

Who's in Favor of Equality?

Equality between Arabs and Jews in Israel
Summary of an Opinion Survey



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סיקוי ס'כ'ו
Sikkuy 

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the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel

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Sikkuy سيكوي סיכוי

העמותה לקידום שוויון אזרחי الجمعية لدعم المساواة المدنية
The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality

Abstract:

Main findings, conclusions and recommendations

The study before you examined the viewpoints of Arab and Jewish citizens on the subject of equality. The unique feature of the study is its combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods: a statistical survey of viewpoints as well as focus groups, and among Arabs, in-depth interviews with community leaders. Combining the methods made it possible to examine not only the degree of desire for equality; we went further and also examined the types of equality in which citizens are interested, the price that each side (Jews or Arabs) is willing to pay in order to promote equality, and the conditions that each side demands of the other.

The research project was conducted by Dr. Nohad Ali and Dr. Shai Inbar, experts in public opinion analysis. **Among the Jewish participants**, eight focus groups met under the auspices of the "Mikud Institute" with a total of 55 adult participants. Subsequently, a quantitative survey of attitudes was conducted based on the findings of the qualitative research. The survey encompassed 550 adult citizens ages 25-50 and was conducted by the "Dahaf Institute" under the supervision of Dr. Mina Tzemach, one of the leading public opinion experts in Israel.

Among the Arab participants in the survey, meetings were held with nine focus groups comprising 87 people among them politicians, students, educators, salaried employees, employed and unemployed women and social activists. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Arab public figures (men and women) from the fields of education, communications, academics as well as mayors, heads of NGOs and civil society activists. Subsequently, a quantitative survey of Arab attitudes was conducted based on the findings of the qualitative research. The survey was conducted through personal interviews in the homes of the interviewees by native Arabic speakers. The survey included a representative sampling of 407 Arab citizens in Israel, 18 years or older, from 30 Arab communities in the Galilee, the "Triangle" the Negev and the mixed cities.

The findings reveal complex viewpoints on the part of Jews, as well as several profound and hard to bridge disputes between Arabs and Jews, but they are surprising in the Jews' openness to the distress of Arabs, the broad acknowledgment of inequality and the desire to change this situation:

- A clear majority of the Jews (74 percent) acknowledge the fact that Arab citizens suffer some degree of discrimination, and many of them expressed empathy for their situation.
- 60 percent of the Jews believe that promoting the equality of Arab citizens is in the interest of the country.
- The inequality of Arab citizens disturbs over half of the Jewish population in Israel (53 percent).
- Almost 40 percent of the Jews are ready for a program to reduce gaps, even if they will suffer from it personally, in other words, they declare a willingness to pay a personal price in order to reduce the gaps.

These are important positive findings of the study among Jews, which attest to a strong base of support for steps to promote equality.

Another dramatic finding of the study is the broad support for integrating Arab citizens. Among Arab citizens there is sweeping support for economic, political and social integration (88 percent, 81 percent and 78 percent, respectively). Among Jews the numbers are lower, mainly in the political sphere, and still, the majority supports economic, political and social integration (70 percent, 52 percent and 65 percent, respectively).

The support of the two groups for integration, which constitutes a basis for a shared society, is one of the positive findings of the study. Among Arabs a connection was found between gender and a willingness to integrate into Israeli society. Over 86 percent of the Arab women supported social integration (a higher percentage than among the men), and leveled criticism at Arab society and its conservatism.

On one issue there is agreement between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel – the desire to integrate the Arabs into Israeli society while maintaining a certain separation between the two population groups. Among Jewish citizens, 59 percent expressed support for living separately (in other words, in separate communities or neighborhoods), but with equal status. Neither group is interested in integration when it comes to housing and schooling, but as mentioned, they do expect integration into economic and social life. Both groups want to maintain separate frameworks, while at the same time reducing inequality. The Arab citizens are well aware of the implications of equality, and particularly the aspect of integration into Israeli society, but are not deterred by it, particularly the women.

