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Inside the Minority

◇ URIEL ZEHAVI

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TODAY is Christmas. In Israel, Christians are celebrating it openly—in Haifa, in Jerusalem’s churches, in the Old City, in towns and villages across the country. Pilgrims are here too, doing what pilgrims have done for two thousand years: walking, praying, singing, and lingering in the places where their faith was born. That is not a small detail. In much of the Middle East, Christian life has been hollowed out by civil war, jihadist violence, state hostility, and demographic flight. In Israel, Christian communities are present, public, and protected by law. You can argue about policy. You cannot argue about the contrast.

IN THIS EDITION

Inside the Minority	4
Civic Architecture: Rights, Law, and the Limits of Power	5
Arab Citizenship Under Load	7
Beyond Religion: Secular Arab Life Inside Israel	8
Land, Law, and Loyalty	9
Covenant and Friction: The Druze Bargain with the State	10
Merit Without Quotas	12
Pluralism at the Margins: The Communities That Break the Model	12
Apartheid by Law	14
Unequal by Neglect: Where the State Has Failed Its Citizens	15

I wrote this after seeing the apartheid allegation once to many times in the same morning. Which is, on its face, absurd. It's impossible, if you've ever been to Israel, to think the claim has any merit. A stroll through Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda shuk or, really, just about anywhere in this land, will fully dispel that idea. That most Israelis look like they've come from Poland is truly laughable.

I've already dismantled the apartheid libel in my book *Rooted Truth: Israel's Case Against the Deniers*, but in an effort to make it more accessible—and to arm you against it—I tackle it a bit here.

Though, more than that, I wanted to share an examination of how minorities actually live inside the state. How they vote. Litigate. Serve. Build careers. Fight crime. Protest policy. Negotiate budgets, And argue with power from within the system that governs them.

Apartheid is a legal regime. Israel is a messy democracy under strain. Those two things are not the same—and confusing them has consequences, not only for Israel, but for the meaning of the word itself. And as someone who (when they were much younger) read the dictionary for fun, that's something worth correcting.

Inside the Minority

Citizenship, identity, power, and friction in a society too plural for slogans

THE word “apartheid” functions as an accelerant. People throw it on Israel the way arsonists throw gasoline. Not to illuminate, to burn. The accusation did not appear by accident. It sits in a lineage—Durban 2001 made it a global NGO project—and it keeps returning because it does its job. It recasts Israel as a moral abomination rather than a state facing enemies, dilemmas, and the obligations of citizenship.

The apartheid accusation runs on a rigid story. Jews as a ruling caste. Arabs as a permanently disenfranchised subject class. Policy as an expression of ethnic hatred.

It flattens national politics into a racial morality play. One in which there can be no context because context wrecks the script.

Real apartheid was not a vibe. It was a legal machine. South Africa codified separation into the bloodstream of daily life. Non-whites could not vote. They could not hold power. They could not live where they wished. They could not use the same entrances, schools, hospitals, or services. The state openly engineered a racial order and enforced it with law, police, and bureaucracy.

If Israel were running an apartheid regime over its citizens, we would see that architecture: universal political exclusion, formal racial classification, blanket bans on access to institutions, and a legal framework designed to keep one group permanently subordinate.

Israel does not have that structure. Arab citizens of Israel vote. They form parties. They sit in the Knesset. They work in public institutions. They study in universities. They shop, travel, sue, argue, and build careers in the same public sphere as Jewish citizens.

Arab and Jewish patients lie in the same hospital wards and receive the same care because the state’s medical system treats them as patients, not as a racial category to be contained.

The smear survives by treating any inequality as proof of apartheid. Inequality exists in democracies. Bias exists. Neglect exists. Underinvestment exists. Poor governance exists. None of that is apartheid.

The accusation also requires erasing internal plurality. “The Arabs” become a single undifferentiated bloc. In real life, Israel’s Arab citizenry contains competing political identities, religious currents, class divisions, and communal strategies. A state running apartheid prefers uniformity: one group on top, one group below, everyone locked into place. Israel’s minority reality is noisy, opportunistic, ambitious, angry, hopeful, cynical, and human—but it is definitely not one solid bloc.

One data point captures the problem for the slogan merchants. In 2021, Ra’am—an Arab Islamist party led by Mansour Abbas—joined the governing coalition.

It was the first Arab party to become a formal part of an Israeli government. That coalition agreement channeled major budgets toward Arab municipalities and community needs. Apartheid systems do not invite the “oppressed” into the ruling apparatus as bargaining partners. They do not write coalition agreements that empower them.

