



Policy Paper 177

A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

The Gap Year as a Path to Mobility among Arab Youth in Israel

Nasreen Haddad Haj-Yahya | Merav Shaviv
Arik Rudnitzky | Aran Zinner

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The Israel Democracy Institute
4 Pinsker St., P.O.B. 4702, Jerusalem 9104602
Tel: (972)-2-5300-888
Website: en.idi.org.il

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with Israeli Arab youth. It looks at the stage after high school graduation—the end of childhood and the beginning of adult life—a decisive turning point in their lives, when they embark upon young adulthood and must find their place in Israeli higher education, vocational training, and employment.

In the research literature, young adulthood is seen as a complex, challenging stage because it is then that major life decisions must be made. Decision-making brings with it a sense of freedom and independence, but also feelings of disconnectedness, confusion, and lack of clarity; it entails a sharp switch from structured, orderly ways of life to personal responsibility for creating the way of life one wants without constant assistance or guidance.

For the vast majority of young Jewish (non-haredi) Israelis, this switch is postponed by compulsory military service; thus they can defer their decision-making about their future for a few years. Military service generally includes various vocational and technological training programs, courses, or even college studies, gives soldiers an opportunity to make up

matriculation exams, and offers experience in a variety of roles, in being independent, and in developing new relationships. Furthermore, military service prepares young people for civilian life through information, career counseling, and financial assistance after demobilization. This is an “entry ticket” to the economy and to Israeli society. In recent years, military service has been made attractive even for parts of the haredi population, giving these young people skills and competencies that contribute to their social and economic mobility.

As alternatives to military service or in preparation for it, a wide range of state-funded gap year programs have developed over the years for various population groups, most notably the volunteer national civic service (NCS) track. This track, developed as an alternative to military service for religious Jewish women, today enables young men and women who have received exemptions from military service or were not conscripted at all to volunteer on behalf of the community while strengthening their job skills and preparing for a future career. In addition, “service year” programs and pre-military academies are available before military service for those interested. These popular tracks include community service and educational and values-based activities in a wide range of settings, with a variety of content, and for various different population groups. According to the data available to us, 97% of 18-year-old non-haredi Israeli Jews (men and women) perform military or national civic service, and 10% of each cohort first take part in a service year or enroll in a pre-military academy. Moreover, after demobilization many young Jews embark on a long trip abroad, which gives them a break and another opportunity to gain experience during the transition to adulthood before settling down into college or work.

The life course of Israeli Arab youths is totally different. They are not drafted for military service, and only a minority of them—about 9% of the average cohort of 18-year-olds—perform NCS (a proportion that has

remained stable in recent years and consists mainly of Arab women), partly due to the Arab leadership's traditional opposition to such service. Most young Arab men look for work after high school, and many of them find low-paying jobs with no prospects for advancement. A large percentage of them—about 30% of those aged 19–21—are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Young Arab women are more likely to enroll in post-secondary and higher education, but many of them, too—about 40% in this age range (and more in older age groups)—are NEET. The participation of young Arab men and women (but especially men) in higher education is also of lower quality, as indicated by higher dropout rates, longer duration of study, and so on. The disparities in fulfilling human capital potential through higher education and employment start during the school years. Arabs (especially Arab boys) have higher school dropout rates and lower scholastic achievement, as evidenced by rates of eligibility for matriculation certificates and scores on international tests (in fact, the disparities have grown over time).

Given the challenges during young adulthood, the data come as no surprise. At this age young Israeli Arabs have to move from the sheltered, enveloping environment of the Arab community to general Israeli society, where they are part of a minority and come from a different cultural background. Through their own efforts, they have to overcome obstacles and challenges originating for the most part in the separate Arab education system (both formal and nonformal), which has not given them the tools needed for effective integration in Israeli society and the Israeli economy. These young people's initial encounter with young Jews and with general Israeli society and culture tends to take place after graduation, at a time when their identity is not yet fully formed; not all of them are mature enough to choose a course of study; some lack guidance and complete, objective information; and their parents have a noticeable tendency to dictate their children's field of study or occupation without necessarily taking into account their personal aspirations. In most cases the young

people are not fluent in the spoken Hebrew required for higher education and employment, and they lack 21st-century skills.