The most profound points of dispute between Arabs and Jews relate to sharing symbols and to equality when it comes to the nature of the country. Among the Arab participants in the study, 90 percent said that they see their future in the State of Israel, but believed that its character as a Jewish state perpetuates their status and reinforces their inferior status as a marginal minority in the country, and they see it as the main obstacle to equality.

Most of the Arab citizens (about 80 percent) demand equality both as citizens of the country and as a national minority: equality both in basic symbolic-nationalist terms and in the distribution of resources. The focus group of political activists all felt that only a change in the nature of the country could lead to complete equality. **An average of about 70 percent of the Arabs are pessimistic about the chances for equality in Israel, even if the government, the majority or the minority work to promote it. That is an important disturbing finding of this study.**

Most of the Jewish citizens of Israel see the Jewish identity of the country as axiomatic; for them that is its essence and the justification for its existence. **Therefore, the clearest, most solid and most inflexible barrier to full equality is the unwillingness of the Jewish citizens to give up the Jewish character of the country,** in terms of its identity and of control over it: the anthem, the language, the flag, the Law of Return and the prime minister. The overwhelming majority is not prepared for equality in this sphere. The Jewish citizens expect the Arab citizens to accept their situation as a minority and refrain from attempting to achieve full equality on the national and symbolic level. Moreover: Part of the Jewish majority that is interested in integrating the Arabs into majority society wants them to change parts of their identity. **These findings attest to a large gap and incompatibility between the views of Jews and Arabs in Israel.**

The study found that the issue of "service" is also a matter of profound controversy. Among Jewish citizens of Israel, 74 percent believe that the Arab citizens must perform some kind of military or civic service. The findings indicate that they see such service as a reflection of the Arabs' willingness to become part of the country and to identify with it. The Arab viewpoint is the opposite: Only 28 percent replied that Arab citizens should be more flexible in the dispute over some type of service. **Here there is an abyss separating the Jewish and Arab citizens, which presents a challenge to relations between them.** Any agreement on this subject that is shared by the leadership of Arab society and by the government authorities could constitute a lever to increase support for equality.

All in all, as Ron Gerlitz claims in the concluding chapter, the findings indicate that even in today's situation there is no basis for the belief that the majority supports those negative elements that are working against equality and partnership, and therefore **no indication that relations between Jews and Arabs are about to deteriorate:** All the positive factors and forces that are working to promote equality and partnership rely on the broad public support found in the study. If the group that supports equality (as opposed to those trying to exacerbate the situation) introduces a sequence of activities and actions that reach a critical mass, it will be possible to bring about a change in the situation.

As far as the profound disputes are concerned, Ron Gerlitz claims in the concluding chapter that the situation can be improved significantly even without reaching agreements on all the disputes on the agenda, but this should not weaken our obligation to try to achieve such agreements. The state's national leadership and the Arab leadership have an obligation to take an active part in formulating these agreements on both sides.

The report identifies several opportunities to promote equality for Arabs. **Among Jews, the combination of acknowledgement of inequality and the willingness to work to reduce it, even if that requires personal sacrifice, attests to a breakthrough.**

Many Jews testified that they want to live in a more egalitarian country, but many feel that the present situation stems from a lack of choice, and they therefore justify it. That is why they are living in a kind of cognitive dissonance stemming from the contradiction between their support for democratic values on the one hand, and their acceptance of the inequality in the country on the other. **This dissonance, if it is properly utilized to emphasize the internal contradictions in the Jewish viewpoints, is likely to arouse motivation for change.** One possible solution could be significant progress toward full equality in the economic sphere, while continuing the discussion of controversial issues. It is important to take advantage of the Jews' willingness to pass laws mandating a fairer and more equal distribution of resources, so that the Arab citizens will receive larger allocations.

It is also important to work with the Arab political leadership, and mainly to inform the leaders about the willingness on the part of the Jews to promote equality, as well as its limitations. Parallel to public relations activity among Jewish and Arab citizens, it is also important to work with the decision makers: to explain to the country's leadership that the Jewish community in Israel is willing to work towards more significant equality for the Arab citizens. This activity will make it easier for the government to take practical steps to promote equality.

