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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

Israel

Palestinian Arab citizens make up around 20 per cent of the Israeli population (around 1.2 million people) and include members of three religious communities. MRG has reported that 81 per cent are Muslim, 10 per cent are Christian and 9 per cent are Druze. In 2010, Israeli Arabs continued to experience deeply ingrained institutional discrimination, restricting their political and religious activity, their access to resources and their rights to employment, education and property ownership. A December 2010 report by Adalah, an NGO and legal centre for Arab minority rights in Israel, highlights the multiple forms of discrimination faced by groups such as women and disabled members of the Arab community. It states that the employment rate among Arab women citizens of Israel is around 20 per cent, among the lowest in the world.

Israeli Arab women's lack of participation in the workforce is often ascribed to attitudes they face in their own communities. But this approach was disputed by education expert Fadia Nasser-Abu Ahija, who became the first Israeli Arab woman in the country to be appointed to a full professorship, taking up her post at Tel Aviv University in March 2010. Professor Nasser-Abu Ahija told Israel's daily newspaper, *Haaretz* that, 'Arab families are changing – and attributing more importance to educating their girls.' She also pointed out that schools in Arab areas suffer from a serious lack of government investment.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that the obstacles to women's participation are primarily the result of the discriminatory policies of successive governments, rather than family or social attitudes. These include discrimination in hiring policies in the civil service and private companies, and a lack of industrial zones and factories located in Arab areas compared with majority Jewish ones. Israeli Arab women are also affected by a dearth of public transport in their areas, a lack of suitable training courses at national and local levels, and a shortage of state-supported childcare services, compared to those available for Jewish communities. According to a large-scale survey on Arab women's employment in Israel, conducted by scholar and activist Yousef Jabareen, 78 per cent of non-working women said their employment status was due to a lack of job opportunities, and 56 per cent of non-working women said they wanted to work immediately. His survey also found that there were slightly more Arab women at university in Israel than Arab men, but that this did not translate into employment opportunities.

Though Israel's Knesset has highly progressive laws on anti-discrimination and legal protection for women and disabled persons, such legislation does not cover discrimination against the Arab minority on the basis of ethnicity. In fact, the state itself is the largest employer of women in the country, but only 3 per cent of all female state employees are Arab women, according to Hanin Zuabi, Israel's first Arab woman MP to be elected as representative of an Arab party. Because of lack of legislation, women and disabled people from these communities cannot fully access the protection that should be available to them, Adalah noted.

Outside of the Arab community in Israel, this legislated discrimination seems to be widely accepted. A poll released in November 2010 by the independent Israeli Democracy Institute found that only 51 per cent of Jewish citizens of Israel support full equality in rights between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel, while a March poll by Maagar Mochot, a private Israeli research institute, found that 49.5 per cent of Jewish 15-18-year-olds feel the same, according to *Haaretz*.

The right-wing government elected in 2009 continued to propose legislation to further marginalize the Israeli Arab minority. For example, in October 2010 the government approved an amendment to its Citizenship Law which, if passed, will require all new non-Jewish citizens to pledge allegiance to Israel as a 'Jewish and democratic State'. According to Adalah and other research bodies, the bill was formulated to target Palestinians married to Israelis who may be seeking citizenship. The *Guardian* newspaper noted that it will particularly affect Palestinians from the West Bank who marry Arab citizens of Israel, although in practice since the start of the second intifada there is actually very little possibility for Arab citizens of Israel married to Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza to provide citizenship or residency rights to their spouses through marriage. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu subsequently amended that the proposal so that it would apply to all new citizens. However, this did not address the concerns of Palestinians who face having to take the oath.

In December, a religious ruling signed by a number of Israel's municipal chief rabbis banned the renting and selling of homes to non-Jews, Amnesty International reported. A letter of October 2010, also signed by rabbis, called for action to be taken against Jews renting or selling homes to Israeli Arabs.

