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Democracy and Diversity in Israel

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When the term 'democracy' comes to mind most people immediately think of voting and free elections. While elections are at the fore in any discussion of democracy, there are other issues that are just as crucial. One of these issues is minority rights. The most diverse countries with the highest degrees of minority rights in the world are all democracies. In the modern world, a democracy is judged on the rights of its minority population(s).

Israel, as the only true democracy in the Middle East, is at the forefront of minority rights. Israel's minorities, Muslims and Christians, Druze and Circassians and many others are all afforded more and stronger protections than their co-religionists in any other country in the region. Israel's Supreme Court regularly rules on the sides of Israel's minorities in cases of governmental responsibility, religious freedom and protection and many other cases.

There are three major issues where Israel stands proud in its dealings with minority rights:

1. Arab Rights
2. Religious Rights
3. Women's Rights

Arab Rights

Arab's make-up approximately 15% of Israel's population (the majority are Muslims, but there are sizable Christian and Druze populations as well). While Israel is regularly castigated by the world which accuses her of mistreating its Arab population, the reality of the situation is quite different.

Arabs, like all citizens of Israel, have complete freedom of religion, freedom of press, equal voting rights, etc. and Arabic is an official state language alongside Hebrew. There is currently an Arab Supreme Court justice and many members of Knesset who represent both Arab parties as well as Kadima, Labor, Likud, Meretz and others. While Arabs are officially exempt from mandatory service in the IDF (a concession which allows Israeli Arabs to avoid the potential of fighting their brethren in neighboring countries) there are many Druze and Bedouin who proudly serve in the IDF and police forces, many opting to make the military a career eventually becoming officers.

Religious Rights

From the earliest days of the State, as outlined in the *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel*, Israel has guaranteed religious freedom for all. In fact, religious minorities in Israel are afforded religious rights far beyond what many would encounter if they lived in countries where their brethren are the majority. Each officially recognized religious community (there are five officially recognized religions in Israel—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Druze and Baha'i—as well as eleven denominations within Christianity) is overseen by their own religious councils, with officially recognized clergy, State recognition of their Sabbath and holidays and the right to establish their own, State-funded religiously affiliated schools. Even religions that are not officially recognized are granted full religious expression in Israel.

In addition to the original clause in the Declaration ensuring freedom for all, the Knesset has since adopted the *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*. This law, which refers to Israel as a Jewish and democratic State, concretizes in law the fundamental rights of every individual.

In addition to these legal documents, the Israeli court system has consistently ruled in favor of religious freedom for all of her citizens. In ensuring religious freedom, the courts have relied upon basic democratic principles as well as international law like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Political and Civil Rightsⁱ. In one prominent case Justice Moshe Landau wrote, 'the freedom of conscience and worship is one of the individual's liberties assured in every enlightened democratic regime'.

Women's Rights

Just like the Arab minority and religious practitioners of all stripes, women are afforded full and equal rights in Israeli society. In 1969 Golda Meir (who was also an American immigrant) became only the third woman to be head of state in the world when she became Prime Minister of the State of Israel. Previously she had served as Ambassador to the Soviet Union and as Foreign Minister. Today, women serve in the Knesset, as Government ministers and as Supreme Court Justices; currently, Tzipi Livni serves as Acting Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and – as head of Kadima – is running for Prime Minister in the February 10th elections. In addition, more and more women serve in elite army units and, in the last few years, have been accepted to the pilot's course widely regarded as the most elite course in the IDF.

The ratio of female students enrolled in institutions of higher learning (55.9%) ranks Israel seventh in the Western world with regard to the percentage of women studying in higher education.

The status of women in Israel is similar to that of women in America with similar percentages of women in Congress and the Knesset and similar cabinet opportunities. While Israeli women trail some of their Western European counterparts in some measures of advancement, when compared with other countries in the region (Jordan, Egypt, Syria, etc), Israeli women have opportunities of which their neighbors can only dream. Israeli Arab women are far beyond their brethren in neighboring countries and vociferously reject the notion of being included as citizens of a future Palestinian state with the full knowledge that their lives as they have come to enjoy could not be replicated living under an Arab led government.
