

Imposition of National/Civil Service Requirement on Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel: An Overview of Political Party Positions

By Salah Mohsen¹

In February 2012, the Israeli Supreme Court struck down the Tal Law, which for the last ten years afforded an exemption to the religious ultra-Orthodox from serving in the military or national/civil service. As the court found the law unconstitutional, the Knesset would not be able to renew the law in its current form. Following the decision, the Knesset formed a “Committee to Equalize the Burden,” headed by Knesset Member Yohanan Plesner (Kadima), to determine how to enlist all sectors of Israeli society, including Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, into army service and/or national civil service.

Although the Plesner Committee did not directly recommend imposing national/civil service on Arab citizens of Israel, it generally recognized in principle that Arabs will be required to perform national/civil service. It did so by recommending the establishment of a second committee, to convene in September 2012, to examine promoting and enforcing national/civil service for Arab citizens. The Plesner Committee also recommended a five-year plan that involves increasing the number of civil service participants by 600 each year, bringing the total to 6,000 in 2016. [The full report](#) – [Ynet summary](#) (Hebrew) – [Jerusalem Post](#)

The Plesner Committee suggested that 80% of eligible religious ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) men be drafted by 2016. The Committee also approved a package of tough sanctions against anyone who attempted to evade conscription, including a fine of up to NIS 7,500, with NIS 75 per day for each additional day absent from service, and the cancellation of social security income, national housing allowances, and other incentives. The Knesset’s approval of these sanctions would show how serious the Israeli government is in imposing military/civil service on all, which will also impact Arab citizens as well.

After the Plesner Committee issued its recommendations, Netanyahu made numerous announcements, in which he stated that he intends to add civil service for Arab citizens into the planned proposed law. To that end, the Prime Minister contacted Arab MKs Mohammed Barakeh, Dr. Ahmad Tibi, and Dr. Jamal Zahalka, and informed them that he was determined to impose civil service on Arab citizens, under the name “Equality in Burden.” Netanyahu then brought Plesner’s recommendations for approval before the Likud party members of the Knesset, which did indeed adopt the recommendations after making adjustments to “ensure Arab recruitment.” The law was scheduled to come before the Knesset before the current session’s end in July 2012, but it did not due to intensive public and political pressure; instead the Kadima left the government.

Recently the Hebrew and Arabic press published numerous articles objecting *not* to the necessity of integrating Arabs into the civil service, but to its *imposition as a requirement*. This trend indicates the beginning of a fissure in Arab opinion, as well as a change in the perspective of the Israeli Jewish elite from accepting Arab exemption from service to a sentiment that all should serve.

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Review of Arab Political Parties and Movements' Positions on National/Civil Service

An examination of the positions of the active Arab political parties and movements in Israel shows that all, without exception, strongly oppose the imposition of a national/civil service requirement on Arab citizens in its current formulation and oppose the enactment of a new law in this regard.

An Angry Reaction of the National Committee of Arab Mayors (NCAM)

Following a meeting held by the NCAM on 7 June 2012 to discuss the issue, the NCAM adopted a resolution unanimously opposed to the national/civil service requirement in all ways, especially in the context of military authority, and enforced through law. They refused to resolve the issue through legislation with the Knesset majority. The NCAM called on the Plesner Committee to stop its procedures, pointing out that the Plesner Committee itself was initiated on the recommendation of the National Security Council and the Lapid Committee, which was formed to circumvent the recommendations of the Or Commission of Inquiry (which investigated the killings and injuries of Arab citizens of Israel by the police in October 2000) in order to preserve and justify the discriminatory policy. According to the NCAM:

“The Arab mayors and local authorities are ready to develop and expand community-based volunteer projects by increasing investment and expanding their reach, in coordination with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services and the Ministry of Education, in complete separation from mandatory- or security-related service.”

This decision sparked a storm of reaction against the NCAM culminating in a joint statement signed by all members of the two Islamic movements, A-Tajamaa (Balad), Abna' Al-Balad, and the Arab National Party. The joint statement read:

“We deplore the position of the National Committee [of Arab Mayors] and what it aimed or did not aim for, for it clearly and explicitly opened the door for civil service... the statement is meant to approve Civil Service if it is not from any security ministry, provided it is not mandatory. This is the opening that the Israeli establishment has long awaited, to begin civil service and then to expand it to all ministries, even security, and afterward to make it mandatory.”

Although the Democratic Front (Jabha) did not sign this statement, it issued its position through its General Secretary, who emphasized the party's rejection of national/civil service in all its forms, but also noted that its belief that the NCAM did not call for civil service.