IDENTITY PERSPECTIVES REGARDING ISRAELI-ARAB YOUTH PARTICIPATING IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL SERVICE IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

This article examines the perspective of Israeli-Arab youth regarding their participation in Voluntary National Service (VNS) within the context of Israel's political landscape. VNS is an alternative to mandatory military service to foster social integration and civic responsibility. However, for Israeli-Arab youth, VNS often leads to significant identity conflict, shaped by Israel's characterization as a Jewish and democratic state and ongoing regional tensions. The article identifies various factors contributing to this identity conflict through a comprehensive literature review. The finding offers insights for policymakers seeking to foster a more inclusive environment for Israeli-Arab citizens.
Keywords: Voluntary national service; multiculturalism; identity dissonance; arab minority in Israel; minority integration

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Author's information

Seline Semaan is a second-generation South Lebanon Army member. Her father served in Lebanon together with the Israeli army, and the family fled to Israel on 23.05.2000, when she was five. She defines her identity as Christian Israeli Lebanese. She studied in a Jewish school, speaks Hebrew as her mother tongue, and was educated to love the country and be loyal to the State of Israel. Upon completing secondary school, Seline undertook Voluntary National Service.[1] She then went on to academia, where she received her undergraduate degree in Social Sciences and Humanities and a postgraduate degree in multidisciplinary democracy. Today, Seline manages the National Service standards for the Arab Druze community in Israel. Her experiences and feelings of not fully belonging to either the Arab or Jewish communities have revealed the complexities between these groups in Israel. The National Service can help bridge social and cultural gaps if approached correctly. This realization drives the desire to understand these complexities better, find ways to resolve conflicts, and foster social leadership.

1. Introduction

Israel, as a Jewish and democratic nation, faces challenges in integrating minority groups, mainly Israeli Arabs, who constitute approximately 20% of the population. Often, the Arabs experience identity dissonance due to the clash between their ethnic, religious, and national identities and the integration efforts in the country. This gap is particularly noticeable in the area of Voluntary National service.

To understand the conflict between Jews and Arabs, it is crucial to know the history of the State of Israel. Israel identifies as a Jewish and democratic state, but it functions primarily as a Zionist state. Israel was founded as a Jewish and democratic state, as outlined in the 1948 Declaration

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[1] The term is mostly used to describe voluntary service for youth who volunteer in specific organizations for a predefined period of time instead of joining the army.

of Independence, signed by the Jewish community and Zionist Movement representatives; the Declaration cities Jewish historical ties to the Land of Israel and asserts exclusive rights to the territory based on three key documents:

1. *The Balfour Declaration* (1971) endorsed a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine while safeguarding the rights of non-Jewish communities.

2. *The League of Nations Mandate* (1922) tasked Britain with establishing the Jewish national home without violating the rights of local inhabitants.

3. *The UN Resolution* (1947) proposed dividing Palestine into two independent states, Jewish and Arab[2].

Following the establishment of Israel in 1948, relations between Arabs and Jews changed significantly, impacting Israeli Arabs who remained in the country. Policies that prioritized Jewish settlements often resulted in the displacement of Arab communities, undermining their sense of belonging and escalating tensions[3]. Following the existing historical context between Arabs and Jews, this affected the Arabs' point of view towards the Voluntary National Service program, which began in 1971 as an alternative to military service for religious girls. Multiple organizations oversee these programs, which the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs authorizes. Volunteers, usually secondary school graduates, serve for one to two years. Upon completion, they receive the same benefits as soldiers, including financial and educational grants based on their service duration[4].

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[2] Sammy Smooha, "A Zionist state, a binational state, and an in-between Jewish and democratic state" in Anita Shapira, Yedidia Z. Stern and Alexander Yakobson (ed.), *Nationalism and Binationalism,* Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2013, pp. 206-224.

[3] Anat Kidron, "Local Communities and Separate Space: The Zionist Stance on Jewish Settlement in Arab Cities - The Case of Acre" in *Journal of Urban History*, no. 49, 2023, pp. 1243-1262.

[4] Moshe Sherer, "National service in Israel: Motivations, volunteer characteristics, and content levels" in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, no. 33, 2004, pp. 94-108.

