

ETHNIC MINORITY LANGUAGES IN ISRAEL

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The non-Jewish minorities make up nearly 25% of the population of Israel. Among them are 4 groups differentiated in various ways from the general Arab Israeli population. The Bedouin are differentiated by their traditional residence patterns, the Druzes by religion, the Circassians by religion and ethnicity. The Greek Orthodox Church brings Greek-speaking priests to Israel, who teaches the language in their church schools. There are Arab Christian families with knowledge of Greek. There are speakers of Aramaic (Syriac), but most members of the Syriac community now speak Arabic. For the rest of the Churches, such as the Coptic and Ethiopians, the speakers are generally clerics. The exception to this is the small but significant Armenian community. The Armenians, like the Circassians, are working effectively for maintenance of their own language. In this paper we will look at language issues that affect these groups.

Ethnicity, religion, minority, Aramaic, Druze, Circassian, Arab, Christians

Some 1.8 million people, comprising some 24 percent of Israel's population, are non-Jews. Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, they include a number of different, primarily Arabic-speaking groups, each with distinct characteristics.

Muslim Arabs, over 1.2 million people, reside mainly in small towns and villages, over half of them in the north of the country. The majority of Israel's Arab population lives in self-contained towns and villages in Galilee and Center.

The **Druze**, some 122,000 Arabic-speakers living in 22 villages in northern Israel, constitute a separate cultural, social, and religious community. While the Druze religion is not accessible to outsiders, one known aspect of its philosophy is the concept, which calls for complete loyalty by its adherents to the government of the country in which they reside.

The **Circassians**, comprising some 4,000 people concentrated in two northern villages, are Sunni Muslims, originally from northern Caucasus. While maintaining a distinct ethnic identity, they participate in Israel's economic and national affairs without assimilating either into Jewish society or into the Muslim community.

Christian Arabs, some 150,000, live mainly in urban areas. Although many denominations are nominally represented, the majority are affiliated with the Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches

Religion	Grand Total	Jews	Moslems	Christians	Druze	Other
Thousands	7419.1	5608.9	1254.1	150.2	121.9	284
Percentage	100	75.60	16.90	2.03	1.64	3.83

Table 1 Index of Israel population by religion, based on the Census of 2008 (CBS, 2010)

The Languages of Non-Jewish Minorities

The non-Jewish minorities make up nearly 25% of the population of Israel. Among them are 4 groups differentiated in various ways from the general Arab Israeli population. The Bedouin are differentiated by their traditional residence patterns, the Druzes by religion, the Circassians by religion and ethnicity. Among the Christians, the Armenians are distinct.

Arab Israelis

Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, the Arab Israeli sector includes a number of different groups – primarily Arabic-speaking – each with its distinct dialect. Muslim Arabs, the largest group, constitute three-quarters of the Arab Israeli sector and most are Sunni Muslims. Arab Israelis are citizens of the Israel with equal rights. 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".

Israeli Arabs sat in the state's first parliamentary assembly; currently, 14 of the 120 members of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) are Arab citizens, most representing Arab political parties, and one of Israel's Supreme Court judges is an Arab.

Linguistically-speaking, the majority of Arabs of Israel are fluently bilingual, speaking both a Palestinian Arabic dialect and Hebrew; some are also trilingual. In Arab homes and towns, the primary language spoken is Arabic. Some Hebrew words have entered the colloquial Arabic dialect. For example, Arabs often use the word *beseder* (equivalent of "Okay") while speaking Arabic. Other Hebrew words that are regularly interspersed are *ramzor* (stoplight), *mazgan* (air conditioner), *maxshev* (computer) etc.

