



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues (IATF)

## **New Government, Protest Movement, and Arab Citizens of Israel: Implications and Emerging Actions**

April 10, 2023

Since the inauguration of Israel's thirty-seventh government on December 29, 2022, Israeli society [has been in turmoil](#). Protests that began in early January against [various illiberal aspects](#) of the new governments' agenda grew and intensified as they coalesced around proposed [judicial reforms](#) and their implications for Israeli democracy. Arab citizens have been [largely uninvolved](#) in the protests, for reasons described below. Yet, Arab society is deeply concerned about the government's shift in overall policies, priorities and tone, and what impact these developments will have on Arab citizens and communities.

This paper aims to outline the major areas of concern regarding the new government with respect to Arab society, state-minority, and Jewish-Arab relations. It then points to emerging lines of thought about responses in the field.

As the largest non-Jewish minority (one-fifth of the population) that is also significantly under-represented in the country's economic growth engines, Arab citizens are a pivotal population group for [Israeli democracy](#) and [economy](#). With [complex Israeli and Palestinian identities](#), they are also key to Israel's [security](#) and [social cohesion](#). For these reasons and more, successive governments since the late 2000s have increasingly prioritized socio-economic mobility and integration of Arab citizens through robust budgets and policies.

Over the last several months, the new government has begun to advance policies and [legislation](#) that risk reversing hard-won gains in [socio-economic development](#) for Arab society, crime prevention, civil equality, and the field of shared society. At the same time, there has been an increase in government activities that intensify tensions in Jewish-Arab and state-minority relations. These include a rise in home [demolitions in the Negev](#) and [East Jerusalem](#) (including [during Ramadan](#) when they are usually stalled); a rise in deadly

[confrontations in the West Bank](#) and between [Arab citizens and security forces](#) in and around the [al-Aqsa](#) mosque; and creation of a beefed-up [National Guard](#) under Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir (Otzma Yehudit) authority, that is widely expected to be deployed in Arab communities.

Both the shift in government priorities and the near absence of Arab issues from related public discourse and protests raise challenging questions for organizations, leaders, and philanthropy focused on strengthening Jewish-Arab relations, equality, and shared society:

- What can be done to mitigate the negative impact of government actions for Arab citizens and Jewish-Arab relations?
- Can Arab citizen's issues be a more impactful part of Israeli democratic discourse, and if so, how?
- What are some of the long-term takeaways emerging from this unprecedented crisis?

The sections below provide a brief overview of the shift in government approach, the complex reality of the protest movement, and the competing priorities and challenges this creates for Arab society initiatives. The paper closes with a list of short and long-term needs and priorities in the field as a result, and an Appendix listing government actions in greater detail.

## Government Actions

Beginning with the [coalition agreements](#), the new government hit the ground running, relocating or creating at least 29 government authorities and advancing numerous policies and legislation in a matter of weeks. While the administration clearly came prepared and is serious about implementing its agenda, the whirlwind pace and quantity of changes, unexpected intensity of resistance, and the fact that a state budget is not yet passed means that there is a great deal of uncertainty still about how much of the new government's agenda will be implemented, and how.

Nonetheless, the government's stated intentions and actions thus far raise significant concerns and challenges for Arab society. These include, for example, the judicial reform proposals that weaken the ability of the court to protect minority rights; laws that make it easier to [disqualify Arab Knesset members](#) specifically; cuts to five-year economic-development budgets for Arab society; [banning display](#) of the Palestinian flag; plans to impose debilitating taxes and revoking the status of [foreign government funded NGOs](#) (much of the shared society field), and more.

The shared society NGO, Sikkuy-Aufoq, explains that, if completed, the new government's overall approach to Arab society will weaken the **legal**, **material**, and **cultural** bases for both Jewish-Arab equality and partnership in Israel.<sup>1</sup>

### Excerpt from Sikkuy-Aufoq's Risk Assessment and Mitigation Plan (March 2023)

Our assessment shows that if completed the coalition agreements and the actions of the government will:

**Weaken the legal basis for equality and partnership through**

- Judicial overhaul
- Authorizing discrimination against Arab citizens in trade and in services through new legislation
- Enabling the disqualification of Arab candidates from being elected to the Knesset through new legislation

**Weaken the material basis for equality and partnership through**

- Redirection of funds approved for the 5-year plans for Arab society - GD550 and GD1279
- Reframing of the struggle against violence in Arab society to one of 'war against national crime'
- Judaization of the Negev