The study therefore indicated that alongside profound disagreements that at this stage seem hard to bridge, **most of the citizens are interested in equality and want to resolve and normalize the relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.**

And now – the responsibility is ours

Ron Gerlitz

A great deal of work was invested in the study presented herein. Permit me to share with you the five main insights it gave me.

1. The majority wants equality

In my work as co-executive director of Sikkuy, since January 2009, I have encountered a variety of viewpoints and activities in the area of relations between Jews and Arabs. The voices and forces that oppose equality are many and clear. The political and social factors that are working to reduce the rights of Arabs are strong, are receiving unprecedented power in the present Israeli government, and to our regret are becoming stronger and are achieving their goals in various areas. But at the same time and in the same place there are also other factors at work, equally varied and numerous, to develop good, humane and normal relations between Jews and Arabs, and to promote equality.

In the context of Sikkuy's activity to promote equality policy, I meet regularly with senior officials in government ministries, and I'm surprised every time to meet officials who not only admit the existence of a non-egalitarian policy, but are even **working to close the gaps**. That is not the exception but actually the prevalent atmosphere. The main business newspaper in the country (TheMarker) has for the past two years been conducting an ongoing campaign, perhaps it should even be called a crusade, to reduce discrimination and to integrate Arabs into the economy and society in Israel. And there is a group of leading businessmen in the country who are in the center of the political map, and are working regularly and consistently, investing considerable personal resources, to integrate Arab citizens into the Israeli economy and society. All these join the vibrant activity of civil society organizations that are working to promote an egalitarian and shared society, and to strengthen their support base. Also worthy of mention is the active support of important groups among North American and British Jewry in working to promote equality.

I do not intend to portray the situation as ideal. There is no doubt that almost none of the positive groups I have mentioned are in agreement with the Arab citizens (or with me) regarding the requisite degree of equality and shared society in Israel. I am not ignoring that fact, but I would like to demonstrate that they are working in a practical, concrete and productive way to reduce inequality.

I would like to maintain that in **Israeli society there are two contradictory trends: one in favor of equality and one opposed to it; one attempting to improve relations between Jews and Arabs and one attempting to exacerbate them**; one with the goal of creating a shared society, and one - in both groups – with the goal of increasing isolationism and avoiding the other. These contradictory trends are present in the public and political arenas, and the study proves that both have a strong support base. But it also proves that **not only is there a broad and solid support base, but that a majority supports the attempt to achieve equality**. I would like to emphasize the following findings:

- A clear majority of the Jews (74 percent) acknowledge the fact that the Arab citizens suffer some degree of discrimination, and many of them expressed empathy for their situation.
- 60 percent of the Jews believe that promoting equality of Arab citizens is in the interest of the country.
- The inequality of Arab citizens disturbs over half of the Jewish population in Israel (53 percent).
- Almost 40 percent of the Jews are ready for a program to reduce gaps, even if they suffer from it personally, in other words, they declare a willingness to pay a personal price in order to reduce the gaps.

The findings therefore indicate that even in today's situation there is no basis for the belief that the majority supports the negative elements, and therefore **there is also no indication that relations between Jews and Arabs are about to deteriorate. On the contrary, all the positive factors and forces** – in the government ministries, in civic society, and even in a small office in Tel Aviv that insists on employing Arab workers – **rely on a broad base of public support that was found in the study.** The quantitative survey among Jewish cities was held in mid-2009, shortly after the war in Gaza that led to more extreme views. Even under the influence of those events we found that a (large or modest) majority of Jewish citizens acknowledge the inequality, it disturbs them and they think that it is in the interest of the country to reduce it.

This means that **all those who are working to promote equality are in effect pioneers among the Jewish citizens (and among the absolute majority of Israeli citizens) who believe in this idea.** The group that is pushing for equality should be made aware that the majority supports its views. The government official who tries to repair 63 years of discrimination should be aware that not only is it his professional duty to implement egalitarian policy, but that the majority of the public is behind him too.

On the other hand, the campaign by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman against Arab citizens and the steps against them by Knesset members from various factions are also based on public support that was indicated in the survey, but they are opposed to the opinion of the majority of Jewish citizens (and certainly to the opinion of the majority of Israeli citizens).

