out the shrinking gaps in education and health that indicate a more complex reality. The paradoxical truth is that over the years while political polarization between Jews and Arabs in Israel has grown, particularly because of the latest war with the Palestinians, the social gaps have narrowed, at least as measured by indices of health and education. Even the most vehement critic of Israel cannot ignore this data.

### Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that Israel inherited from British Mandatory Palestine tremendous inequities between Jews and Arabs, both with regard to health and education and other social and economic factors. The Jewish worker, protected by the Zionist ideology of employing Jewish labor preferentially and by the clout of the powerful Histadrut labor union, generally earned twice as much as his Arab counterpart. This wage gap has decreased over the years so that now the differential between the mean salaries of Jewish and Arab employees is between 20 percent and 35 percent in favor of the Jews. While in recent years, the ethnic income gaps have widened a bit, the differential in the standard of living as measured by consumption of durable goods has narrowed. For example, today all inequities in ownership of telephones have been eliminated; Arabs and Jews own phones at an equal rate. This disparity of income but near-equality in consumption of goods can be explained by the role of the welfare state in Israel. Arabs receive a much larger share of the transfer or welfare payments than do their Jewish counterparts.

This process of narrowing the gaps has taken place despite the existence of two types of overt discrimination: Until the mid-1990s Arab schools received lower per capita budget allocations for their student bodies. This scandalous institutionalized discrimination was abolished under the Rabin administration. In the sphere of health services, many Arabs, and especially Arab children, were without insurance; under Rabin's government a national health insurance law was passed, insisting upon total equity among all sectors. It is widely assumed that these two legislative steps will further reduce existing gaps between Arabs and Jews.

Of course, further progress toward equity will require some assistance on the part

of Israeli Arabs themselves—most notably, by not withdrawing their pupils before the completion of high school; by sending more children to early childhood and kindergarten programs; and by preventing in-marriage among close blood relatives (the latter being the primary cause of the higher infant mortality rate among Arab Muslims). A joint effort will be needed involving both a governmental policy implementing total budgetary equality and changing norms within the Muslim communities. The latter is especially needed among the Bedouins of the Negev, who exhibit the highest rate of underachievement in education, combined with the highest birthrate.

Equality is vital for Israel because the hostility and conflict of nationalisms between the two communities have been exacerbated by the so-called “Al-Aqsa Intifada.” Behind the figures representing progress quoted above, reciprocal fears and mutual feelings of animosity and frustration play out in many ways. Israeli Jews often regard the growing Arab community with anxiety, and listening to the Arab Knesset members who deliver direct threats to Israel’s national existence, they see “the enemy” and view themselves as the menaced minority. For example, in July 2001 MK Talab Al-Sana (of the United Arab List party) issued a proclamation reminiscent of the notorious UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 (“Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”) of November 1975, which was subsequently revoked. This member of Knesset stated that Zionism is “in its very essence racist and colonialist” and that such racism will vanish from the land of Israel “just as the Turks and the English disappeared.”

On the other hand, Israeli Arabs have their plentiful share of grievances about injustices perpetrated against them by the Jewish state. They suffer economically, are discriminated against in employment, and are underrepresented in the allocation of resources and in participation in governmental and public bodies. To overcome this discriminatory history, the Knesset has enacted two laws calling for preferential treatment of Arabs in the civil service and on boards of directors of governmental corporations.

Clearly, these mutual recriminations and fears will die hard; yet while Israel and most of her Arab neighbors live on separate planets, with the divide between them growing, there are some signs that a contrary process is taking place. The norms of democratic life in Israel are beginning to trickle into the fortresses of conservatism, the religious and traditional Muslim communities. The phenomenon of Israeli Arab feminist groups, which have succeeded in persuading the Knesset to change the law to allow Muslim women to sue their husbands in civil rather than religious (Sharia) courts, is not to be exaggerated but not to be minimized either. “Honor killings,” while they still exist, have been reduced.

One feels a hushed wind of change among Israeli Arabs—concealed by the nationalist element but active below the surface. Israeli Arabs enjoy a free, unbridled



press—the only free Arab press in the region. They use that freedom to blast Israel, but having tasted this freedom, they will not give it up easily to live in a more repressive Arab environment.

Is there a chance that this benign process will spread over the whole Middle East, when the peace miracle finally happens and the rest of the Arab world initiates democratic, social, and economic reforms? One would wish to be optimistic—but the vision seems to be receding. One can only hope that the Arab countries who are Israel's neighbors will be able to repeat on a large scale what has been achieved in Israel on a small but impressive scale—a narrowing of gaps through legislative initiatives and socioeconomic change.

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1. *Mandatory Year Book* (Jerusalem: Mandatory Government of Palestine, 1945), available in the Israel State Archives.

2. Paolo Bollini and Harald Siem, "No Real Progress towards Equity: Health of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities on the Eve of the Year 2000," *Social Science and Medicine*, no. 6 (1995): 819-28.

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