**Weaken the cultural basis for equality and partnership through**

- Forbidding the display of the Palestinian flag through new legislation
- Weakening civil society NGOs and the ability of foreign governments to support them by imposing ruinous tax penalties on foreign government donations

As the most far-right coalition in Israel's history, the government also sets an entirely different tone on Jewish-Arab and state-minority relations. The far-right tends to view relations between Jewish-Arab citizens primarily in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in this respect is will tolerate [risks to Israeli democracy over risks to security](#).<sup>2</sup> In practice, this can be seen in the new government's reframing of the struggle for crime prevention in Arab communities in the scope of [national security](#), including enabling increased use of [combat-trained police forces](#) that risk a "[militarization](#)" of state-minority relations; promoting "positive migration"—widely understood to mean "Jewish"—to the Negev and Galilee where there are large populations of Arab citizens; and advancing a cluster of legislation proposals focused on Arab citizens' potential association with terrorism that also limit civic and socio-economic participation.

Paramount among these is the changing approach to crime prevention in Arab communities under the [Ministry of National Security](#). While Minister Ben Gvir campaigned on public security and reigning in lawlessness in Arab society, Arab [homicide rates have doubled](#) over the last three months, attributed by police to Ben Gvir's [abandonment](#) of the designated

<sup>1</sup> "Preparing for the New Reality of Israel Risk Assessment and Mitigation Plan" *Sikkuy-Aufoq for a Shared and Equal Society*, March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "[What Israel's Crisis Reveals About Its Democratic Compromises](#)." April 4, 2023. Porter Robbins, Claire. "The Origins of Right-Wing Populism in Israel: Peace Process and Collective Identities' Struggle." ECPR Panel Abstract, September 2019; "Examining the Israeli Right Wing and Its Implications for National Security." Rane Worldview. October 27, 2022; Chotiner, Isaac. "[How Israeli youth helped usher in the farthest right-wing government ever](#)." *Vox*. February 23, 2023.

track for police coordination on crime prevention in Arab society. In parallel, plans to form a beefed-up National Guard evoke fear that in place of much needed police services, Arab citizens will be subject to over-policing that views them as a collective threat, and reduces police capacities to address the crime epidemic that harms everyone.

Along with weakening the material, legal, and cultural bases for equality and shared society, therefore, the new government also leans towards recasting Arab society as a potential threat, but with seemingly little planning for how these policies might affect equal citizenship, mobility, and opportunity.

**A detailed list of major government actions impacting Arab citizens can be found in the [Appendix](#).**

## Protest Movement

“De-mo-cra-cy!” has been the ubiquitous chant repeated across the unprecedented protest movement opposing the judicial reforms. As the main institutional check on government power, the judicial overhaul is seen as an effort to weaken the most significant [safeguard of Israeli democracy](#). For Arab citizens, however, the movement embodies the complex relationship Arab citizens have with Israeli democracy in that neither their reality, their struggle, nor their identity is represented.

In the first few weeks of protest, Arabs that participated were asked to lower Palestinian flags, fearing they would polarize participants, and Arab speakers were asked to tune their messages in ways that would appeal to the broad base of Jewish demonstrators. Since then, only a handful of Arabs agreed to speak publicly at the demonstrations and most [Arab citizens continue to sit out](#). Arab citizens also feel less safe protesting and the sting of a double standard, seeing how few arrests and confrontations there are with police relative their experiences.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court is not seen as having been [particularly supportive of Arab minority](#) rights to date. While leaders in Arab society and among the protest movement have made efforts to engage Arab participation, in the eyes of many, defeating the overhaul will only preserve a state of second-class citizenship, with no indication that Jewish Israelis will extend their political voice to Arab citizens in return. Perhaps most profoundly, though Arab citizens recognize they will likely be [the first harmed by the judicial reforms](#) and a far-right government, there is a [sense of betrayal](#) that few Jewish Israelis rally for Arab citizens’ democratic rights when those are jeopardized.

Indeed, on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, much of Arab society went on [general strike](#) to protest the [police shooting](#) of a Bedouin citizen of Israel at the entrance to the Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem's Old City. The shooting—whose motives are still in dispute—took place just as the cabinet was preparing to approve Ministry Ben Gvir's proposed National Guard. The shooting is widely perceived in Arab society as a direct [manifestation of Ben Gvir's incitement](#) and represents the immediate danger felt by Arab citizens that police will be quicker on the trigger.