In the present situation, where there are contradictory trends, both of which are based on public support, it is clear that **what will determine the outcome are actions. If the group that supports equality implements a sequence of actions that reach a critical mass, it will be possible to bring about a change in the situation.** Here we have a reason for optimism.

2. So what is the real challenge?

At the same time, the study points to areas in which there is a large gap between the views of Jews and Arabs in Israel: on the issue of land, the character of the country, the need to change the symbols of the state, and conspicuously, the obligation of Arab citizens to do some kind of service. In some cases the gap is huge on issues where it is very important to one of the groups to bring about a change whereas for the other it is very important to leave the situation as is.

It is true that the situation can be improved substantially even without an agreement in those areas, but that should not weaken our obligation to try to achieve them. It can also be maintained that the Jews' demands of the Arabs are unrealistic, or vice versa. But if each side becomes entrenched in its viewpoint we are liable to find ourselves on a serious downhill slide. That is why these issues represent a genuine challenge which confronts both groups. There is a need for internal work among each of the sides and an ongoing dialogue geared to reaching agreements. **The leadership of the country and of the Arab citizens have an obligation to work actively to formulate these agreements, and to oppose those on both sides who are not interested in them.**

3. Who is in favor of integration and a shared society?

Another dramatic finding of the study is the broad support for integrating Arab citizens and even for creating a shared society in Israel. Among Arab citizens there is sweeping support for economic, political and social integration (88 percent, 81 percent and 78 percent, respectively). Among Jews the numbers are lower (particularly disturbing is the statistic regarding support for political integration of Arabs – only 52 percent), but still, the majority supports their economic, political and social integration (70 percent, 52 percent and 65 percent, respectively).

That means that a majority of Israeli citizens, both Jews and Arabs, are interested in integration between the two populations, without assimilation and loss of identity. I am not ignoring the fact that in both groups there is also opposition to the steps toward integration, and the fact that the study found that part of the Jewish majority that is interested in integrating the Arabs into the majority society wants them to modify parts of their identity. There is no question that a majority of Arabs are not interested in doing so, and justly so; most of them desire to create a shared space in which there is room and an equal presence for each of the groups. This point of tension is also a major challenge of the relations between Jews and Arabs.

And in spite of all this, in spite of the conflict and the barrier of fear (among the Jews) and hostility (on both sides), **most of the citizens want to create a process of integration and want a shared space, or at least understand that it is essential.** That is another reason for optimism.

4. So does the study support pessimism or optimism?

Everyone will probably find reinforcement for his own perception of reality in the study. When it comes to the future of relations between Arabs and Jews these days, to many the horizon does not look rosy, but the study before you is an opportunity to see the deep-seated views: not those that are splashed across the newspaper headlines after yet another round of unruly behavior by MKs from Yisrael Beitenu and their collaborators in the other factions. **I do not intend to express exaggerated optimism, but to try to look toward the light instead of despairing of the dark. And the deep-seated views – according to the study – are that most of the citizens support equality between Jews and Arabs in Israel.** The question is who will be stronger, who will shape the reality of our lives and the lives of our children.

5. And what now? The responsibility is ours

We here, Jews and Arabs, are facing a situation that is changing quickly and in a worrisome manner. Surveys among Israeli youth paint a very disturbing picture, but this study has shown that among the adult public there is support for equality. There is still hope, on condition that we understand that we are being called to action.

We, Jews and Arabs, will confront soft, covert and bureaucratic discrimination, as well as hard, overt and blatant discrimination. We will confront it and fight against incitement, racism, hatred, exclusion and isolationism. And no less important – we will also fight the despair that has become part of our lives. We will stand and fight with strength, with faith in the justice of the path, and preferably through joint action, because the struggle for equality and a shared society in Israel requires the support of both sides, and cannot be implemented unilaterally.

We are a large faction that most of the citizens support. We will carry the flag of equality, democracy and shared society, never forgetting that so many similar struggles have succeeded in the face of equally strong forces of darkness. This place is dear to all of us, both Jews and Arabs. We can allow the forces that are seeking to destroy it to succeed, or we can act to promote a democratic, egalitarian and shared society. **It's up to us. Nobody will do it for us.**