Israel did, because Israel’s political system runs on votes and deals, not on racial exclusion.

Civic Architecture: Rights, Law, and the Limits of Power

Israel built its civic order on a blunt promise albeit with a permanent tension. The promise appears in the state’s founding declaration: complete equality of social and political rights to all inhabitants, regardless of religion, race, or sex, alongside protections for religion, conscience, language, education, and culture. The tension though is fairly obvious. Israel defines itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people while governing a multiethnic citizenry with full political rights. Anyone looking for apartheid architecture needs to find a racial hierarchy baked into law. Israel’s framework runs on the opposite premise—one citizenship, one ballot, one court system open to all—then wrestles with the messy consequences of identity, history, and unequal outcomes.

Start with the baseline: Israel does not maintain legal tiers of citizenship. Jews and non-Jews hold the same citizenship status, the same passport, the same vote, the same due process protections.

One legal preference does exist, and it sits where Israel’s Jewish national purpose is explicit: the Law of Return, which grants Jews worldwide the right to immigrate and receive citizenship. That policy draws criticism, sometimes fair, often weaponized. Still, it does not establish differential civil rights among citizens already inside the state. It functions at the gates, not within the citizenry. Inside the citizenry, the vote does not come with a “Jewish” surcharge.

Israel recognizes multiple religious communities and assigns personal-status matters—marriage, divorce, some inheritance issues—to religious courts for those communities. Muslims have state-supported sharia courts for personal status. Christians and other recognized communities maintain their own ecclesiastical systems in parallel. People who want a single civil marriage regime call this outdated, and they have a point. People who call it apartheid are playing a different game. A citizen does not lose standing in secular courts or access to state services because a religious court handles personal-status matters inside that citizen’s community. The framework grants communal autonomy, then channels civic disputes through a shared state system.

Any citizen can petition Israel’s courts, including the “supreme court” sitting as the High Court of Justice. Minorities and civil rights groups use that access constantly.

Cultural autonomy sits alongside civic equality and creates a landscape that looks “separate” without operating as forced segregation. Arabic-speaking citizens often attend Arab-sector public schools with Arabic as the language

of instruction, following an Israeli curriculum that includes Arabic language and cultural heritage alongside general studies. Hebrew-sector schools follow their own cultural focus. This arrangement preserves minority identity while leaving room for integration—especially in mixed cities—and bilingual programs. Separation here grows primarily from language, communal preference, and historical development, not from statutes that forbid mixing.

Where people want more integration, they push for it. Where they want cultural continuity, they maintain it. The state funds both. That arrangement can lead to arguments about resources, curriculum, and identity. Democracies argue about that. Apartheid regimes dictate.

Economic and social gaps remain real, however. Arab municipalities tend to be poorer on average, with higher poverty and unemployment rates and weaker outcomes in educational metrics. Those gaps reflect a mix of past neglect, uneven resource allocation, and internal community challenges. None of that becomes apartheid by rhetorical force.

The legal question stays narrow and brutal: does the law enforce separation, prohibit shared public life, or deny political rights. Israeli law does not bar Arab citizens from universities, hospitals, workplaces, highways, public transport, or courts. Daily civic life inside Israel produces routine contact: integrated universities with Arab student representation, a national healthcare system shared across communities, mixed workforces, mixed shopping centers, and mixed cities where Arabs and Jews live in proximity, if not always in harmony.

In recent years, government development plans earmarked unprecedented billions of shekels for investment in Arab towns to close gaps. The motivations vary: governance needs, crime concerns, economic productivity, coalition incentives. The effect remains concrete: a state planning to permanently suppress a population does not publish multi-year investment plans aimed at narrowing disparities inside that population's municipalities.

Governments can misallocate, underdeliver, and drag their feet even while spending. Still, the direction of travel matters for assessment. The civic arena functions as a bargaining space, not a racial cage.

Identity politics continues to generate flashpoints, including the 2018 Nation-State Law, which elevated Jewish national rights in symbolic and constitutional language and triggered criticism and petitions. Public dissent erupted across communities. Legal challenges moved through the courts. The argument unfolded in open air rather than in secret police basements.

A propaganda campaign needs a single villainous structure. Israel's domestic civic order offers something less cinematic and more definitive: enfranchised minorities fighting for budgets, litigating rights, building careers, preserving identity, and winning arguments often enough to keep the system honest. That architecture does not belong to apartheid. It belongs to a democracy that refuses to stop arguing.