The Zionist enterprise in Israel started with the revival of Hebrew as the nation legitimate language (Cooper, 1989). Even so, Arabic remained an official language of the State. It is much less employed in official documents and dealings than Hebrew, but the presence of Arabic in Israel nevertheless real. In all universities one finds departments of Arabic. Arabic is supported by daily TV and radio broadcasting, daily newspapers and periodicals. Arabic is the teaching language of the Arabic educational system where more than 90% of Arab children study – from kindergarten to teachers' colleges. Moreover, in the Hebrew-speaking school system,

Arabic is an optional third language. On the other hand, Hebrew is obligatory from the third grade on in Arabic-speaking schools. The high competence which Arab students generally achieve in Hebrew – the wide majority of Arabs under forty know Hebrew well – contrasts with the feeble dedication of many Israeli Jews to the learning of Arabic in the Hebrew educational system (Ben-Raphael, 1994).

The determinant factor of inter-group interaction is the dominant culture, which legitimizes a linguistic and cultural pluralistic model of majority-minority relations. Within this context Arabic is by no means held in high respect by the majority, which tends to downgrade its value. The underprivileged status of Arabs in Israel and other factors explain why Arabic is most often left out of the Jews cultural repertoire – even though it is diffused by schools. On the other hand, the minority which is dependent on the language majority is determined to acquire it. The price it pays for this enrichment is the downgrading of the social value of its own language (Ben-Raphael, 1994).

Bedouin Arabs, also Sunni Muslim, estimated at approximately 250,000, belong to some 30 tribes, living in Negev, Center and North. Formerly nomadic shepherds, the Bedouin are currently in transition from a tribal social framework to a permanently settled society.

The Bedouin are linguistically marked by use of dialects that are quite distinct from those of the cities and villages. Tribal differences remain and are important, and until recently their society has been traditional, tribal and feudal.

The Druzes

The Druze community in Israel is officially recognized as a separate religious entity with its own courts (with jurisdiction in matters of personal status: marriage, divorce, maintenance and adoption) and spiritual leadership. Their culture is Arab and their language Arabic but they opted against mainstream Arab nationalism in 1948 and

have since served in the Israel Defense Forces and the Border Police.

Worldwide there are probably about one million Druze living mainly in Syria and Lebanon, with 122,000 in Israel, including about 18,000 in the Golan (which came under Israeli rule in 1967).

The Druze community in Israel has a special standing among the country's minority groups, and members of the community have attained high-level positions in the political, public and military spheres. The Druzes in Israel live in 22 villages in the Galilee and on Mount Carmel. Most of those villages are populated exclusively by Druze, although in some of them minorities of Christians and Muslims have become residents. The community is said to have remained feudal and patriarchal, with continuing opposition to mixed education of the sexes. The fact that Druze men all serve in the Army has had a major effect on their social and political integration, and there is increasing knowledge of Hebrew. The 1983 census (the last to include this question) found a higher index of Hebrew speaking among Druzes than among the non-Jewish population as a whole. The index is higher among men than women, and highest in age groups that include those who have served in the army (Spolsky & Shohami, 1999).

The Circassians

Circassian, or Cherkess, is a general name for a group of peoples who formerly inhabited the northwestern Caucasus and part of the east coast of the Black Sea. In the 1860s and the 1870s, when the Russians began their conquest of the Caucasus, most of the survivors were forced to migrate to Ottoman Turkey. In the 1870s, some of the Circassians settled in villages in Palestine. Today there are some 4000 Circassians in Israel. 2500 live in Kfar Kama, a village on the Tabor Mountain road on the way to Tiberias. Almost 1000 more live in Reihaniya, a village located along the Lebanese border. About 25 families are in Jewish towns. The entire community of the Circassian population in Israel speaks the

vernacular mother tongue. It is just as clear that the Circassian language symbolizes Circassian ethnicity and constitutes the 'core value' of their culture. The Circassian language can be regarded as the 'cultural marker' of the Circassian's minority existence and a model of the cultural pluralism in the ethnically heterogeneous society of Israel. (Stern, 1991).

The Christian Communities of Israel

Of the over 7 million people living in Israel today, Christians constitute about 2% of the population. Christian Arabs, who constitute Israel's second largest minority group of some 150,000, live mainly in urban areas. Although many denominations are nominally represented, the majority are affiliated with the Greek Catholic (42%), Greek Orthodox (32%) and Roman Catholic (16%) churches. Except for national churches, such as the Armenian, the indigenous communities are predominantly Arabic-speaking.