Arab Bedouin communities are particularly affected by government actions concerning land tenure and development. In its 2009 report to the CEDAW committee, Israel stated that Bedouin in the Naqab number at least 170,000 people. They have suffered repeated evictions and state appropriation of their ancestral land. According to Adalah's 2010 report on inequality amongst the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel, 'between 75,000 and 90,000 Arab Bedouin in the Naqab live in around 40 unrecognized Arab villages throughout the Naqab, referred to by the state as "illegal clusters".' These villages are extremely precarious living environments, with few basic services. They have little, or no electricity or running water and are cut off from communication; people living in these villages are viewed by the state as 'trespassers'.

On 27 July, the 250 residents of Al-Araqib were woken in the middle of the night by police and given two minutes to leave their homes. Adalah reported that 1,300 police officers began to demolish the town while residents struggled to save their belongings. All the houses were razed to the ground. Attempts to rebuild the village have resulted in the same destruction each time. Amnesty International reported the eighth destruction of the now makeshift village on 23 December 2010.

The West Bank

Aside from the Muslim Palestinian majority, the people of the West Bank include Bedouin, Jews (primarily Israeli settlers), Christian Palestinians and around 400 Samaritans. According to the international news agency Reuters, around 17,000 Catholics live in the West Bank. The number has shrunk as people have left in search of a better quality of life, members of the community have reported. The OCHA has noted that a large proportion (40 per cent in 2007) of land in the West Bank is occupied by Israeli settlements, military bases and tightly controlled areas including nature reserves and roads that are prohibited to Palestinians. An Israeli-controlled separation barrier of around 420 miles exists along and within the West Bank, limiting the movement of Palestinians into Israel, separating villages from their own land, trapping thousands in closed enclaves and stunting the development of the Palestinian community inside the West Bank.

The occupied West Bank is divided into three administrative areas: A, B and C. Area A is under the control and administration of the Palestinian Authority, while Area B is controlled by Israel but administered by the Palestinian Authority. Area C makes up 62 per cent of the West Bank and is under full Israeli military and planning control. Around 150,000 Palestinians live in this area, alongside approximately 500,000 Israeli settlers. Other minority groups include Bedouin who number around 250,000 people in Area C and 40,000 in the whole of the West Bank.

In 2010, the non-Jewish communities in Area C continued to suffer the demolition of what the Israeli authorities term 'unrecognized' or 'illegal clusters', that is, their homes and villages. In January, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) demolished Bedouin homes and part of a school, leaving 50 people homeless. Thirty children were sitting down to complete an exam, and witnessed the partial destruction of their school, the report said.

Palestinians in Area C also faced ongoing devastation of their livelihoods and destruction of their homes. UNRWA reported that in 2010, the military destroyed more than 349 Palestinian structures. Almost 485 Palestinians, half of them children, were left homeless. The number is a 'significant increase' on demolitions in 2009, when around 191 structures were demolished, UNRWA stated. Palestinians also face a number of complex legislative restrictions to their economic, social and cultural rights that keep them in extreme poverty, in stark comparison to their Israeli neighbours.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women expressed particular concern in 2010 on the extreme situation faced by Palestinian women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), resulting from the impact of the Israeli occupation, the continued construction of Israeli settlements and of the West Bank separation barrier, and the restrictions on movement of people and goods that the community faces. The commission's report noted that this affects their 'right to health care, including access for pregnant women to health services for antenatal care and safe delivery, education, employment, development and freedom of movement', and

© UNHCR has led to an increase in 'incidents of domestic violence, and declining health, education and living standards, including the rising incidence of trauma and decline in their psychological well-being'.

Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip is currently governed by Hamas, and is subject to a blockade and harsh sanctions imposed by Israel, termed 'collective punishment' and in violation of international law by the UN. The area is home to a small minority of Christians (around 3,500), who have suffered sporadic violence and persecution not necessarily at the hands of the state, but from what one priest described to the UK's *Guardian* newspaper as 'vigilante justice'. MRG has noted that over the last decade, the area has become subject to increasing religious radicalization. Many Christians have fled the area's political tensions in the last decade. In 2010, around 500 members of the community were allowed by Israel to cross the blockade and visit Bethlehem for Christmas. In some cases, not all members of a family were issued permits, *The Guardian* reported.

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