Arab Citizenship Under Load

Roughly 150,000 Arabs, most Sunni Muslim, remained inside Israel's borders after the 1948 war and received citizenship. Their descendants now number close to two million, forming the largest non-Jewish bloc in the state.

Though Muslim Arab citizens hold the same formal rights as Jewish citizens, clan loyalty still shapes local politics, hiring, and dispute resolution in many towns, particularly outside mixed cities.

This internal architecture complicates every attempt at reform.

Geography doesn't always help. Most Muslim Arab citizens live in the Galilee, the Triangle, and the Negev. Only a small minority live in mixed cities such as Haifa, Jaffa, Lod, Ramle, or Acre. Even there, housing patterns tend to cluster by language and income. This is not the result of exclusionary law. It flows from planning failures, land ownership patterns, family networks, and habit.

Dozens of Arab municipalities elect their own mayors and councils. These officials manage schools, zoning, sanitation, and welfare under budget constraints that are often tighter than those faced by Jewish towns. They lobby ministries, file petitions, and bargain. They also preside over communities facing violent crime, illegal weapons, and entrenched clan rivalries. When murders surged in Arab towns, mayors and MKs accused police of abandonment. The government responded decisively, launching large-scale anti-crime plans, expanding police presence, and declaring the violence a national problem. States that view minorities as expendable do not invest resources to stop intra-community violence.

Social integration advanced regardless of any tensions. Education levels rose sharply over two generations. Arab high school completion climbed toward parity. University enrollment surged, especially among women. Arab students now fill lecture halls in medicine, engineering, law, and science. The labor market followed. When education levels matched, employment gaps narrowed. Arab doctors, pharmacists, and nurses now form a huge part of Israel's healthcare system. Hospitals function as integrated spaces where hierarchy collapses under clinical necessity. Arab physicians treat Jewish patients daily, and Jewish physicians depend on Arab colleagues.

Economic integration remains partial. Arab wages lag. Poverty rates remain high. Municipal tax bases remain weak. The state's response has been to invest. Multi-year development plans channeled tens of billions of shekels into Arab localities for infrastructure, transport, employment, and housing. Results appear uneven and slow. Still, the direction is clear. The state treats Arab economic inclusion as a national interest.

Arabic remains visible in public life despite symbolic downgrades that triggered backlash. Arab citizens function bilingually in most professional settings. Hebrew dominates the public sphere and Arabic persists in education, media, and communal life. Arab journalists appear in Hebrew media. Arab actors, writers, and musicians move between linguistic worlds. Some face backlash from both sides. None face legal prohibition.

Periodic violence tests the glue holding everything together. The riots of May 2021 exposed how quickly external conflict bleeds inward. Synagogues burned. Streets turned into battle lines. The state prosecuted offenders across communities and restored order unevenly—drawing criticism from all sides. The following year produced an Arab coalition partner and expanded investment in Arab towns.

Muslim Arab citizens live inside Israel's contradictions. They experience discrimination and underinvestment. They also exercise agency through elections, courts, professions, and public life. Their leaders bargain, protest, litigate, and govern. Their professionals staff hospitals, courts, ministries, and businesses. Their communities argue internally about religion, crime, women's roles, and identity. None of this aligns with a regime designed to freeze a population into permanent inferiority.

Beyond Religion: Secular Arab Life Inside Israel

A significant share of Israel's Arab citizens do not anchor their identity in religion. They define themselves through language, profession, neighborhood, and civic participation rather than mosque or church. This cohort cuts across Muslim and Christian backgrounds and resists easy categorization. Their existence complicates the political narratives that rely on faith-based or ethnic binaries, and it exposes how poorly the apartheid lie maps onto lived reality.

Polling over the past decade shows a steady pattern: a large minority of Arab citizens rank Israeli citizenship as a central component of their identity, sometimes above religion and sometimes alongside Arab ethnicity. Secular Arabs overwhelmingly pursue Hebrew-language education, build careers in mixed workplaces, consume Hebrew media, and operate comfortably in national civic space. Their lives run through the same institutions as Jewish Israelis, often without intermediaries or communal gatekeepers. Identity here functions as layering, not opposition.

Public visibility makes this hard to ignore. Lucy Aharish's career did not succeed in a cultural side-channel. She rose inside mainstream Hebrew-language television, became a national figure, and was selected to light a torch on Independence Day. Her own ordering of identity—Israeli first, then woman, then Arab Muslim—reflected how many secular Arabs navigate daily life. Systems built on segregation do not reward minority figures for integration into national culture. They suppress them.