In the past decade, Israeli social-action organizations have developed a range of gap year programs for Arab high school graduates in order to promote equal opportunity and socioeconomic mobility for these young people, encourage change in the community, build a shared society, and train young leadership. These programs are based on the principles of nonformal education and include processes of empowerment and consolidation of personal and national identity, preparation for the encounter with Israeli society, assistance in formulating a picture of one's future, and exposure to a range of options for the next stage, including fields of study. In these programs, the young people improve their proficiency in spoken Hebrew; acquire soft skills and capabilities (e.g. self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, the ability to work independently, and the ability to cope with complex situations), volunteer and contribute to the community; and prepare for high-caliber integration in college, employment, and Israeli society.

In the past few years the State of Israel has begun, for the first time, to support such programs through the Ministry of Education's "socio-community leadership institutes" under Government Resolution 922 for the economic development of the Arab population. The aim of this support is "to encourage young Arabs to participate in processes of societal change while promoting personal empowerment, education, and volunteering, in the belief that advancing equal opportunity requires the development of robust local leadership in Arab localities."¹ In our estimation, about 3% of Arab 18-year-olds (mostly women) currently participate in gap year programs, and the state supports only about a third of these programs.

1 "Support Tests for Support from the Ministry of Higher Education for Socio-Community Leadership Institutes in Arab Society," Ministry of Justice website, Apr. 11, 2021 (Hebrew)

This trend is expected to increase in the coming years in view of the government's recognition of the need to develop such tracks for the entire young Arab population and to allocate additional budgets for them.

Main Insights and Conclusions

(1) The study found that gap year programs in general, and in Israel in particular, are a **formative period that makes a significant contribution to the maturation of young people**. These programs influence their identity, their personality, and their mission in this significant period of their lives. Moreover, they empower them, teach personal life skills such as responsibility, awareness of civic obligations, involvement in society, leadership skills, and acceptance of and tolerance for complex populations, and they help young people prepare for college and the job market. The young people who take part in gap year programs are not the only beneficiaries. Society as a whole benefits: for example, the civic involvement and contributions to the community among participants of gap year programs are much higher than average.

(2) Gap year programs for young Arabs in Israel exist primarily **due the need to help them integrate in the Israeli economy and society**. This is clear from the stated goals of existing programs: “producing young Arab leadership”; “preparing the young people for higher education and employment”; “moving the young people from a state of dependency and neediness to taking responsibility for their lives and their future”; “personal development through civic involvement”; and so on.

(3) Alumni of the programs enroll in Israeli colleges and universities in relatively high numbers and are more involved than the average in civil society. Cost-benefit computations of similar programs show that on the whole **creating such tracks has economic potential, as they offer a positive return to the individual and the economy**, depend on the increasing rate of employment and salaries of the participants.

(4) There is broad consensus among the people who developed and run the programs that **gap year programs are essential for all young men and women in Arab society** and must be made the routine next step after high school. Significantly, due to the Arab leadership's traditional opposition to state-sponsored national civic service, the programs operate separately from it, and the prevailing view is that a variety of alternative tracks should be available in addition to national civic service. This idea is supported by a survey of Arab 12th-graders conducted as part of this study, which found relatively low willingness to perform state-sponsored NCS.

(5) Gap year programs are **crucial both for the top students**, who can enroll immediately in Israeli colleges and universities, **and for NEETs**, due to the significant challenges faced by young Arabs trying to begin higher education, vocational training, and employment in Israel. A suitable gap year can help young people choose a field of study and the right educational institution while reducing college dropout rates and lessening the proportion of young people who apply to colleges and universities in the Palestinian Authority and abroad. According to the survey conducted as part of this study, of 12th-graders, a substantial proportion (about 21%) said they intended to attend college abroad.

(6) **Most of the existing programs operate five full days a week for 10 months to a year and appeal to relatively "strong" populations.** Few programs take place only part of the week. Unlike gap year programs in Jewish society, such as the pre-military academies, most of the programs take place in a group format and combine frontal classes with hands-on activity, volunteering in the community, and social initiatives. Few of the programs offer dormitories (mainly for fear that parents would not allow their daughters to spend the night away from home), but they do require going outside the community. Only a few programs take place in a mixed Jewish-Arab setting, although most do conduct such encounters.

(7) The direct cost of gap year programs depends on the number of participants per group, the scope of the training program, dormitories, food, travel, and so on. Average state support for leadership institutes for young Arabs is, in our estimation, 50%–75% of the actual cost, with the remainder provided by social-action organizations. **This rate of support has been unstable in recent years and is low** relative to the actual average cost, especially in models that offer housing. It should be noted that most of the participants do not pay participation fees due to their relatively low socioeconomic status; rather, they may receive monthly income support from the National Insurance Institute. However, they do not receive benefits, unlike participants in other, similar gap year programs, and the wages offered by the job market are higher than the income support they receive.