Voluntary National Service aims to strengthen the connection between citizens and the state, promoting equality and citizenship through an independent body unrelated to security forces. Surveys, cited by Reuven Gal in 2008[5], show that 40% to 50% of young Arabs in Israel are willing to participate in Voluntary National Service. However, Arab leadership strongly opposes the plan, arguing it represents inequality and that linking duties to rights is unjust. They express concerns that the initiative could lead to the "Israelization" of young Arabs and question the government's true intentions[6].

In contrast, The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), established in 1948, functions as a: citizens' army" that reflects the diversity of Israeli society. The IDF requires compulsory military service from eighteen-year-old Jewish men and women and Druze men. This recruitment serves two key purposes: to build a strong operational force and to promote a sense of national identity. Given Israel's ongoing security challenges, military service is a vital connection to the state, highlighting the relationship between citizens and their government in a democracy[7].

Historically, the establishment of Israel's border resulted in the expulsion of many Arab families, while others fled or left voluntarily. In contrast, the Druze chose to stay in their homes; many Muslim and Christian Arabs from the Galilee, Triangle region, and southern Bedouins accepted Israeli citizenship. The 2006 Second Lebanon War raised questions about the identity of Israeli Arabs. They condemned Israeli attacks on Lebanon but were also victims of Hezbollah rocket fire in Northern Israel. Most identify as Israeli Palestinians since they are not citizens of the Palestinians since they are not citizens of the Palestinian Authority. Their identity connects them to

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[5] Reuven Gal, Position paper: Perception of the Issue of Israeli Arab Citizens' Rights and Obligations, in the Face of the Voluntary National Service Idea, Tel Aviv University [In Hebrew], 2008.

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] Eitan Adres, Pieter Vanhuysse and Dana Vashdi, "The individual's level of globalism and citizen commitment to the state: The tendency to evade military service in Israel" in *Armed Forces & Society*, no. 38, 2012, pp. 92-116.

the broader Arab community through shared history, culture, customs, and language[8].

The Arab society in Israel values traditional norms, evident in the strong family ties and established identities. Despite modern influences, clans remain influential in social dynamics, often controlling urban politics and private land in Arab communities. Arabs in Israel have a strong sense of identity linked to their villages, which is more significant than their national identity. In contrast, Jewish individuals primarily identify with the State of Israel. National tensions and historical factors related to the Israel-Palestine conflict play a crucial role in shaping Arab identity in the country[9].

The integration of Israeli Arabs into the Voluntary national service underscores the significant identity conflict that exists within Israel's social and cultural frameworks. This conflict arises from the dual identity experienced by Arab citizens of Israel, who simultaneously identify with Palestinian nationality. The Arab minority in Israel has two main aspects of identity: civil, based on citizenship, and national, tied to the Arab world and the Palestinian people. Religious factors also shape ethnic identity among Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Palestinian identity is essential for expressing belonging and shared values. Many volunteers struggle with loyalty, feeling caught between their connections to the Palestinian people and their duties as Israeli citizens. This tension creates a fragmented identity[10].

Previous studies, such as those by Shdema and Martin (2022) and Blit-Cohen and Essa (2022), have explored the civic identity of Israeli Arabs. Still, they have not adequately addressed this minority's perspective on voluntary national service and multiculturalism. This article aims to analyze

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[8] Mohammed Saif-Alden Wattad, "Israeli Arabs: Between the nation and the state" in *Indigenous Law Journal*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 179–192, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ilj/article/view/27668/20399>, accessed 20 January 2025.
[9] Ilan Shdema and Deborah G. Martin, "Place identity among native minorities: Lessons from Arabs in Israel" in *Geographical Review*, no. 112, 2022, pp. 286-305.
[10] Edith Blit Cohen and Essa Mays, "Palestinian-Arabs volunteering in state institutions in Israel: Reconciliation and peacebuilding or conflict and suspicion?" in *Peace and Conflict Studies*, no. 29, 2022, pp. 1-26.

the perspectives of Israeli Arabs regarding national service, positioning the state as a multicultural and democratic entity. It discusses relevant theories of multiculturalism while highlighting the identity dissonance experienced by both individuals and collective.