The Chalcedonian-Orthodox Churches (Eastern)

The Chalcedonian-Orthodox (Eastern Orthodox) churches are a family of self-governing churches that follow the doctrines of the seven Ecumenical councils, and acknowledge the honorary primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem considers itself to be the "mother church" of Jerusalem. It is the largest of the Christian communities.

Two historic Eastern Orthodox national churches have representation in Israel: the Russian and the Rumanian.¹

The Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches (Oriental)

The non-Chalcedonian Orthodox churches are churches of the East (Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian and Syrian) that refused at the time to acknowledge the decrees issued by the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

The Armenian Orthodox (Apostolic) Church dates from the year 301, the first nation to embrace Christianity. They are around 2000-3000 in Israel and liturgical language is Armenian.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has its roots in Egypt, where most of the population became Christian during the first centuries CE. Their liturgy is in Coptic language, one of ancient Cushitic languages of Egypt.

Today the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Israel is a small community consisting mostly of a few dozen monks and nuns living in Jerusalem.

The Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobites) is a successor to the ancient Church of Antioch. Among its traditions is the continued use of the Syriac language (Western Aramaic) in liturgy and prayers.²

The Roman Catholic and Uniate Churches

The Roman Catholic and Uniate churches are churches that are in communion with Rome. In matters of liturgy, the Eastern churches in communion with Rome follow their own languages and traditions.

Until a few years ago, there were just a few hundred Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel. But they are growing steadily, and today number at least seven communities. They are called Messianic Jews and they incorporate elements of Judaism with the tenets of Christianity.

In popular parlance, local Roman Catholics are referred to as "Latins", in reference to their historic liturgical language. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, the liturgy is generally celebrated in the vernacular, except at some of the holy places, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity, where the mass and other services are still celebrated in Latin³.

The Maronite Church is an entirely Catholic community of Syrian origin, most of whose members live in Lebanon. As a uniate body⁴ it possesses its own liturgy in the Syriac language (Christian Aramaic). Most members of the Maronite community in Israel reside in the Galilee.

The (Melkite) Greek Catholic Church is the result of a schism in the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.⁵ The traditional languages of worship are Arabic or Greek.

The Syriac Catholic Church, a uniate breakaway from the Syriac Orthodox Church, is a small local community in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They use the West Syrian Rite.

The Armenian Catholic Church separated from the Armenian Orthodox Church, had been in contact with Rome since the Crusader period. The community is Arabic-speaking and the liturgical language is Armenian.

The Chaldean Catholic Church is a uniate descendant of the ancient Assyrian Apostolic Church of the East (Nestorian) and numbers no more than a few families. Its members still preserve the use of East Syrian Rite (Eastern Aramaic).

The Protestant Churches

The Protestant communities in the Middle East only date from the early 19th century. The intention of these missions was to evangelize the Muslim and Jewish communities, but their only success was in attracting Arabic-speaking Orthodox Christians.

The new Anglican Protestant Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East is the largest Protestant community in the Holy Land with the first Arab bishop in Jerusalem. This community attracted an increasing number of Arabic-speaking members.

There are also small Danish, Swedish, German and English-speaking Lutheran congregations for the benefit of members who are visiting or resident in Israel.

The Association of Baptist Churches in Holy Land has eighteen churches. The majority of the congregants are Arabic-speaking.

The (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland and the Church of Mormons has a small, mostly expatriate community serving pilgrims and visitors.

Some marginalized minorities

The Hebrew Israelite Community

Labeled over the years as “the Black Hebrews,” community members began arriving in Israel in 1969. They came from the United States via Liberia stating they are descendants of the tribe of Judah. They presently number about 2000 in Dimona in the Negev, with additional families in other towns.

The community has become most noted for its healthy holistic lifestyle. All members are vegans, they do not smoke or drink alcohol. They speak mostly English as well many of them Hebrew.

The Gypsies in Israel

Communities of Dom (the term that many in Middle East refer to themselves) can be seen in Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank. The Domari population is estimated between 2000 and 5000.

