



Civic Service for Arabs in Israel

**Findings of Attitude Survey of the Arab
Public and Leadership in Fall 2007**

Sammy Smooha
Participation: Nohad 'Ali



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Abstract

Voluntary civic service has been in existence since the early 1970s, but it has been limited mostly to religious-national Jewish girls. It has gathered momentum only in 2007 after the Government adopted the Ivry Commission recommendations to open up the service to the ultra-orthodox (Haredim), Arabs and other youth exempted from compulsory military service, and established a special administration for this purpose. The Arab leadership, not affiliated to the Jewish establishment, opposes civic service for Arabs and conducts intense struggle against it lest it would set a precedent for compulsory civic or military service, accelerate the "Israelization" process and the blurring of national identity of Arab youth and because the project is implemented without its participation.

Public opinion surveys, carried out in 1994-2007, point out to the willingness of about half of the Arab youth to volunteer to civic service in defiance of the independent Arab leadership. This is a trend that has not changed for years and has been confirmed by actual volunteering figures (the number of Arab volunteers doubled from 280 in 2006 to 560 in 2007).

In order to get a scientific and updated data on Arab public opinion toward civic service and to assess the willingness of Arab youth to volunteer, an attitude survey was conducted in October 2007 on this topic. The telephone survey included 910 respondents, drew on national representative samples of 500 men and women aged 23 and over, 204 parents of 18-22 years old children, and 204 male and female youth 16-22 years old. After completing the Arab population survey, an Arab leadership survey was carried out using the same procedures. The survey included Knesset members, heads of local governments, heads of movements and voluntary associations, journalists and university lecturers. They were divided into 27 public figures affiliated to Jewish establishment and 51 public figures unaffiliated to Jewish establishment. The public and leadership survey was supported by the Alan B. Slifka Foundation from New York.

The Arab population survey reveals that most respondents are not familiar with civic service: 77.4% of the general public, 71.6% of the parents and 79.6% of the youth have no or only little knowledge about civic service, whereas the leaders had sufficient information. The new project is not known to the public despite the campaign against it. The respondents were given basic information emphasizing the voluntary nature of civic service, its organization and funding by the state, the help extended to the needy, the benefits given to the volunteer, and the contributions to society. According to the opponents of the program, this information, though correct, unduly biased the respondents' attitudes. It seems that the program is attractive to the Arab public, and the positive response is not due to an artificial bias. The support of civic service, influenced by the information provided, was indeed considerable, ranging from 65.0% to 78.2% among the three population groups. It was greater among persons with little prior knowledge about the project because they judged the project according to its objective merits as presented to them, and not in the spirit of the concerns and objections of the independent Arab leadership.

The degree of support for civic service found in the Arab leadership survey was over 70% among leaders affiliated to the Jewish establishment, standing in sharp contrast with over 90% rejection among leaders unaffiliated to the Jewish establishment. Although leaders not connected with the Jewish establishment enjoy electoral and other backing of most Arabs in Israel, they do not truly represent them on the issue of civic service while leaders identified with the Jewish establishment are close to the Arab public in their attitude to this question.

In order to obtain more realistic assessment of the degree of support, a number of questions about intensity were posed. It was found that the ratio of supporters answering "certainly in favor" to supporters answering "thinking in favor" was 3-4 to 1, indicating a high degree of confidence in the positive attitude toward civic service. The strength of the stance was also measured by steadfastness vis-à-vis objections added to several questions. The decline in support of civic service was especially evident among the youth: the degree of support was 75.3% when no objection was mentioned, dropped to 42.2% when respondents had to consider their opinion in case most Arab leaders object, going down to 35.0% in case most religious and non-religious local leaders object, and further declined to 27.1% if close family members object. This is an appreciable drop showing that support of civic service, if not propped by prior positive knowledge, is vulnerable to erosion by objections and negative campaign.