The article claims that the inclusion of Israeli Arabs in voluntary national service highlights the existing identity dissonance, which reflects broader challenges in the State of Israel as both a multicultural and democratic state. I am second generation South Lebanon Army. My father served in Lebanon together with the Israeli army, and we fled to Israel on 23.05.2000, when I was five. I came with my parents and older sister, but the rest of our family remained there. I grew up in Tiberias, and as a teenager, we moved to a Moshav. My identity is Christian Israeli Lebanese; I studied in a Jewish school; I speak Hebrew as my mother tongue. I was educated to love the country and be loyal to the State of Israel. Today, I manage a project called "Meizam Tnufa" (Momentum Initiative) at the Voluntary National Service Association. This project strives to develop volunteers willing to integrate into the world of employment. The accompaniment of group leaders and peer groups surrounding volunteers was intended to meet individuals' needs to develop this skill. To strengthen this process, mentors accompany volunteers individually and together to establish a personal program, personal relationship, and attentiveness. Voluntary National Service (VNS) is a two-year journey during which volunteers undergo training for up to three months. Training is adapted culturally, during which volunteers attend Hebrew preparatory courses, professional training, and courses to reinforce their sense of belonging and connection to Israeli society alongside developing soft skills and those suitable for the new world of work. After the training period, volunteers are integrated into services, including experience in the profession acquired, and continue to receive mentoring and accompaniment until the end of their VNS. At this time, volunteers will be able to work in these professions.

2. Identity Conflict in a Multicultural and Democratic State: The Case of Israeli Arabs

This chapter explores the identity conflict experienced by Israeli Arabs within a broader theoretical framework of multiculturalism and democracy. The aim is to understand how these theories can help analyze the tension between the personal and collective identities of Israeli Arabs while participating in the Israeli voluntary national service.

Cultural diversity often arises when multiple ethnic groups coexist within a single state. Consequently, a country with more than one nation is known as a multinational state, which includes various national minorities and their distinct cultures[11]. In Israel, these dynamics are closely linked to its identity as a Jewish homeland.

"Rethinking liberal multiculturalism" focuses on the enduring impact and evolving aspects of Will Kymlicka's theories. Kymlicka advocates for multicultural citizenship, emphasizing the importance of special rights and recognition for cultural minorities to support their social integration. However, François Boucher *et alii* challenge simplistic interpretations of his work, urging a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to multiculturalism. In the Israeli context, the intricate relationship between Jewish and Arab communities exemplifies the challenge of balancing minority rights within national unity, often resulting in tensions between individual and collective identities[12].

Liberal political theory faces challenges in balancing the required inclusivity of its institutions with the cohesion needed among citizens. Historically, the nation-state has served as a cultural-institutional framework for this, providing a shared identity and narrative that unites political community members. However, this can lead to exclusion by demanding

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[11] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

[12] François Boucher, Sophie Guérard de Latour and Esma Baycan-Herzog, "Rethinking liberal multiculturalism: Foundations, practices, and methodologies" in *Ethnicities*, no. 23, 2023, pp. 1-18.

that citizens prioritize their citizenship over other identities and create a political culture that defines the community. Consequently, pursuing inclusion in liberal democracies can paradoxically result in political exclusion. Clayton Chin highlights a paradox in democratic liberalism, maintaining that efforts to integrate minorities can lead to their exclusion[13]. In Israel, the VNS seeks to enhance civic belonging and identity among its citizens. For young Israeli Arabs, participating in this program may be perceived as an alignment with a Jewish state, which can overshadow their Palestinian identity. This situation creates a conflict between their roles as Israeli citizens and their national identity as Palestinians[14].

The identity conflict can be viewed in a global context. Aytan Gahramanova points out that democratization and international attention to minority rights often heighten tensions in countries with strong national identitie[15]. For instance, in post-Soviet states, efforts to integrate the Caucasus as an ethnic minority frequently conflict with prevailing national narratives, leading to their exclusion. In Israel, the Arab minority faces a dual identity conflict as they try to balance their identity as Israeli citizens with their connection to the Palestinian nation. This struggle is common worldwide, where minority groups must navigate the challenge of preserving their culture while integrating into a dominant political framework, as seen in the context of Israeli Voluntary National Service.

Consequently, Palestinians in Israel lead a complex life as they navigate their identities as both Israeli citizens and members of the Palestinian and Arab nations. Ibrahim Khatib explores the attitudes of Palestinian leaders in Israel toward events like the Arab Spring and finds that their views are primarily shaped by collective national or religious identities rather than

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[13] Clayton Chin, "The concept of belonging: Critical, normative and multicultural" in *Ethnicities*, no. 19, 209, pp. 715-739.