While a few related signs appeared in the mainstream protests that night connecting the issues, the predominantly Jewish and predominantly Arab protests remained separate. Issues related to national security, religious conflict, East Jerusalem, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain highly sensitive. “A lot of Israelis can unite around the idea that Israel is a liberal democracy, albeit an imperfect democracy,” explains investigative journalist Ilana Dayan. But “many Israelis who go out in the streets [disagree as to the solution for the Palestinian conflict](#)” and would be hard-pressed to unite in a more complex movement over the long-term.

**Arab community leaders urge Arab citizens to join the protests ([Link to ad](#))**



Video Campaign by The Abraham Initiatives and Have You Seen the Horizon Lately

Still, over these weeks, Jewish and Arab organizations, Arab civil society leaders, and activists are pushing for Arab citizens to take part: “The [leadership vacuum](#) among the Arabs will be felt in the future in every walk of life” writes Odeh Bisharat. “If they don’t make their voices heard at this fateful moment, when the road map to democracy and Arab representation in

parliament is being drawn, when will they ever?” Political sociologist, Ameer Fakhoury, asserts this is the moment that “Palestinian politics can offer the discourse of "[shared destiny](#)" as an alternative to the discourses of citizenship available today.”

Small but significant groups of [Jewish-Arab demonstrators](#) organized by a handful of joint initiatives like Zazim, Anu, Standing Together, Centers for Social Justice, youth movements with Arab and Jewish-Arab branches, and more, have become more visible, albeit often in parallel to and separate from the mainstream protests. The real opportunity, says [activist Reem Hazzan](#), will be when Jewish protesters say “Friends, we want to build a future together, without occupation, with peace and with equality.”

## Competing Priorities

For the protest movement, the threat of this administration is seen as a fundamental reconfiguring of Israel’s liberal democracy. For leaders promoting Arab equality and Jewish-Arab shared society, additional imminent challenges make the situation more complicated:

- **Civil Sector organizations and programs in limbo:** The organizations best positioned to lead and coordinate efforts in response to changing government realities are also often the ones running a wide variety of socio-economic development and shared society programs. While many are involved in mobilizing around protests and monitoring government activities, they are also concerned about slowdown and reduction of government funding essential to their core work. The government has yet to pass a state budget and has made very few decisions about funding, renewal, or extension of existing programs and tenders. Only in a few specific cases (AJJEC, Stopping the Bleeding by JDC) have ministers specifically discussed de-budgeting or a program shutdown, and those have not been definitive either. This limbo means NGOs cannot fight back or take a position on cuts, but must nonetheless plan for them to ensure their ability to survive and meet needs in the field.
- **Local Authorities’ Solvency and Services:** Most Arab local authorities have a socio-economic ranking of 1-4 on a scale of 10, making them by far the weakest in Israel. The [five-year economic development plans](#) for Arab society include long term efforts to strengthen their capacities to boost growth and provide better opportunities and services for their communities. With expected budget cuts and reduced cooperation between local Arab authorities and national government, there is great concern that many Arab local authorities will be deemed insolvent by the Ministry of Interior and taken over—a

situation that weakens the community and is hard to reverse. Before GR-922 (the first five-year plan approved in 2015), many more Arab communities were in this position.

- **Jewish-Arab Relations:** Current tensions in Jewish-Arab relations are high, especially in light of escalations related to clashes at al-Aqsa mosque. Following the violent events of May 2021, many programs were initiated (many with government funding) to prepare for and prevent such events from escalating throughout Israel. NIF, Shatil, and Centers for Social Justice are only some of the organizations working in this area. Currently, it is uncertain if government funding will continue. Nonetheless, in light of the high tensions surrounding the new government and co-occurrence of Ramadan and Passover, these initiatives continue to work while looking for new sources of funding.

## Emerging Needs Assessments

Given the areas of urgency and the limitations of Arab civil society organizations, local, and political leadership, efforts to triage Arab society's needs reveal both competing priorities and basic weaknesses requiring long-term investment. Below is a preliminary list of mitigation priorities regarding threats to Arab society, civil sector capacities needed to meet these needs, and considerations for connecting Arab citizens to the movement for liberal Israeli democracy.

### Socio-Economic Development and Civil Equality

- **Identify and develop government channels** for sustained work and dialogue with professional tiers. Most program implementation takes place with civil service professionals (not the political leadership) and can move forward in various political climates. Continuing to build civil sector relationships with government professionals around implementation of approved budgets can improve outcomes and help minimize negative political influence on professional cooperation.
- **Enhance and establish monitoring and data collection** capacities that can provide local authorities, civil sector, researchers, and analysts with trusted and up-to-date knowledge regarding relevant government budgets, tenders, policies, legislation, and data.
- **Continue civil sector advocacy** that monitors and promotes equal rights in government planning, policies, and activities and maintains these issues in public discourse. Participate in legal actions against discriminatory legislation and policies.