(8) **The willingness of young Arabs to participate in gap year programs cannot be taken for granted.** These programs are new and unfamiliar in Arab society; they are not well established the way they are in Jewish society. The study found that most Arab students want knowledge and higher education but do not see participation in a gap year program as an attractive option. They are highly optimistic regarding their ability to achieve their life goals on their own by taking personal responsibility for their career choices. This is especially true of pupils with a high grade-point average, particularly boys. Most of the girls first and foremost want satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and higher education. The boys, however, also aspire to high earnings. They are less sure of their future plans, less aware of the challenges, less likely to consult anyone regarding their choice of career, and more worried about insufficient finances. The research literature also indicates that young Arab women are more likely to enroll in higher education, whereas young Arab men are busy supporting their families. Significantly, the survey of 12th-graders found that most of the boys – about 2/3 – worked at least one day a week while in 12th grade, compared to 1/3 of the girls.

(9) Parental support and the ability to consult their parents regarding decisions about the future are the most important factor helping young men and women in Israeli Arab society today, and they are critical in making decisions for the future. The parents are their children's natural mentors and role models. In contrast, outside advisors, such as professionals or the school staff, were found to be of **secondary** importance. Therefore, recruiting participants for programs is currently done mainly by winning the parents' trust and consent, while offering comprehensive professional advice and direction. Interviews with role models in Arab society indicate that what helped them most was **meeting with mentors** (Arabs and Jews). The mentors' contribution was not limited to the professional arena; they also helped with personal growth and the acquisition of soft skills, such as public speaking, persuasiveness, and coping with stressful situations and with dilemmas and crises.

(10) According to the study, existing gap year programs for Israeli Arabs mainly offer the following content:

- **Development of an identity and a sense of belonging, which is a necessary stage in the maturation process of every young man or woman.** This is also a vital element in the process of decision-making about one's future career and integration in Israeli society. The research literature indicates that it is natural for young people to try to figure out their identity at this time of life; group work on these topics gives them essential social support, shows them that the feelings that accompany the process of figuring out their identity are normal, and offers ideas for how to cope. The identity dilemma of young Arabs in Israel becomes increasingly intense following high school graduation when they are trying to integrate in general Israeli society, particularly due to the lack of attention to the issue in the Arab schools. In this context, it was found that these young people feel their strongest sense of belonging to and identification with their families. The family is far more important to them than all other sources of belonging: the town, the religious community,

Arab society, the Palestinian people, and last of all, general Israel society. The distribution of answers by religious affiliation uncovers significant differences in this respect between the different religious communities. These differences reflect rifts between ethnic groups and religions in Arab society and are related to their internal narrative.

- **Increased proficiency in the Hebrew language** is a necessary condition for successful integration in the job market, higher education, and Israeli society. In Arab schools Hebrew is taught with emphasis on texts from the Bible and Jewish literature, and most graduates are not fluent in the language required in college and the job market, especially **spoken Hebrew**. In our study, only a third of the 12th-graders said they speak Hebrew on a high level. Gap year programs improve proficiency in Hebrew both through frontal classes and through encounters, lectures, and experiential activities with Hebrew-speakers.

- Becoming better acquainted with Israeli society is another important component of the programs. The study found that young Arabs do not feel comfortable in a Jewish environment; many of the students are **bothered by discrimination against Arabs in Israel**, which they regard as a major barrier to integration in employment. This perception is shared by those with high grades, those from well-off families, and even those with a relatively good knowledge of Hebrew. Given the separate education system, the first substantial encounter between young Jews and Arabs tends to be in college or in the job market, and without appropriate preparation this encounter can be confusing and even threatening. The more fluent young Arabs are in Hebrew, and the earlier they are exposed to Jewish society, as they are in existing gap year programs, the gentler the culture shock that they experience when they encounter Jewish-Israeli society.

- **Volunteer activity and social/community initiatives**, which are present to varying degrees in all the existing programs, are important elements in the development of self-efficacy and in civic education. Some of the

program leaders stressed that the most meaningful volunteering is in the formal and nonformal education systems, where participants can acquire a sense of efficacy and the ability to influence others. In contrast, others maintained that sending volunteers (especially young women) to the education system is easy, and therefore creativity is needed in finding diverse social projects for community volunteers. Some emphasized the impact of volunteering on exposure to and experience in various career options. Some stressed the importance of volunteering in general society to gain exposure to Hebrew and to Israeli society, but most believed that the volunteering should be done in the Arab community, given the participants' poor spoken Hebrew and the social needs of the Arab community.