[14] *Ibidem.*

[15] Aytan Gahramanova (2006), "Identity conflicts and its implications for conflict management" in *Revista UNISCI*, no. 11, pp. 153-186.

civic ones[16]. This highlights the identity conflict faced by Arab-Israelis in balancing their conflict identities.

Israel annexed East Jerusalem following the Six-day War in 1967, impacting around 70,000 residents at that time. On July 30, 1980, the Knesset passed the "Jerusalem Law," which proclaimed all of Jerusalem, including the territories captured in 1967, as the capital of Israel. Palestinian Arabs residing in Jerusalem are classified as residents, which provides them with an Israeli identity card. This designation enables them to work in Israel and access social benefits from National Insurance and Medical Insurance, typically available only to Israeli citizens. Nonetheless, only a tiny percentage of these residents possess Israeli citizenship[17].

The identity conflict in East Jerusalem is particularly intense for Palestinian youth living under Israeli rule. According to Shaul Bartal, these youth face a struggle to balance their Palestinian and Israeli identities. Although they enjoy relatively better economic conditions due to the annexation of East Jerusalem, they are trapped in a paradox where their daily lives and political beliefs do not align. They must navigate a fragmented national identity, caught between their connection to the Palestinian minority in Israel and their ties to youth in the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority; this division highlights broader identity challenges for Israeli Arabs, with the requirement of voluntary national service adding pressure by demanding loyalty that may clash with their Palestinian roots[18].

The experience of Israeli Arabs involves a complex struggle between their national loyalty and cultural identity amid Israel's diverse socio-political landscape. The dual ethnic identity theory provides insight into the conflict. According to Guy Abutbul Salinger, Israeli adolescents with dual ethnic

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[16] Ibrahim Khatib, "Attitudes of Indigenous minority leaders toward political events in their trans-state national group: Between identity, conflict, and values" in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, no. 27, 2021, pp. 149-168.

[17] Shaul Bartal "The Palestinian youth of East Jerusalem – between Palestinian and Israeli identity" in *Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 60, 2024, pp. 1-12.

[18] *Ibidem.*

identities navigate a "thin" identity, allowing flexible self-identification and a "strong" identity[19]. The interaction between these two types of identity is dynamic, and a "thin" identity enhances social integration. Yet, it may also give rise to internal conflict when external pressures necessitate the adoption of a stronger, more defined identity. For Israeli Arabs, this often means shifting between their Arab and Israeli identities based on the situation. For instance, In professional or academic settings, an Arab-Israeli may highlight their Israeli identity to fit in better; at family or religious gatherings, their Arab identity may be more noticeable[20].

The recruitment of female Arab police officers (FAPO) into the public sector in Israel illustrates the complexities of such integration efforts. According to Tal Meler, Arab women who join the police force experience significant identity conflicts[21]. While their participation can be viewed as a progressive move towards diversifying public institutions, it is also seen as crossing a cultural boundary. Within the Arab community, joining the Israel Police may be perceived as an act of betrayal of collusion with state mechanisms that often conflict with Palestinian identity. Meler's qualitative study, which involved semi-structured interviews with 27 FAPOs, explores the subjective experiences of these women, highlighting the internal and external conflicts they encounter. These officers defend their roles by highlighting their community contributions and promoting social integration despite facing criticism[22].

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[19] Guy Abutbul Selinger, "The construction of dual ethnic identity among multi-ethnic adolescents" in *Current Sociology*, 2024,
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00113921241275682>, accessed 18 January 2025.
[20] *Ibidem.*
[21] Tal Meler, "I represent the police I represent the state – justification work following ethno-national boundaries crossing among Arab female police officers in Israel" in *Frontiers in Sociology*, 81, 2023, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sociology/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1296790/full>, accessed 1 March 2024.
[22] *Ibidem.*

The theories of multiculturalism, the politics of recognition, and identity dissonance offer valuable insights into understanding the identity conflict experienced by Israeli Arabs. VNS, portrayed as a means of fostering civic belonging, highlights the tension between state policies and the preservation of collective identity. This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for discussing this tension, as illustrated through the Israeli context, and allows for broader comparisons with other countries with significant minority populations.

3. National Service in Israel: Effects on Arab society

This subchapter will examine the perceptions and effects of VNS among Arab-Israeli minorities, analyzing the intricate impacts on identity and social dynamics based on recent research and theoretical frameworks.