Secular Arabs cluster disproportionately in mixed cities and Jewish-majority urban centers—drawn by employment, infrastructure, and social freedom rather than communal isolation. Tens of thousands have quietly relocated from Arab towns into cities such as Haifa, Tel Aviv, Carmiel, Hadera, Be'er Sheva, and Nof HaGalil. This movement has no legal barrier. It proceeds through real estate markets, schools, and workplaces like any other internal migration. The drivers are modern and familiar: housing stock, commute times, schools, and lifestyle.

None of this erases discrimination, bias, or resentment. Secular Arabs report racism in hiring, housing, and public discourse. They often feel pressure to prove loyalty twice—once to Jewish society and once to their own community. The response remains civic. Courts, media, and electoral politics absorb the dispute. Careers continue. Migration continues. Integration continues unevenly.

Land, Law, and Loyalty

The Bedouin question sits where modern statehood collides with a tribal society. For centuries, Bedouin tribes moved through the Negev and parts of the Galilee with herds, seasonal agriculture, and an internal legal order enforced by kinship and custom. Ottoman reforms in 1858 tried to drag the region into formal land registration. Most Bedouin resisted, largely to avoid taxes and conscription. The result was predictable: vast areas of Bedouin-used land remained unregistered and therefore defaulted into the “state land” category under Ottoman legal logic. The British Mandate did not resolve the gap. Israel inherited it in 1948 and then tried to govern it with a planning regime built for fixed towns, permits, and deeds.

After the 1948 war, roughly 11,000 Bedouin remained in the Negev. The new state treated the open Negev as state-owned because registered deeds were scarce. Bedouin families treated ancestral use as title.

In the 1950s, many Negev Bedouin concentrated into clusters, under state pressure, which reduced nomadism and pushed tribes toward semi-permanent settlement. It also sharpened the central dispute. A state with fixed borders and security imperatives will not tolerate widely dispersed, unplanned encampments indefinitely. A tribal society will not surrender ancestral space easily, especially when the state’s offer resembles relocation, not recognition.

The sharpest interface with the state runs through recognition. Beginning in the 1960s, Israel pursued a policy of urbanization, establishing seven planned Bedouin towns over several decades and later recognizing additional villages. The state’s argument was administrative and economic: services require density. Roads, sewage, schools, clinics, and policing do not scale efficiently to scattered encampments. The Bedouin counterargument was existential: relocation feels like dispossession and cultural erasure, especially when the destination towns become hubs of poverty and crime rather than platforms for mobility.

Dozens of villages remain unrecognized, with populations in the tens of thousands. The consequences are brutal and mundane. Unrecognized villages often lack connection to the electric grid, water infrastructure, sewage systems, and paved roads. Residents live as citizens whose neighborhoods are absent from official maps and development plans. This produces a daily reality of generators, trucked water, and illegal temporary structures. Then comes enforcement. Demolition teams arrive. Families rebuild. Clashes follow. Each side walks away convinced the other side proved its bad faith.

Bedouin Muslims are not conscripted. However, many volunteer for service. Bedouin trackers have served the IDF since 1948, prized for navigation and field skills, especially along borders. Tracker units have long been heavily staffed by Bedouin soldiers. A predominantly Bedouin reconnaissance battalion exists. Senior Bedouin officers have risen through the ranks, including promotion into senior command roles and leadership of recruitment efforts. The state actively courts Bedouin enlistment. A government that sees a minority as a permanent enemy does not recruit it into sensitive border roles or promote it to command.

Internal Bedouin dynamics complicate everything and cannot be outsourced to the state as a convenient villain. Rapid sedentarization has stressed traditional authority, increased poverty concentration, and intensified clan rivalry inside towns. Patriarchal norms remain strong. Polygamy persists despite illegality. Women's workforce participation has lagged. Education outcomes have been weak—with high dropout rates and barriers especially acute in unrecognized villages where access to schools can be physically difficult. Crime has surged due to a mix of illegal weapons, organized crime, and clan feuds.

Change is also happening. Bedouin women now enroll in higher education in growing numbers, especially in the Negev's major university. A majority of Bedouin students at Ben-Gurion University have been women in recent years, a quiet revolution in a society built around male authority. Trailblazers in medicine and academia have emerged, including the first Bedouin female physician and the first Bedouin woman to earn a professorship.