Main Recommendations

(1) The state, in consultation with the Arab leadership, should adopt a clear, wide-ranging policy to establish effective gap year programs for all young Israeli Arabs, with the intention of making the gap year program a standard, routine stage in the lives of young Arabs in Israel. To this end, the state should greatly increase the resources for developing and funding these programs and should adjust its funding to the real cost of the various programs. Moreover, the funding and regulation of the various programs should be done by a single government body rather than being scattered among several ministries.

(2) In order to increase the number and variety of programs, steps should be taken to create a foundation of knowledge and to train personnel from the emerging field of nonformal education in Arab society. Local civic-action organizations within Arab society should be developed and strengthened so that they can conduct the programs in conjunction with the Arab local authorities.

(3) Emphasis must be placed on the participation of young men in the programs, since only a minority of them, even among NEETs, currently

take part. Moreover, the models must be adapted to suit them (volunteer activities, scope of activity, financial incentives, gender separation, etc.). It is necessary to contend with the perception among many Arab parents that young men should immediately enter the job market in order to help support the family and build homes for themselves; financial constraints must also be addressed. To this end, it is necessary, inter alia, to **amend the support tests for government support for leadership institutes**, which currently encourages participation only by women, and to increase the resources allocated for this matter.

(4) In the short term, participation in the programs should be **made more economically feasible**, especially for young people from a low socioeconomic background, by increasing the financial support provided to participants, and by allowing them to earn more than is permitted today without losing their eligibility for income support. Moreover, we recommend offering additional financial incentives to program participants, both in money and in kind (e.g., funding a preparatory course for the psychometric exams and the Yael Hebrew-language exam, free public transportation, and food). In addition, if the gap year programs are similar to national civic service, **equivalent benefits should be granted** to their alumni (demobilization grants, personal deposit accounts, etc.).

(5) In order to meet the needs of the diverse populations within Arab society and the various objectives, **a range of models of gap year programs should be developed**; clear goals and targets should be set for the program operators relating to preparation for vocational and technological training, for higher education, and for quality employment in the Israeli job market; and achievement of these goals and targets should be assessed. We recommend supporting models with varying amounts of frontal classes, practical experience, volunteer activity and initiatives, and so on, depending on their objectives. Furthermore, the development of short-term programs or programs that take place only part of the week should be considered so that participants (particularly young men) can work as

well. In addition, a **regular forum of program heads and personnel should be established** so that they can learn from one another and improve the programs.

(6) As stated, most of the existing programs are commuter programs due to fear that parents would not agree to allow the young people, especially young women, to spend their nights away from home. We believe that **both commuter programs and residential programs should be offered**, and that the residential programs should be gradually expanded, given the importance of developing independence, responsibility, initiative, and additional life skills.

(7) Furthermore, **joint programs for young Arabs and Jews should be encouraged** in order to prepare the young people (from both groups) for life together. At the very least, it is important to ensure that the separate programs include significant encounters of young Jews and Arabs (which should start in high school). Fear of discrimination against Arabs and the difficulty of being in Jewish society constitute significant barriers for young Arabs entering the job market. In this context, it should be kept in mind that the current support tests do not allow support for joint leadership institutes for Jews and Arabs. **We therefore recommend revising them** and allocating an additional budget for such programs.

(8) It is essential to devote a major portion of the content of the gap year programs to the following components: **Issues of identity and belonging** on the personal, social, cultural, and national levels, including becoming acquainted with the diverse segments of Israeli society. The earlier the young people contend with these issues, the more successfully they will be able to integrate in Israeli society and the Israeli economy. **Activities to improve proficiency in Hebrew, with emphasis on the spoken language**, in accordance with what they will need for college and the job market. We recommend emphasizing activities that encourage the **development of life skills** such as independence, self-efficacy, and initiative. In addition, the programs should address the development of **study skills** needed

for vocational and technological training programs and college, such as researching a topic, critical thinking, independent study, teamwork, time management, and digital skills. We believe it is important to include in the programs **meaningful volunteering** in a variety of realms, particularly in order to empower the participants, teach them skills, and strengthen their social and community involvement. In this context, it should be noted that the regulation governing leadership institutes limits volunteering to 25% of the program. Given the importance and benefits of meaningful volunteering and the importance of developing a range of models as stated, we recommend **eliminating this restriction**.

(9) Exposure to gap year programs should begin in high school in order to prepare students for the activities conducted in these programs, to form close-knit groups for an effective gap year, and to win parents' trust in the operating organization. Moreover, some activities can be started in high school, such as providing information and career counseling so as to enable the young people to plan their courses of study appropriately in accordance with their inclinations and aspirations and to prevent tracking.