The rates of Arab youth participation in VNS programs in Israel are significantly lower than that of Jewish and Druze youths, with participation rates ranging from 20-30%. This disparity is influenced by various socio-political and cultural factors[23]. A primary issue is that Israeli Arabs are exempt from mandatory military service, which leads them to perceive VNS differently. Jewish and Druze youth consider this an obligation to their national or communal identity. Since the establishment of the state, civic service has been a contentious topic in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. Although the government has introduced voluntary programs as an alternative to mandatory military service, participation among Arab youth remains low, in part due to concerns that these programs may conflict with their Palestinian identity and align with state narratives[24].

Another point of view is that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) strategically uses media to shape public perception. Oren Golan and Eyal Ben-Ari highlight how the IDF employs digital platforms to present itself as essential for national

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[23] Tamir Rozental, "The influence of public demographics in Israel on the perception of CSR of Mega companies" in *Entrepreneurship*, no. 11, 2023, pp. 98-107.

[24] Etta Bick, "Lip-service to service: the Knesset debates over civic national service in Israel 1977–2007" in *Israel Affairs*, no. 22, 2016, pp. 126-149.

defense, justifying organized violence and promoting inclusivity initiatives, such as the integration of Arab Israelis, in a controlled narrative[25]. Analysis of the IDF's official websites shows that Arab individuals are often depicted in ways that serve national security interests rather than reflecting their actual contributions. This selective framing reveals the challenges of fostering belonging among Arab Israelis while perpetuating exclusionary practices. This narrative highlights the marginalization of Arab Israelis by focusing on national security instead of true civic inclusion. Consequently, many see voluntary national service as a tool for state control rather than a way to achieve meaningful integration[26].

The media significantly influences Arab collective identity, mainly through regional media. Popular Arab television programs such as "Arab Idol" and "The Voice" illustrate viewers' preferences for contestants from their respective countries, thereby underscoring the diverse national identities that exist within the Arab world. According to Ahmed Al-Rawi, social media engagement with popular Arab TV shows reveals that despite efforts to promote a unified Arab identity, online interactions often highlight national and ethnic differences[27]. This trend is also seen among Arab Israelis regarding Voluntary National Service. While Israeli authorities portray National service as a means of integration and loyalty, Arab youth's responses indicate a complex range of identities shaped by Arab media portrayals and local socio-political factors.

Media representation plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of identity, while emotional experiences within state institutions contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of affiliation. Jennifer Skriver and Julie Jensen investigate inclusion and exclusion in Denmark's

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[25] Oren Golan and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Armed forces, cyberspace, and global images: The official website of the Israeli Defense Forces 2007–2015" in *Armed Forces & Society*, no. 44, 2018, pp. 280-300.

[26] *Ibidem.*

[27] Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Regional television and collective ethnic identity: Investigating the SNS outlets of Arab TV shows" in *Social Media +Society*, no. 4, 2018, pp. 1-16.

educational practices, focusing on the impact of emotions on social relationships[28]. Their findings about emotional experiences in artistic teaching can be applied to Israeli society. The research shows how emotions can either foster inclusion or reinforce exclusion. For Arab-Israelis in VNS, these emotional factors are crucial. Responses to state narratives and societal perceptions significantly affect their willingness to participate in VNS. The disconnect between the state's view of VNS as unifying and the exclusion many Arab-Israelis feel highlights the complexities of identity and belonging.

In addition to personal feelings, the internal politics of Palestinian leadership in Israel create tension between integration and the preservation of identity. Rida Abu Rass explores political responses to exclusion within the Palestinian leadership in Israel, noting that Palestinian politics often shift between unity and division based on political circumstances[29]. The study highlights two primary strategic responses: the "hegemonic-accommodationist" approach, led by Mansour Abbas and the United Arab List, and the "hegemonic-rejectionist" approach, representing the broader Palestinian leadership. This divide reflects ongoing tensions in the Arab-Israeli community regarding VNS. The "hegemonic-accommodationist" stance appeals to those seeking integration and socioeconomic benefits through VNS. In contrast, the "hegemonic-rejectionist" viewpoint expresses concerns about repression and loss of identity associated with participation in VNS. This fragmentation illustrates the conflicting priorities and challenges faced by Arab-Israelis in this context.

