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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2009 - Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Palestinian citizens of Israel, or 'Israeli Arabs', who constitute 20 per cent of the Israeli population, continue to be marginalized socially and politically, and divided into sub-groups that receive different treatment from the state. In October 2008 extremist Jewish rioters attacked Arab homes and property in Akka; in November outgoing Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, admitted that Palestinians in Israel suffer from 'deep-seated discrimination'. Most of the Israeli Palestinians are Sunni Arabs, but they also include Christian Arabs, Circassians, Druze, Samaritans and Bedouin. Other minority communities, such as Jews from the Arab region and migrant workers from the Horn of Africa, have also faced systematic social and political discrimination.

Repressive treatment of the Israeli Arab minority is typically justified by the government referencing Israel's identity as a Jewish state or by invoking security concerns. To this day, the country continues to be torn between its Jewish identity and its claim to full democracy, and political parties that deny that Israel is a Jewish state are banned.

Arab students in Israel are taught in their own language, but it was only in 2007 that parliament approved a textbook that included Arab views on the expulsion of Palestinians at the founding of Israel as a 'Nakba', or catastrophe. In 2008 the Arab Pedagogical Council was founded to research and offer policy recommendations connected to the Arab education curriculum. However, the Ministry of Education has been reluctant to cooperate with the council.

In July 2008, Israel's Citizenship and Entry Law, which prevents Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens from receiving status and living together in Israel, was extended for another year. Land confiscations, the withholding of building permits and the disproportionate destruction of Israeli Arab homes and villages have also long been problems for Israeli Arabs, particularly for the Bedouin of the Negev.

The Israeli government and media maintain an explicit concern that land must remain under Jewish ownership. In 2007 and 2008, for example, there was a continuing effort by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and the Israeli Lands Administration to ensure that the JNF does not have to sell land to Arabs.

The land issue is of particular significance to the Bedouin, a cultural minority of nomadic herders who have traditionally inhabited Israel's southern desert, the Negev. For more than 40 years, they have faced a policy of forced urbanization, under which their settlements in the desert have been considered illegal and 'unrecognized'. The government has routinely refused to provide water, electricity or sewerage services to these settlements, and often destroys them completely. There has been some progress on this issue: at the end of 2007, a government commission recommended that as many Bedouin villages as possible should be recognized by the state. However, the report did not call for an end to all demolitions, which continued in 2008 and early 2009.

In July 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned that the estimated 50,000 Bedouins and herders of the West Bank were 'on the brink of an emergency' after three years of drought and cold winters. The ICRC stated that Israeli policies had aggravated the problem by preventing herds from being moved to water sources and fresh grazing land. The ICRC cited Israeli settlements, roads, military zones and nature reserves as all presenting obstacles to the livelihood of Bedouins and herders.

A 2009 report from the Health Ministry in the Negev region found infant mortality rates among the Bedouin to be three times above the national average – although since 2004 there has been a 5.5 per cent decline in the infant mortality rate among Bedouin.

The military attacks on the Gaza Strip that commenced in December 2008, and Hamas rocket fire into Israel, further increased existing tensions between Arab and Jewish Members of the Knesset (MKs). During the conflict, Israel's Central Election Committee banned two Arab parties from fielding candidates in elections for the Knesset. The Supreme Court declared the ban illegal and Arab parties gained one seat in the 2009 elections, but two Arab Labor MKs lost their seats.

The 2008 report by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel report found that Ethiopian immigrants to Israel were still experiencing discrimination and marginalization. It also highlighted that only 39.1 per cent of Ethiopian students graduated from high school. In July 2008 an investigative committee was set up in the Knesset to examine the situation of Ethiopians in the areas of education, housing, employment and welfare.

Throughout 2008 Israel appeared to continue its efforts to annex parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. There was a significant increase in settlement construction: 1,257 new constructions in 2008 as opposed to 800 during 2007. Concerns have been raised over the implications of continued illegal settlement for the future of any peace initiative.

Settler violence against Palestinians continues to increase. In 2008 the OCHA reported an increase of settler violence against Palestinians from 243 incidences in 2007 to 290 in 2008; approximately half of those injured since 2006 were women and children.

Although house demolitions were halted after an agreement between the Israeli government and the Quartet (the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN) in May 2008, in late 2008 demolitions resumed.

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