A significant relationship was found between gender and support of civic service. Women and mothers supported more civic service than men and fathers, and girls' support was the same as boys'. When the question focused explicitly on volunteering of Arab girls to civic service, the support dropped among all research groups, except among independent leaders whose support was minimal to begin with (about 10%). For instance, youth's support decreased from 75.3% to 48.1%. These two facets of support show that civic service may perform vital need for Arab girls – moratorium before work, continued studies and marriage,

refuge from the restraining bubble of family and community, and a good opportunity for personal development. For this reason female support is greater than male support and the actual number of volunteers among girls to civic service is higher than among boys.

About 90% of the supporters indicated, as reasons for their support, contribution to Arab society, promotion of equality between Arabs and Jews, and development of an independent and responsible personality of the volunteer, while 54.2% to 79.9% mentioned personal, instrumental and material interest although it is less socially desirable to say so. In contrast, at least one-fifth of the objectors agreed with each one of ten reasons proposed for objecting to civic service, and a majority emerged citing national-collectivistic reasons for objecting such as fear that a voluntary service would become obligatory or turn into a compulsory military service, internal division between volunteers and non-volunteers, a stigma of collaboration and non-achievement of the goal of equality. Arab public figures who are not attached to the Jewish establishment indicated only national objections to civic service and did not raise doubts about the worthiness of the benefits given.

With regard to the character of the civic service, it appears that there is no clear majority for a specific option but rather preference of a variety of options: one or more years of service, service with Arabs or with Jews, and service in locality of residence or elsewhere. A majority emerged in favor of living at home during the period of service and in favor of service in three areas – helping teachers and students in schools, helping the elderly and the disabled, and helping employees and the sick in hospitals. These are the three activities that Arab volunteers to civic service in 2007 were in fact performing.

In response to whose opinion one should consider when deciding if to volunteer to civic service, the most important figure is the youth oneself, then one's relatives and then peers, while teachers and national and local leaders

were pushed aside. The decision on civic service is therefore perceived as a personal, not national, decision. This holds true for supporters of the civic service who see it first and foremost as a worthwhile transaction, while the objectors view it primarily as a project inimical to Arab national interest. Accordingly, the Arab leadership survey shows that public figures unaffiliated to the Jewish establishment, being against civic service, frame it as a national issue and expect Arab youth to take into account the view of Arab leaders when deciding if to volunteer or not.

A stand on volunteering to civic service is part of a wider set of attitudes toward the Jewish majority and the state. In this study relationships of this kind were found but they were not too strong. Their weakness stems from the fact that the Arab sector is still not well-informed about civic service, and hence no attitudes have as yet crystallized toward it among the Arab general public and youth. Yet, significant relationships were found between civic service and identity: supporters of civic service tend to hold civil, rather than nationalist, identity, and Israeli-Arab, rather than Palestinian-Arab, identity. Followers of Jewish political parties support civic service, but also a large majority from among followers of Arab political parties does so, a finding that confirms once again that for most Arabs this issue is construed more as a personal-family, rather than as a public-national, matter.

Connections were found between support of civic service and several socio-demographic variables. There was a larger support among women and persons with lower level of education and income because civic service provides an additional channel of social mobility to these weak and disadvantaged population groups. In contrast, no differences were found according to contact with Jews, age, religion, religiosity, Bedouin origin, origin from a displaced family and region in the country.

Civic service is an issue on which the Arab population and the Arab leadership not affiliated to the Jewish establishment are divided. This Arab

leadership is conducting a campaign to do away with the government initiative by deterring Arab youth from volunteering to the program. For a large part of Arab youth, civic service gives worthy personal benefits and contributes to the Arab community by boosting educational, health and welfare services. Independent Arab leaders and Arab objectors to civic service view it as a means adverse to Arab national interest because it may facilitate Arabs' integration into the state and their acquiescence to its Jewish character and may weaken their struggle against discrimination and exclusion.

The project may succeed if accompanied by a campaign for explaining its benefits to Arab individuals and communities, if remains voluntary, if the promised benefits are delivered and if recruitment is limited to several thousand volunteers per year (from an annual cohort of 19,000 girls and boys), and as long as civic service will furnish a valuable supplementary manpower to service providers in the Arab sector. The campaign against the project would reduce its mass support but would not cause its downfall.