The October 7, 2023 atrocities exposed another layer of Bedouin reality. Bedouin communities near Gaza took rocket fire and suffered deaths. Many Bedouin citizens acted with courage during the assault, including security personnel and civilians who rescued others under fire. Bedouin loyalty in moments of national crisis is documented in blood.

The Bedouin issues are a governance failure wrapped around an unresolved land regime, complicated by internal social clashes. Yet the core structure remains civic. Bedouin citizens vote, litigate, negotiate, govern municipalities, and volunteer for national defense. Hardly reminiscent of apartheid.

Covenant and Friction: The Druze Bargain with the State

Roughly 150,000 Druze citizens live inside Israel—a small Arabic-speaking community with a closed, secretive faith and a tight communal discipline that has preserved identity for centuries. The religion emerged from the 11th-century Isma'ili Shi'a world and then sealed itself. No converts. Strict endogamy. Sacred texts guarded from outsiders.

Israel recognizes the Druze as a separate religious community with its own religious courts and spiritual leadership. The community's internal cohesion matters more than administrative categories. It is why Druze villages can produce soldiers, judges, and ministers while retaining a distinct communal identity. It is also why the Druze can protest the state ferociously without

sliding into separatism. They do not need to invent belonging. They already have it.

Druze communities historically gravitated toward mountainous regions across Lebanon, Syria, and the Land of Israel as a protective strategy. In Israel, the Druze concentrate in the Carmel and Upper Galilee, with another Druze population in the Golan Heights. During the 1948 war, Druze communities navigated the Jewish-Arab conflict with pragmatism. A Druze unit that initially joined Arab forces disbanded after a failed attack. Most local Druze chose neutrality or cooperation with the nascent Jewish state. That choice created a long-term alignment that neither side fully planned at the time.

In 1956, Israeli leaders and Druze elders agreed to mandatory Druze conscription. People call it the “covenant of blood” for a reason. It was a strategic pact. The state trusted Druze men with weapons and training on the same terms as Jewish Israelis. The community accepted the burden and treated it as proof of belonging. That one decision destroyed the apartheid analogy at the level of mechanics. Racial regimes do not draft minorities into the army as equals, then place them in sensitive roles, then promote them into command. Israel did all three.

Druze enlistment rates have remained high for decades, with participation often exceeding national averages. Druze soldiers serve across the IDF, including elite combat units and positions that require high levels of trust. The community produces senior officers, including commanders of major brigades, and it did so consistently enough that Israelis treat Druze service as expected rather than exotic. The IDF once maintained an all-Druze battalion, the Sword Battalion. It later folded Druze soldiers across units, which mattered more.

Loyalty has been reciprocated with recognition, yet gaps persist in municipal resources, village expansion, planning approvals, and infrastructure. Druze localities face overcrowding and housing pressures. Planning enforcement and restrictions on building have generated recurring tension.

That friction produced a strategic shock in 2018 with the Nation-State Law. The law elevated Jewish national self-determination and symbols in constitutional language and omitted an explicit equality clause. A community that buried sons in uniform felt itself nudged toward symbolic second-class status. Tens of thousands rallied in Tel Aviv. Israeli flags mixed with Druze flags. In a tone of wounded patriotism. Sheikh Muwaffak Tarif captured it succinctly: the community had shown unlimited loyalty, but the state was not treating them as equals.

The state did not crush the protest. It met it. The prime minister engaged Druze leaders. The government sought packages of recognition and benefits aimed at affirming Druze status, including formal national recognition measures such as a Druze contribution day. The government publicly validated the Druze demand to feel equal, not just be equal on paper. That entire chain of events—mass protest by a loyal minority, political engagement, policy concessions—belongs to a democratic system under internal pressure. It does not belong to racial rule.

Druze activism has grown sharper around land, agriculture, and planning. In the Golan Heights, protests erupted against wind turbine projects on Druze agricultural land. Demonstrators blocked roads and clashed with police. They demanded fairness from the state and expected negotiation. The government paused and negotiated. The Druze used civic tools: protest, political pressure, and institutional bargaining.

Merit Without Quotas

Arab Christians occupy a narrow demographic space and a wide civic one. Fewer than two percent of Israel's population, they remain rooted in the Galilee and mixed cities such as Nazareth, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Shefa-Amr, organized around remnants of a colonial past and churches that long predate the state. These institutions—schools, clinics, charities—did not retreat after 1948.