Arab participation in VNS faces significant barriers due to these programs' cultural and political context. Tal Nir and Lotem Perry-Hazan highlight that youth councils often reinforce power imbalances and sociopolitical

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[28] Jennifer Ann Skriver and Julie Borup Jensen, "Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion: Illuminating the dynamics of affect in practices of artful teaching and learning in social education in Denmark" in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, no. 23, 2024, pp. 131-152.

[29] Rida Abu Rass, "The two-pronged Palestinian response to exclusion within Israel" in *Palestine/Israel Review*, no. 1, 2024, pp. 421-453.

inequalities[30]. Their study reveals that, instead of promoting integration, these councils create unequal power dynamics that restrict the participation rights of Palestinian-Arab youth. The top-down nature of these councils, combined with a polarized socio-political environment, limits full and fair engagement from Arab youth. To promote VNS effectively among this group, it's crucial to adopt context-sensitive frameworks that address local dynamics and ensure equitable participation opportunities.

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and locality size significantly affect participation rates. Tamir Rozental shows that public perception and involvement in national initiatives, including civic services, vary across different demographic groups. Arab youths in smaller localities and lower-income backgrounds have notably lower participation rates, highlighting the socioeconomic barriers they face, which are tied to historical grievances and identity conflicts[31].

Moreover, communal and familial attitudes they hold against VNS significantly influence perceptions of it. Many Arab families and community leaders regard it as a threat to their Palestinian identity and social cohesion. This socio-cultural resistance presents challenges for national policy initiatives. Political dynamics have historically shaped the Israeli government's stance on VNS, resulting in a preference for maintaining the status quo instead of pursuing initiatives that could enhance participation rates among Arab youth[32].

Many Arab Israelis view VNS with skepticism or outright opposition. While it may lead to better job prospects and social mobility, it also challenges their collective identity and national loyalty. Nurlan Mominov examines how militarism and settler-colonialism shape Israeli national identity, affecting

[30] Tal Nir and Lotem Perry-Hazan, "Realizing participation rights of minority youth in conflicted societies: The case of councils integrating Jewish and Palestinian-Arab youth in Israel" in *Youth & Society*, no. 57, 2025, pp. 56-79.

[31] Tamir Rozental, *op. cit*.

[32] Etta Bick, *op. cit.*

minority perceptions of VNS[33]. This study points out that Israeli identity is closely tied to Zionism and militarism, which many Arab-Israelis view as exclusionary. VNS is often viewed as an extension of the Israeli security system, which intensifies the sense of alienation among Israeli Arabs. They associate it with ideologies that conflict with their national identity.

Despite the identity conflict that the VNS may have, a significant motivation for VNS lies in its perceived benefits for personal and professional growth. Research conducted by Hwee Ling Lim *et al.* in the United Arab Emirates indicates that VNS can aid individuals in achieving their professional aspirations[34]. Participants in the study highlighted that military environments foster discipline, patriotism, and essential life skills, all of which apply to the broader concept of VNS. However, this research took place in a different political and social context where National Service is unrelated to ethnic tensions or historical conflict. For Arab youth in Israel, these advantages may encourage increased participation. Furthermore, the notion that VNS promotes the development of positive character traits may resonate with both young people and their families, challenging the belief that such service primarily benefits the Jewish majority.

This chapter addresses the complex relationship between VNS in Israel and the identity of Arab citizens. While the state frames VNS as a tool for civil integration and economic advancement, many Arabs feel alienated and see conflicts with their national and cultural identity. This tension arises from the historical and political context surrounding Arab citizens in Israel, where involvement in state led programs is frequently perceived as an endorsement of a national narrative that marginalizes Palestinian identity. Low participation rates among young Arabs in VNS result from historical,

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[33] Nurlan Muminov, "Redefining Israeli National Identity: Understanding the role of militarism and settler-colonialism" in *Etnosayasat*, no. 1, 2023,
<https://journal.etnosayasat.kz/index.php/etp/article/view/8/8>, accessed 27April 2024

[34] Hwee Ling Lim *et al.*, "Emirati parents' attitudes toward the military and national service in the United Arab Emirates" in *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies,* no. 9, 2021, pp. 203-213.

political, cultural, and social factors. Media representation often portrays Arabs through a security-focused lens, which reinforces feelings of exclusion rather than promoting true inclusion. Political and community influences also play significant roles. Palestinian leaders in Israel are divided: some view VNS as a chance for integration, while others fear it undermines national identity. Family attitudes and social contribute to concerns that VNS threatens Palestinian identity. Despite these issues, some young Arabs recognize potential benefits, such as gaining life skills, enhancing job opportunities, and fostering civic responsibility. However, these advantages do not outweigh the substantial fears related to identity, exclusion, and inequality.

