

ISRAELI ARABS

[Israel](#) is home to a highly diverse population from many different ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds.

Israel is not a theocracy; it is governed by the rule of law as drafted by a democratically elected parliament. Israel has no state religion, and all faiths enjoy freedom of worship. It is informed by Jewish values and adheres to many Jewish religious customs (such as holidays), but this is similar to the [United States](#) and other nations that are shaped by the Judeo-Christian heritage and also have expressly religious elements.

Of Israel's more than [7.8 million citizens](#) in 2012, more than 1.6 million, constituting just over 20 percent, are [Arab Israelis](#), many of whom are descendants of residents living there from before the establishment of the [State of Israel](#).

Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, the Arab Israeli sector includes a number of different, though primarily Arabic-speaking, groups each with its own distinct identity. [Muslim Arabs](#), the largest group, constitute three-quarters of the Arab Israeli sector and most are [Sunni Muslims](#). Nearly one-tenth of Israel's Muslim Arabs are [Bedouins](#), formerly nomadic shepherds. Christian Arabs form the second largest group in the Arab Israeli sector. The [Druze](#), some 110,000 Arabic-speakers living in 22 villages mostly in northern Israel, is a separate cultural, social and religious community.

Equal Rights

Arab Israelis are citizens of Israel with equal rights. Arabic, alongside [Hebrew](#), is one of Israel's national languages.

In 1948, Israel's [Declaration of Independence](#) called upon the Arab inhabitants of Israel to "participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."

The political involvement of the Arab sector is manifested through both national and municipal elections. Arabs in Israel have equal voting rights; in fact, it is one of the few places in the Middle East where [Arab women](#) may vote. Arab citizens run the political and administrative affairs of their own municipalities and advance Arab interests through their elected representatives in the [Knesset](#), Israel's parliament.

In 2012, Arab parliament members held eleven seats in the [eighteenth Knesset](#), representing around 10% of the legislative body. These Arab MK's represented three Arab-majority parties: [United Arab List](#), [Hadash](#), and [Balad](#). Arabs have been elected to the Knesset in every election since the 1960's.

Arab Israelis have also held various government positions, including that of deputy minister, a position that Druze MK [Ayoob Kara](#) currently holds in PM Netanyahu's [thirty-second government](#).

Furthermore, Arab Israeli's have also held positions of leadership in Israel's [Supreme Court](#). In 1999, Abdel Rahman Zuabi became the [first Arab to sit on the Supreme Court](#) when he received a nine-month placement and in 2004 Salim Joubran became the first Israeli Arab to be selected for a permanent appointment to the country's highest court. Joubran rules in every case the court hears, irregardless of who or what is being tried, as was proven when he ruled with the other judges in the eventual rape conviction against former Israeli President [Moshe Katzav](#).

Israel has extensive [anti-discrimination laws](#). Moreover, since the founding of the State, the status of [Arab Israeli women](#) has been significantly improved by legislation stipulating equal rights for women and prohibiting of polygamy and child marriage. Israel remains the only country in the Middle East where women enjoy equality in rights and personal freedoms, including the right to vote and be elected to local and national office.

The only legal distinction between Arab and Jewish citizens is not one of rights, but rather of civic duty.

Since Israel's establishment, Arab citizens have been exempted from compulsory service in the [Israel Defense Forces \(IDF\)](#). This exemption was made out of consideration for their family, religious and cultural affiliations with the [Palestinians](#) and the rest of the Arab world, given the on-going conflict. Still, volunteer military service is encouraged and IDF service was made mandatory for Druze and Circassian men at the request of their community leaders. Bedouin Arabs also serve voluntarily in the IDF and many join the special ["Yahav" rescue unit](#).

Arab Israeli Identity

As a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual society, Israel has a high level of informal segregation patterns.

While groups are not separated by official policy, a number of different sectors within the society have chosen to lead a segregated lifestyle, maintaining their strong cultural, religious, ideological and/or ethnic identity.

The vast majority of Arab Israelis have chosen to maintain their distinct identity and not assimilate.

The community's separate existence is facilitated through the use of Arabic, a separate Arab/Druze school system; Arabic literature, theater and mass media; and maintenance of independent Muslim, Druze and Christian denominational courts which adjudicate matters of personal status. Though they coexist as two self-segregated communities, over the years Jewish and Arab Israelis have come to accept each other, acknowledging the uniqueness and aspirations of each community and participating in many joint endeavors.

Advances

In the years since the founding of the State of Israel, the [Arab Israeli community sector](#) has made great strides in almost every area of development.

For example, the median years of schooling of Arab Israelis rose over a 35-year period (1961-1996) from 1.2 to 10.4 years. Infant death rates per thousand live births decreased significantly during that same 35-year

period. In the Muslim population, the rate dropped from 46.4 per thousand births to 10.0; among Christians the decrease was from 42.1 to 6.7; among the Druze it dropped from 50.4 to 8.9 deaths.

These advances are particularly striking when comparing Arab citizens of Israel to their brethren living in neighboring countries. However, it is also clear that much work must be done to close the gap between Arab and Jewish Israelis.

There are several factors that explain the reason why the gap between economic development in the Arab sector and that of the Jewish sector has yet to be closed. The average family size in the Arab sector is far higher than that of Jewish families, which greatly reduces the relative number of financial providers per dependent. Average Arab family income is further reduced due to the lower rates of female participation in the work force. [Education](#) levels in the Arab sector are relatively lower than those in the Jewish sector, often leading to lower incomes.

The majority of Arab Israelis live in small communities with limited economic infrastructure. This contributes to employment in unskilled or semiskilled fields, as well as the higher overall rates of unemployment. Service in the Israeli Defense Forces gives veterans certain economic and other benefits. Although Arab Israeli youth who do not volunteer for army service gain a two-to-three year head start in their higher education or in joining the workforce, this does not always compensate for missing out on the benefits and training enjoyed by veterans.