The results are measurable. Christian Arab students consistently post the highest matriculation rates in the country and enter higher education at levels that dwarf their population share. Women drive much of this success, filling lecture halls and graduate programs in numbers unmatched by any other group. Inevitably, it led to representation across large swaths of medicine, law, engineering, academia, and corporate hierarchies. No formal preferences carried them there. No ceilings blocked them. The system rewarded preparation and persistence, and the community responded by overperforming.

Military service complicates the picture. Christian Arabs are exempt from conscription. Some volunteer. The numbers remain small—but grew after October 2023, when the war sharpened questions of belonging and duty. The state does not bar them. It courts them. Many choose civilian national service instead, staffing hospitals and schools. Others choose neither and face no sanction.

Demography presents a quieter challenge. Christian Arabs have the lowest birth rates in the country and the highest mobility. They also face harsh restrictions from their Muslim Arab neighbors. Indeed, this is the first year in recent memory where the Christian Arabs were allowed, by their Muslim neighbors, Christmas trees in some public places. Though protected by the State of Israel, they are still part of their own societies. Thus, many try to move into other societies, and education opens exits as well as entrances. Emigration siphons talent to Europe, North America, and Australia. The community worries about shrinkage even as it thrives. This tension—success enabling departure—exists because freedom exists. Israel remains one of the few Middle Eastern states where the Christian population grows in absolute numbers and reports high life satisfaction. The comparison requires no embellishment.

Pluralism at the Margins: The Communities That Break the Model

Israel's smallest communities expose the fraud at the heart of any apartheid claim. They sit outside the Jew-Arab binary that activists rely on, and they

operate under arrangements too varied, too bespoke, and too permissive to fit a single theory of domination.

The Circassians are the cleanest case. A Sunni Muslim people expelled from the Caucasus by Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century, they arrived under Ottoman rule and settled in two Galilee villages, Kfar Kama and Rehaniya. They never became Arab, never assimilated, and never disappeared. After 1948, Circassian leaders made a strategic choice: full civic integration without cultural surrender. In 1958, at their own request, Circassian men entered mandatory military service on the same terms as Jewish and Druze citizens. Enlistment rates are high. Circassian officers serve in sensitive roles. The state arms them, promotes them, and relies on them.

At the same time, the Circassians preserved language, dress, and internal norms. Israel did not force them into Arabic schools. In 1976, the community secured its own education system. Children grow up fluent in Hebrew and Circassian, often Arabic and English as well. The state funds these schools. Street signs carry Adyghe script alongside Hebrew. Cultural survival is subsidized. That combination—compulsory service, cultural autonomy, state investment—cannot be squared with racial segregation. It reflects a state responding pragmatically to a minority that demanded inclusion without erasure.

When Circassians protest, they do so openly. They joined Druze demonstrations against perceived budget discrimination and against the Nation-State Law. Their grievances were heard, debated, and folded into broader negotiations over municipal funding. No one silenced them. No one questioned their standing. Their small numbers make them inconvenient for ideology. That is why they are usually ignored.

The Armenians represent a different model. Ancient, Christian, and institutionally autonomous, they anchor themselves in Jerusalem's Armenian Quarter and smaller communities in Jaffa, Haifa, and Nazareth. Their presence predates Islam. Under Israeli rule, Armenian churches, schools, and monasteries retain control over internal affairs. The Armenian Patriarchate operates with recognized legal status. Those Armenians who hold Israeli citizenship participate fully in civic life; others in Jerusalem retain residency by choice. The state does not impose religious law on them. It recognizes theirs. This arrangement is not unique to Armenians, but it is explicit. Apartheid regimes do not preserve minority ecclesiastical autonomy at the heart of their capitals.

The Samaritans test flexibility at the extreme. Fewer than a thousand people worldwide, split between Holon and Mount Gerizim, they are the only community holding both Israeli and Palestinian citizenship. Israel recognizes them as a distinct religious group, facilitates pilgrimage, adjusts military service expectations, and coordinates security so they can practice rites that predate rabbinic Judaism. Some Samaritan men volunteer for the IDF. Others work in Israeli high-tech firms or municipal services. Their survival depends on accommodation, and the state accommodates. No rigid hierarchy explains this. Only administrative pragmatism does.