Dom people often "hide their ethnic identity by declaring themselves to be nationals. The term "nawar" is one of the most widely used designations in the Arab world. The word is commonly used as an insult, not only as an ethnic designation, but also to designate them as worthless (Eliyahu, 2001)

Nawari is also a dialect of Domari language. Dom people know the local dialect of Arabic. When their native language lacks a word, they borrow that term from the Arabic that is spoken in the area.

The Samaritans

The Samaritans are a small tribe, totaling as of November 1, 2007, there were 712, both a religious and an ethnic group located in the West Bank and in Israel. Ethnically, they are descendents of the inhabitants of ancient Samaria, the center of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Religiously, they hold to a tradition based on the ancient Israelite religion, but they reject normative Judaism. About half of the Samaritans live in Kiryat Luza, close to Mount Gerizim, just

south of Nablus in West Bank, which is their religious centre. The rest live in Holon district right outside Tel Aviv in Israel.

With the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in Israel, most Samaritans today speak Modern Hebrew. The spoken mother tongue of the Samaritans in the West Bank is Arabic. For liturgical purposes, Samaritan Hebrew and Samaritan Aramaic are used, all of which are written in the Samaritan alphabet, a variant of the Old Hebrew alphabet, distinct from the so-called square script "Hebrew alphabet".

The Ahmadis

The Ahmadis are a Muslim sect which was founded in Qadian, Punjab, in the nineteenth century. The Ahmadis accept four of the five basic principles of Islam, namely prayer five times a day, the Ramadan fast, the Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) and alms-giving. They do not accept the fifth principle, that of the *Jihad* or Holy War against non-believers. Many Muslims regard them as heretics and refuse to accept them as a legitimate part of Islam. The core community is in Pakistan, about 3-4 million (Gualtieri, 2004).

Kababeer, a small town on Mount Karmel in Haifa, is the center of Ahmadi activities in Israel. Established in 1928, 99% of the residents of this town are Ahmadis. Some 2000 members of this community belong to more or less to the same family.

The Baha'is

The Baha's is a religious minority whose numbers worldwide probably exceed 5 million. Baha'ism is a modern religion, founded in the mid-nineteenth century in southern Iran as an offshoot of Shia Islam. Baha'is believe in a completely transcendent and unknowable God, manifestation of whose divine essence is revealed to believers in the form of prophets or messengers who appear through the ages.

The Bahá'í Faith's relationship with the land of Israel was formed in 1868 when the founder was exiled with members of his family and a small band of his followers, to

the Holy Land, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. The Bahá'í World Centre, the spiritual and administrative heart of the Bahá'í community, is located in the cities of Acre and Haifa in northern Israel.

Summary: Pluralism and segregation

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 are somewhat segregated and maintain their strong cultural, religious, ideological, and ethnic identity.

However, despite a fairly high degree of social cleavage some economic disparities and an often overheated political life, the society is relatively balanced and stable. The moderate level of social conflict between the different groups, notwithstanding an inherent potential for social unrest, can be attributed to the country's judicial and political systems, which represent strict legal and civic equality.

Thus, Israel is not a melting pot society, but rather more of a mosaic made up of different population groups coexisting in the framework of a democratic state.

Notes

¹ A mission representing the Rumanian Orthodox Church was established in 1935. It is led by an archimandrite and consists of a small community of monks and nuns resident in Jerusalem.

² Syriac is a Middle Aramaic language, and as such a language of the Northwestern branch of the Semitic family.

³ The largest contingent of Israeli Catholics is immigrants from the former Soviet Union. In the great wave of immigration to Israel in 1990s, up to 300,000 Christians arrived along with about a million Jews. In addition, some 200,000 foreign workers now reside in Israel, including Africans, Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, and Filipinos. They are

overwhelming Christian. Many have settled in Israel. Their children attend Israeli public schools and speak Hebrew.

⁴ An Eastern Church in communion with Rome, which retains its respective language, rites, and canon law.

⁵ The term "Melkite", literally "royalist", is derived from the Syriac, Western-Aramaic word *malko*, which means "royal" or "king".

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