(10) Winning the trust of Arab parents is crucial for recruiting young people. Successful marketing of the programs requires increasing parents' awareness of their practical benefits, especially through messages that emphasize a better ability to choose a field of study and succeed in Israeli colleges and universities, vocational training, and future careers. Furthermore, **Arab mentors should take part in the programs** so that they can influence the young people and set personal examples, both in the recruitment stage and during the programs themselves.

(11) It is important to continue assisting the participants after the programs are over, and especially in their first years of college, vocational training, or employment, i.e., in the stages in which they experience independent adult life in Israeli society for the first time. (Most of the existing programs do this via coordinators who have personal relationships with the participants.)

(12) Follow-up studies are needed on various kinds of models and programs for various populations, in order to examine their effectiveness before they are expanded.

Significantly, the study was not conducted among Arabs in East Jerusalem. Most of these young people do not attend Israeli schools and do not speak Hebrew, and therefore they have difficulty gaining admission to training programs and higher education in Israel. In addition, they face substantial socioeconomic difficulties and cultural and other challenges. Government Resolutions 1775 and 3790 for the economic development of East Jerusalem increased the options available to these students; currently, not only are they eligible for assistance with vocational training and employment, but many colleges in Jerusalem offer specially designed college preparatory programs for them that emphasize academics and acquisition of Hebrew. In addition, both the Rowad program, which offers guidance and information about higher education, and the al-Bashayir leadership training program for outstanding high school students operate in Jerusalem. These programs are mainly for top students who have passed the Palestinian matriculation exams (*Tawjihi*) and whose challenges do not involve academic ability. However, the existing programs do not seem to offer a comprehensive solution for all the challenges the way gap year programs do. Furthermore, the current support tests for leadership institutes are not intended for gap year programs for Arab youth from Jerusalem, since they are not citizens. **Therefore, a separate study and pilot program should be conducted in order to develop gap year programs earmarked for East Jerusalem residents and to prepare them for vocational training, higher education, and employment in Israel.**

In the final stages of the study, after some of the interim findings had been presented at a seminar on the subject,² the Israeli Government adopted Resolution 852: “Government Policy for Dealing with Crime and Violence in Arab Society and Empowering Arab Society in Israel and Amendment of Government Resolutions” (March 1, 2021). In this resolution, the Government decided for the first time to **develop gap year programs for young Arabs to prepare them for integration in society, higher education, and employment, in addition to and in coordination with national civic service.** On October 24, 2021, two additional important resolutions were adopted for the next five years: Under Resolution 549: “Five-Year Plan for Dealing with Crime and Violence in Arab Society, 2022–2026,” the Labor Branch would be instructed **“to operate a 6 to 12 month ‘gap year’ program** that will constitute an intensive, holistic program promoting the employment of young men and will include components such as personal and group assistance, vocational training, Hebrew, and various other skills needed for the job market.” In Resolution 550: “The Economic Plan for Reducing Disparities in Arab Society by 2026,” the Government stated, inter alia, that it “sees national importance in boosting the integration of young Arabs in the economy, higher education, and employment and increasing civic involvement among young men and women in Arab society.” To this end, the Ministry for Social Equality was instructed **“to conduct ‘transitional programs’ in the program localities** in order to assist young Arabs with guidance in the transitional period after high school graduation and before their integration in society, higher education, and employment, with the aim of offering direction, providing tools and skills for employment and higher education, increasing the sense of belonging, developing leadership skills, and preparing them for adult life. These programs will grow gradually and will include measurable indicators of

2 Israel Democracy Institute seminar, Feb. 21, 2021, “From Crisis to Growth: A Gap Year for Young Arab Men and Women as a Way of Promoting Employment, Higher Education, and Volunteering in the Community.”

success.” The government allocated hundreds of millions of shekels for gap year programs for the next five years, in addition to the tens of millions of shekels being provided by philanthropic foundations that invest in the development of knowledge.

These resolutions are extremely significant and will, in our estimation, make it possible to triple the number of participants in gap year programs in the next five years (not including a possible increase in NCS). Nevertheless, this would still be a relatively low percentage of the relevant age group. As stated, an investment is needed in infrastructure creation and resource allocation in order for significant growth to continue in the coming years.

It is important to stress that gap year programs are no substitute for urgently needed changes that would make the Arab education system, both formal and nonformal, up to date and relevant. These changes are necessary in order to give young Arabs the tools and skills they need to be part of Israeli society and the Israeli economy in the 21st century. The gap year programs will have to adapt themselves to these changes.