The Bahá'í presence removes ethnicity from the equation entirely. Israel hosts the world center of a global faith. The shrines in Haifa and Acre are protected, tax-exempt, and internationally celebrated. Formal agreements guarantee autonomy and freedom of operation. In the region where Bahá'ís face systematic persecution, Israel provides sanctuary and status. The state gains nothing demographically or politically from this arrangement. It persists because religious freedom is enforced as policy.

Other micro-communities follow similar patterns. Ahmadis worship freely in Haifa. Aramean Christians received formal recognition for a distinct identity. Vietnamese refugees admitted in the 1970s became citizens. None of these cases follow a single template. Each required ad hoc decisions, legal creativity, and political patience. They live under Israeli sovereignty without being Arab, without being Jewish, without fitting any caste. They serve, protest, preserve, and prosper in arrangements that shift over time.

Apartheid by Law

The apartheid allegation collapses once it is tested against its own definition. Under international law, apartheid describes an institutionalized regime of racial domination, enforced by law, designed to preserve one group's supremacy over another. The crime is not inequality. It is not conflict. It is not occupation. It is a legal architecture that assigns rights by race and maintains that hierarchy as state policy. South Africa built such a system deliberately and comprehensively. Israel did not, and does not.

Inside Israel, there is no statute that assigns different civil or political rights to citizens based on ethnicity or religion. Voting rights are universal. Office-holding is unrestricted. Courts are open. Property ownership is lawful across communities. The founding declaration commits the state to equal civil and political rights regardless of religion, race, or sex, and the judiciary has repeatedly enforced that principle in practice, including against the government itself.

Apartheid South Africa stripped Black citizens of citizenship, confined them to designated areas, barred them from national elections, segregated education and healthcare by law, and enforced racial separation through pass laws, bantustans, and criminal penalties. Israel has none of this. There are no racially defined electoral rolls. No prohibitions on mixed hospitals, schools, or neighborhoods. When discrimination occurs, it is litigated, challenged, and reversed by the courts. Under apartheid, the courts upheld segregation. In Israel, they strike it down.

Arab citizens vote and sit in the Knesset. Arab parties legislate. Arab ministers hold cabinet portfolios. Arab judges sit on the Supreme Court and rule on constitutional questions, elections, and criminal cases involving Jewish defendants and the state itself. Arab diplomats represent Israel abroad. Arab officers command units in the military and police. Arab professionals run hospital departments, lead faculties, chair banks, and build companies. These are not anomalies smuggled in for public relations. They are routine outcomes of a system that permits minority access to power.

The apartheid claim often shifts ground by pointing to Palestinians in Judea and Samaria or Gaza. This move confuses categories deliberately. Apartheid applies to how a state treats its own citizens within its sovereign jurisdiction. Palestinians in Judea and Samaria are not Israeli citizens. They live under a disputed territorial and security regime born of war and an unresolved conflict. Their legal status differs from that of Israeli Arab citizens not because of race—both populations are Arab—but because of citizenship and belligerency. Every state differentiates between citizens and non-citizens. Doing so is not apartheid. Even harsh security measures, checkpoints, or military administration do not become apartheid unless they are part of a racial system imposed on citizens to preserve supremacy. Israel's policies in Judea and Samaria are argued, contested, criticized, and defended as security measures, not as expressions of racial doctrine.

Intent matters. Apartheid South Africa aimed to entrench white rule permanently. Israel has repeatedly negotiated, offered withdrawals, and accepted the principle of partition and Palestinian self-determination. One may judge those efforts insufficient, failed, or badly executed. They still contradict any claim of an ideological commitment to permanent racial domination. A state seeking to preserve supremacy does not offer sovereignty to the population it allegedly seeks to subjugate.

The persistence of the apartheid charge owes less to law than to politics. The term carries moral explosives, and it has been deployed as a delegitimization tool since long before recent NGO reports. The 1975 “Zionism is racism” resolution and the 2001 Durban NGO conference fixed the verdict in advance and worked backward to justify it. Legal analysis followed ideology, not the other way around. That sequencing explains why the charge survives facts that would kill it in any other context.

Even jurists who have fought genuine apartheid reject the analogy. Richard Goldstone, who lived under South Africa's system and helped dismantle it, stated plainly that Israel does not meet the definition of apartheid. Stretching the term to fit Israel cheapens the crime and obscures reality.

What remains after the rhetoric is a country with real inequalities, real grievances, and real debates about identity, power, and justice. These debates occur in parliament, in courts, in the press, and in the streets. Minorities argue with the state using the state's own institutions. They win some fights and lose others. That friction is not evidence of apartheid. It is evidence of a democracy under strain.

