

Academic: Israeli-Arab pols fomenting extremism

Prof. Efraim Karsh: "Militant leadership" radicalizing their communities.

By ARIEL BEN SOLOMON (Jerusalem Post)
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An article published this month argues, based on economic and other data, that Israeli Arabs' standard of living has risen dramatically, while Israeli Arab leaders have increasingly radicalized their community.

Prof. Efraim Karsh, a scholar of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College and a principal research fellow at the Middle East Forum, published an article – which is an updated version of a 2003 piece in Commentary magazine dealing with Israeli Arabs – in the January issue of Israel Affairs and on the website of the Middle East Forum.

Entitled "Israel's Arabs: Deprived or Radicalized?" the article cites statistical evidence demonstrating that Israeli Arabs have had an increasingly better quality of life since the Jews began settling in large numbers in British Mandate-era Palestine. For this reason, Arabs continued to move to Jewish population centers in order to improve their socioeconomic living conditions.

However, Karsh presents a paradox: as Israeli Arabs' living conditions have continued to improve since the early 20th century, the Arab population has become more radicalized.

He attributes this mostly to extremist leadership, which began with Jerusalem Mufti Hajj Amin Husseini, who planned to conduct mass murder of Israel's Jews and allied himself with Hitler during World War II. Proving his point, just last week, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas paid tribute to Husseini and his legacy as a great man who should be emulated by all Arabs.

Israeli-Arab MKs such as Ahmed Tibi and Haneen Zoabi have also been at the center of controversy in Israel for their strong pro-Palestinian stances. Tibi refused a request to be interviewed, saying he was "not interested" in the subject.

In the article, Karsh mentions Azmi Bishara – a former member of Knesset and the founder of the Balad party who praised Hezbollah and called for "a state of all its citizens," a phrase typically used in calls for Israel to lose its identity as a Jewish state.

Bishara ended up fleeing Israel after being charged with cooperating with terrorists.

Karsh says that Arab leaders tend to blame Israel for all of their problems and incite violence and hatred against the Jewish state.

However, he argues that Israeli Arabs are anything but deprived and marginalized, stating that they "have made astounding social and economic progress."

"Far from lagging behind, their rate of development has often surpassed that of the Jewish sector, with the result that the gap between the two communities has steadily narrowed," the professor declares in the piece.

"Health statistics are but one indicator. Perhaps most significantly, mortality rates among Israeli Arabs have fallen by over two-thirds since the establishment of the Jewish state, while life expectancy has increased 30 years, reaching 78.5 (women 80.7, men 76.3) in 2009. At the end of the 1940s, life expectancy of Israeli Arabs was fifteen years lower than that of their Jewish counterparts; by the 1970s, the gap had decreased to 2-3 years and has remained virtually unchanged since then (3.7 years in 2009)," he continues.

"Not only does this compare favorably with the Arab and Muslim worlds, but the average Israeli Arab male can expect to live longer than his American (76 years in 2007) and many European counterparts."

In a conversation with Karsh, he said that “the facts speak for themselves” and that Israeli Arabs “are not discriminated against in any major way,” according to the data.

Karsh said that “Arab cities are less congested than Jewish ones,” and that security profiling and other issues are often not a result of racism, but of history.

He also cited statistics showing that infant mortality rates have similarly gone down from 56 per 1,000 births in 1950 to 6.5 in 2008, which is “slightly above the US mortality rate and much lower than that of the neighboring Middle Eastern states. In Algeria, for example, it is 24.9 deaths/1,000 live births, in Egypt 30, in Iraq 40, in Iran 41.”

Israeli Arabs have also excelled in education. In 1961, the average Israeli Arab spent one year in school and today the average is over 11.

In higher education, “fifty years ago, a mere 4% of Arab teachers held academic degrees; by 1999, the figure had vaulted to 47%,” the study finds. Another interesting statistic is that illiteracy dramatically decreased from 57.2% to 7.7%.

Karsh goes on to cite other statistics, such as those showing that the Arab unemployment rate has dropped below that of Jewish periphery towns.

“The truth is that the growing defiance of the state, its policies, and its values was not rooted in socioeconomic deprivation but rather in the steady radicalization of the Israeli Arab community by its ever more militant leadership, not unlike their mandatory predecessors,” he concludes in the piece.

On the other hand, Karsh says that the facts demonstrate that there are some positive signs. He cites a 2007 survey that reveals a “a surprisingly high level of support for the idea of voluntary civil service among Israeli Arabs: 75% among young Arabs (aged 16-22), 71.9% among Arab men and 89% among Arab women say they would support the idea of voluntary civil service.”

In addition, he states that when Israeli Arabs are asked whether they would like to be part of a future Palestinian state or remain Israeli citizens, they overwhelmingly say they would like to remain Israeli citizens. Karsh also calls for new Israeli leaders that “would pay greater heed to the wishes of their constituents and halt their steady drive toward an allout collision.”

These ideas echo those of Atef Krenawi, the founder of new Arab political party Hope for Change.

In an interview last month with *The Jerusalem Post*, he said, “In my almost 20 years in public life, I came to see that the Arab leadership only cares about itself, about keeping its salaries and its seats in the Knesset, and not about the citizens of Israel. Moreover, they’re doing great damage in the way they deal with the Palestinian Authority and the neighboring Arab countries. We as Israeli Arabs need to be a bridge to peace, not fodder for more war.”