



Israel's Arab Citizens: Progressive Responses

Doug Krikler, Co-Chair of the UK Task Force spoke at the Labour Friends of Israel and Progress party conference fringe event on Monday 26 September 2011. The key points from his speech can be found below.

The current Israeli government's commitment to the needs of the 20% Arab population was affirmed shortly after it was elected, with the establishment of The Authority for Economic Development in the Minorities Sectors in the Prime Minister's Office and the appointment of MK Avishay Braverman as Minister for Minority Affairs. At the same time, the first 'Information Manual on Israel's Arab sector for policy makers' produced by the Abraham Fund was endorsed by MK Braverman and distributed across all Israeli government departments. MK Shalom Simhon succeeded Braverman in January 2011.

- **Economic Development**

The Authority for Economic Development in the Minorities Sectors was created in 2009 – shortly after the government was elected – in order to tackle socio-economic gaps between Arab and Jewish communities. Under the direction of Aiman Seif, himself an Arab, the authority is currently implementing economic development plans in Arab, Circassian, Druze and Bedouin communities, totalling an overall investment of approximately NIS 2 billion over the next five years.

The government is also allocating funds for 13 industrial parks in Arab communities, which will not only boost employment levels but will also accrue more money for local municipalities through tax levies on commercial buildings.

- **Tackling public sector underemployment**

In 2000, an amendment to the Civil Service Law was introduced in the Knesset that would institutionalise fair representation of Arabs in government ministries. The Cabinet mandated that Arab employees should constitute at least 6% of all employees in government agencies, organizations, and ministerial offices by 2006, and 8% by 2008.

This target was not reached, even though Arab employment in these positions increased from 4.8% to 5.9% between 2000 and 2008.

Nevertheless, government ministries remain committed to affirmative action. In November, 2007, the government passed a decision which stipulated that by 2012, Arab and Druze employees should comprise 10% of all civil service employees. In June 2008, the Director-General of the Ministry of Justice announced that "30% of the vacancies to be filled in the civil service will be set aside for Arabs." According to the Israeli Civil Service Commission's report for 2008, between 2006 and 2008 the proportion of Arab candidates who commenced work at the Civil Service almost doubled: from 5.7% (180 out of 3,161) to 10.4% (517 out of 4,955).

The government has also initiated a number of incentive packages for educational and housing expenses that would make it more viable for Arabs to relocate to Jerusalem for government employment.

- **Increasing Arab participation in national service**

In June 2011, the Ministerial Committee on Legislative Affairs approved a government bill that calls for extensive reforms in the National Civic Service System to make it easier for Arab sectors of the population to undertake community service as an alternative to IDF enlistment. Over the past five years the number of Arabs volunteering has risen from 240 to 1,459.

- **The Police Force: representation and service in Arab communities**

Following clashes between Israel's police force and Arab protestors during the October 2000 riots, in which 13 Arab citizens were killed, an investigation was launched that resulted in the publication of the 2003 Or Commission Report. The report criticised the heavy-handed approach of the Israeli police force.

In response to this, in 2004, the Israeli police formally recognised the Abraham Fund as its official provider of educational activities on issues of democracy, civil rights and egalitarian service in a multicultural society – and instituted the organisation's Community-Police Initiative as part of the formal activities of its Human Resources Department. This has led to community police units, comprising of both Jewish and Arab personnel in over 100 Arab towns, in contrast to 3 towns a decade earlier. Each of these units is comprised of both Jewish and Arab personnel, increasing the Arab representation in the Israeli police from 1 to 4.5 percent.

This, in turn, has paved the way for the commitment of Israel's police force to a more measured response, for example in its preparations for the UN vote on Palestinian statehood. Israeli Police Commissioner Yohanan Danino announced that if and when protests occur in Arab society as a result of the UN statehood bid, subordinates will be instructed to act with restraint and sensitivity to prevent an escalation of violence. He said the police "will ensure that all those that will protest will return home safely."

- **Arabic language teaching**

In 2010 the government implemented an Arabic language requirement for fifth graders in 170 Jewish schools in northern Israel. The programme, entitled 'Ya Salam', forged in conjunction with the Abraham Fund, makes Arabic language and culture studies mandatory in state schools, as well as creating 50 new jobs for Arab teachers. There are plans to roll out the programme more widely.

- **Investment and business**

An Investment fund for the Arab sector, Al-Bawadir, was launched in March 2010 and is the first ever government initiative to enhance private sector investments in Arab businesses. Run by Pitango, Israel's leading capital venture group, Al-Bawadir was awarded a government tender to advance minority sectors of NIS 80m and has raised a total of NIS 177m (around £30m). The fund is investing in Arab-owned technology, manufacturing and

service companies. It will make investments within five years, after which it will help the portfolio companies expand and provide other assistance.

The high-tech employment of Arab college graduates has almost doubled in the last three years, helped by the joint Arab-Jewish organisation, Tsofen. Recognising its 83% placement rate, the government has provided funding enabling Tsofen to double again the number of Arab graduates enrolled in its transitional programmes. In addition, the government has agreed to pay 25% of the salary of all Arab citizens hired in the high tech sector.

The Tel Aviv Stock Exchange (TASE) launched a programme in 2010 to boost listings of Arab companies this year as part of a bid to improve relations with Israel's Arab community. In line with broader government efforts to develop the Arab business community within Israel, it has launched a programme to encourage Israel's Arab businesses to list on the Israeli exchange. The TASE has a modest target of attracting 10 listings in the next two years.

- **Representation: Trajtenberg Committee**

Steps were being taken to ensure that the interests of the Arab community are effectively represented in the governmental response to the social justice demonstrations in Israel over the summer. Organisers of the protests co-ordinated with Arab community leaders, adding two items to the list of demands drafted for the Trajtenberg committee, including: state recognition of the unrecognised villages throughout the country, especially the Bedouin communities in the Negev, and the approval of master plans that would expand local authorities' jurisdiction, to enable housing construction. In addition to this, following a High Court of Justice petition against the original composition of the Trajtenberg committee, an Arab woman was added to the panel to ensure that the specific needs of the Arab community are accounted for.

The committee submitted its report to Prime Minister Netanyahu's Office for review on 26 September 2011, in which they included recommendations for further integration of Arab women into the workforce and the allocation of an additional NIS 250 million (around £42 million) to improve infrastructure in the Arab sector.