Unequal by Neglect: Where the State Has Failed Its Citizens

Israel argues, allocates, litigates, protests, and tries again, often late and often badly, but in full view. Sometimes it succeeds, other times it has failed.

The most lethal failure is public safety. Arab citizens comprise roughly a fifth of Israel's population and have absorbed the bulk of its homicides in recent years. Arab towns have watched organized crime metastasize through illegal weapons, protection rackets, loansharking, and clan feuds. People have

learned to live with the sound of gunfire the way Tel Aviv learns to live with sirens. The moral injury is obvious: citizenship that does not deliver basic security becomes a hollow document.

Arab citizens did not absorb this quietly. They marched, struck, blocked roads, waved black flags, and shouted outside police stations. The chants were not polite. They accused the state of racism and abandonment. They're citizens demanding services from their government, not subjects whispering in fear. They spoke in Hebrew and Arabic, on national television, and in the Knesset. They named police failure publicly. They forced ministers to respond publicly.

Senior officials were pushed into acknowledging the crisis and proposing extraordinary measures, including involving the Shin Bet in combating organized crime inside Arab society. Prime ministers have promised equal enforcement and national mission language. That rhetoric is easy. The results are harder. Police distrust in Arab communities has sunk to roughly one-third, reflecting years of under-policing and failed investigations.

The drivers of this violence are not a single lever the state can pull. Illegal weapons circulate widely, including thefts from military sources. Over time, Arab criminal networks professionalized—making them harder to disgorge. Traditional clan authority has eroded without a credible replacement. Poverty and unemployment feed recruitment. Israel allowed a security vacuum to form inside its own citizenry, then watched predatory actors fill it. The winners were gangs.

Poverty rates in Arab society remain dramatically higher than in Jewish society, and Arab towns cluster near the bottom of Israel's municipal socioeconomic rankings. Weak municipal tax bases translate into weaker services: fewer after-school programs, fewer youth frameworks, poorer infrastructure, fewer safe public spaces.

These failures are neither hidden nor accepted as permanent. They generate litigation, public commissions, parliamentary hearings, and nightly coverage. Arab NGOs and local councils petition the courts. Some cases expose funding disparities so stark they require no commentary. In one prominent case involving the Ministry of Religious Affairs, a petition highlighted that roughly 2 percent of the ministry's budget served roughly 20 percent of the population. A justice remarked, with dry precision, that the facts spoke for themselves, and the court ordered correction. That pattern repeats across domains: petition, exposure, judicial intervention, partial compliance, new disputes.

Policy has also moved under pressure. Governments have launched multi-year development plans aimed at closing gaps in Arab education, transport, housing, and employment. Resolution 922 in 2015 marked a shift to more investment, though implementation lagged and a significant portion of allocated funds went unspent. The 2021 plan expanded dramatically to roughly 30 billion shekels and included Arab professionals and municipal leaders in design.

Israel will keep failing in places. That is the price of a real democracy with real citizens and real arguments. It will also keep doing something the region treats as heresy: holding a shared civic space together while dozens of identities refuse to disappear.

Israel's minorities are not museum pieces. They shop in the same shuks, vote, sue, serve, run hospitals, command units, build companies, argue in the Knesset, and light the country up with their own languages and calendars.

A state that protects a Bahá'í world center, sustains an Armenian quarter, recognizes Samaritans, drafts Druze and Circassians, negotiates with Bedouin, and educates Christian and Muslim children in their own heritage while giving them the same passport and the same courts is not running a racial caste regime. It is running a complicated country.

In most of the Middle East, minorities live by permission and vanish when permission expires. In Israel, minorities live by right, and the argument is about budgets, policing, zoning, and dignity—ugly, mundane, democratic fights.

Israel is a functioning melting pot where Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians, Armenians, Bahá'ís, and others live under one flag and one legal order, present in public life and protected by law. Today, you can see this play out as the church bells ring, the muezzins call Muslims to prayer, and a stroll down any street in a major city.

That reality will outlast the branding campaign, because it is built out of people, not hashtags.

— *Uri Zehavi · Intelligence Editor, Israel Brief*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Uriel Zehavi

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR · MITZPE INSTITUTE

Uriel Zehavi is the executive director of Mitzpe Institute, where he writes the daily Israel Brief and co-directs its Institutional Intelligence practice with Modi Zehavi. He is the author of four books from Mitzpe Press and advises Israeli and allied clients on strategic communications for Western audiences.



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