- **Strengthen civil sector capacities** to coordinate as a field, develop an economic and professional preparedness plan, and fill-in to provide services that may be needed due to budget cuts, and deepen the resilience and leadership capacity of the Arab civil sector going forward.
- **Identify funding sources** to support core operations as well as expansion to meet new needs and build related capacities.

## Democracy and Shared Society

Arab citizens seek a democratic movement that encompasses issues of shared society and Jewish-Arab equality. Below is a partial and preliminary list of avenues that can be promoted by and for Arab and Jewish community leaders, organizations, activists, and philanthropy:

- **Develop Arab multisectoral political planning and coordination** that can articulate short and long-term political goals, mobilize the community, and have representative credibility.
- **Work with Jewish activists** to foster shared discourse, collaboration capacities, trust, vision, and cooperation with Arab leaders and on Arab minority issues.
- **Strengthen shared society organizations** to enable further professionalization and diversification such that they can implement programs, build partnerships to expand reach, and deepen strategic planning capacities.
- **Increase local community organizing** to develop future leadership, strengthen intercommunal ties and resilience, promote social cohesion and shared identity, and prevent violence.
- **Promote democracy curriculum and education** in formal, informal settings, from elementary through higher education.
- **Encourage Israeli institutions, associations, and companies** to adopt inclusive and shared society practices.
- **Promote activities** that counter delegitimization of Arab citizens' Palestinian identity.

While these lists are not comprehensive, they illustrate the complex challenge of mitigating cuts to basic immediate needs and addressing gaps in the social and political spheres to make these needs a democratic priority. As policies and needs become clearer in the coming weeks, so will the capacities of the civil sector to articulate and advance more refined strategies. We



thank the many organizations, activists, and leaders who are mobilizing and formulating their responses and shared their time and insights with us for this report.

## Appendix:

### Major government policy and legislation proposals of concern for Arab citizens

#### Economic Development Plans:

- **Implementation challenges:** Cuts to the state budget and an overall slow-down in the allocation of designated economic-development budgets for Arab society are expected to significantly weaken Arab local authorities and reverse trends to professionalize and improve local services, growth, and leadership.
- **Budget redirection:** Coalition agreements enable redirection of approved economic development budgets for Arab society (GR-550) that are underutilized to crime prevention efforts. *See more on crime prevention below.*
- **Budget cuts:** Reversal of Ministry of the Negev and Galil commitments to designating 30% of budgets for local authorities to Arab communities, capping allocations for Arab authorities at 2022 levels while increasing ministry's budget six-fold.
- **Transportation cuts:** NIS 5 billion annual budgets remains after cuts to NIS 2 billion previously allocated for transportation infrastructure development.
- **Mixed Cities:** Concerns that the unprecedented five-year plan for economic development of Arab communities in mixed cities will not be approved beyond the first year, up for renewal this August.

#### Crime and Personal Security

Crisis-level crime rates and concerns for personal safety continue to be the [most pressing issue for Arab citizens](#). In the first quarter of 2023, 40 people were murdered in Arab society (double the rate at the same time last year), compared to 12 in Jewish society. Of these, only

5% of the Arab cases have been solved compared to 83% among Jews.<sup>3</sup> Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben Gvir (Otzma Yehudit), focused his campaign on security and governance. However, both the rhetoric promising a crack-down on Arab lawlessness and steps taken thus far have intensified Arab fears of over-policing and of being recast as a fifth column as opposed to receiving improved police services:

- **Over-Policing:** Expansion of the [National Security Ministry](#) (previously Ministry of Internal Security) is set to increase the number and uses of combat-trained forces inside Israel by bringing [Border Police and creating a beefed up National Guard](#) under its direct authority. These forces are widely understood [as directed at Arab citizens](#), especially in the [Negev](#) with respect to both crime and land disputes, and in mixed cities, which were central to the [events of May 2021](#).<sup>4,5</sup> The stated purpose for expanding the ministry in this way is to “restore personal security ... eradicate nationalist crime” and “prepare for dealing with the potential opening of an internal front during an emergency.”<sup>6</sup> By enabling forces traditionally deployed in the West Bank to serve in Arab communities in Israel, and reframing the struggle against violence in Arab communities as an issue of nationalist crime, the Ministry blurs the lines between Arab citizens of Israel and West Bank Palestinians.
- **Under-Policing:** Meanwhile, two major components of GR-549, the NIS 2.4 billion plan approved in 2021 to combat crime in Arab society, have been disbanded or de facto abandoned. In March, the unit created for Arab Community Crime Prevention [was dismantled](#) citing difficulties achieving its aims. In addition, “Safe Route” a weekly meeting of senior police officials to coordinate the government's operations and objectives in Arab community and with Arab leaders [lost traction](#). Along with questions about what will happen to the designated budgets, police attribute the dramatic increase in murders to lag on this coordination. “National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir stated that he intends to continue the discussions, but several sources indicate that the issue ‘isn't a high priority’ for the minister. Since Ben-Gvir took office, no one is leading

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<sup>3</sup> Breiner, Joshua. “[Murder Toll in Israel's Arab Community at Record High So Far This Year. Just Two Cases Have Been Solved](#).” *Haaretz*. April 4, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon, Jeremy. “[Cabinet vote Sunday on Ben Gvir bid for 2,000-strong national guard under his command](#).” *Times of Israel*. March 29, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Kingsley, Patrick, Bergman, Ronen, Yabek, Hiba “[Security Force or Anti-Arab Militia? Israelis Feud Over Far-Right Plan](#)” *New York Times*. April 1, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Shamir, Jonathan and Breiner, Josh. “[New Powers in Far-right Hands: Israel's National Security Ministry, Explained](#)” *Times of Israel*. November 27, 2022.

the discussions, and communication between the ministry and Arab society leaders has ceased.”<sup>7</sup>

## Shared Society and Jewish-Arab Relations

There is little in the coalition agreements or recent policies that address intergroup relations explicitly. Rather, the Knesset has advanced, passed, or discussed numerous laws and policies that apply only to Arab citizens, restrict Arab civil society, political representation and expression, enable discrimination, or target the field of shared society.

- [A cabinet proposal to cease recognizing degrees from Palestinian universities](#): The proposal seeks to limit the exposure of Arab students to anti-Israel materials and messages. However, thousands of Arab students earning higher education degrees do so in universities in the West Bank due to difficulties entering Israeli institutions. If passed, this legislation would curtail Arab citizens ability to obtain higher education and integrate into Israel’s economy.
- [65% tax on foreign government donations](#): A proposal calls for a 65% tax on donations from foreign governments to Israeli NGOS. Much of this funding goes to shared society organizations and peacebuilding initiatives.
- [Arab citizens and terrorism](#): The Ministerial Committee on Legislation approved a bill that would institute the [death penalty in instances of terrorism](#). Because the act must be, “with the purpose of harming the State of Israel and the rebirth of the Jewish people in its homeland”, it will not apply to Jews. The Knesset also [passed a law](#) that revokes citizenship of Arab citizens who commit terrorism and receive money from the Palestinian Authority. It is advancing legislation that would also revoke the citizenship of the perpetrators’ families.
- [Easing disqualification of Arab candidates for Knesset](#). A bill entitled “Expanding the grounds for preventing participation in elections” was submitted in January to ease existing requirements for significant evidence of support for terrorism to justify disqualification of a candidate or entire party from running for Knesset. A provision adds that a person shall not be a candidate if their actions, explicitly or implicitly, reject Israel’s existence as a Jewish and democratic state.

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<sup>7</sup> Breiner, Josh. “[Murder Toll in Israel's Arab Community at Record High So Far This Year. Just Two Cases Have Been Solved](#)” *Times of Israel*. April 4, 2023.

- [Banning Palestinian flags in public places](#): Following instructions from MK Ben Gvir, police were ordered to confiscate Palestinian flags. Demonstrators [have allegedly been arrested](#) for waving Palestinian flags at protests.
- [New restrictions to external education programs](#): “Operators of informal school programs must commit, “not to include material that shames or humiliates the IDF, its soldiers, its casualties or the casualties of terror attacks.” This limits programs that discuss Palestinian identity and narratives.
- [Amending law to allow religious discrimination in provision of services](#): A current proposal would amend a law passed in 2000 prohibiting discrimination in the provision of services, products and entry to public places so that this is permitted “when done due to the religious belief of the person whose occupation is providing a public product or service or operating a public place.” While most condemnations of this law assume this is targeted at LBGTQI people, shared society organizations expect that the loophole will be used to enhance discrimination and block mobility of Arab citizens.