4. Voluntary National Service and the Integration of Minorities: A Comparative Perspective

Integrating minority populations into a national framework is a complex process that involves challenges related to identity, social cohesion, and civic participation. Conducting international comparative analyses is crucial for addressing these issues. Such studies reveal a range of approaches, uncover common obstacles, and suggest potential solutions for effective policy development. By examining diverse cases, we can identify successful strategies for integrating minorities and resolving identity conflicts.

A study by Petia Genkove *et al.* highlights intercultural competence as essential for positive intercultural relations[35]. This competence involves the ability and willingness to engage with different cultural or ethnic groups. In Germany, many civic service initiatives are based on this principle, involving young participants in language courses, social projects, and community service tasks that encourage direct interaction among diverse groups. Implementing similar approaches in Israel could foster greater

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[35] Petia Genkova *et al.*, "A comparative study on culture-specific and cross-cultural aspects of intercultural relations in Hungary, Serbia, Czech Republic, and Germany" in *Frontiers in Psychology*, no. 13, 2022, pp. 1-16.

integration between Israeli Arabs and other populations, thereby helping to reduce identity-based conflicts.

Moreover, Bogdan Popescu and Marlene Jugl explore the complex link between civic associations and political behavior in Germany. They maintain that, although these associations typically encourage civic engagement, they can also be influenced by populist radical right parties that promote anti-establishment and anti-democratic views [36]. This emphasizes the need for caution in civic service models: while fostering integration and civic participation, guarding against exclusionary narratives is vital. In Israel, civic service programs must promote democratic values and unity while preventing the use as platforms for radical ideologies.

Similarly, The Canadian model of multiculturalism provides a valuable point of comparison. Canada focuses on the coexistence and equal recognition of various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities within its borders[37]. A key element of its success lies in multicultural policies and community service programs that promote a sense of belonging among minority groups. For instance, Esra Ari investigates how second-generation Jamaicans and Portuguese in Toronto experience integration differently based on their visible minority and social statuses. The influence of class and race on the real-world applicability of multicultural policies is emphasized[38]. Such comparisons offer insights into how these policies can be improved to meet better the diverse needs of racialized youth in multiethnic communities.

A country's historical and political context shapes its integration approach. Christina Zuber argues that experiences like the political economy

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[36] Bogdan G. Popescu and Marlene Jugl, "Civic associations, populism, and (un-)civic behavior: evidence from Germany" in *Political Science Research and Methods*, no. 13, 2024, pp. 1-17.

[37] V. Dubrovin and Y.N. Solovarova, "Problematization of ethnic context and socio-political cases of multiculturalism" in *The Kazan Socially-Humanitarian Bulletin*, no. 11, 2020, pp. 9-15.

[38] Esra Ari, "Multiculturalism: An antidote to racism or untouched inequalities? A comparative study of second-generation Jamaicans and second-generation Portuguese in Toronto" in *International Network on Youth Integration (INYI) Journal*, no. 7, 2020, pp. 4-11.

of industrialization influence how countries respond to immigration today. For example, Catalonia has created a consensual discourse of integration that includes international immigrants. In contrast, South Tyrol's focus on internal migration has led to segregation without agreement on integration strategies. Catalonia's development of a non-ethnic identity has allowed for smoother integration of both internal and international migrants, highlighting how historical legacies impact current integration policies[39].

The communication and implementation of policies are significantly shaped by the rhetoric used, which is a critical factor in their effectiveness. Alena Bohunická highlights the vital role of civic rhetoric in facilitating social inclusion through public discourse. Grounded in classical rhetoric, civic rhetoric actively engages citizens by harmonizing diverse interests, addressing information gaps, and promoting solidarity among various groups. This inclusive approach is essential for bridging divisions between community groups and enhancing social cohesion. It ensures that minority groups feel heard and valued, which is crucial for their successful integration and the negotiation of their identities[40].

Canada's multicultural policy framework effectively integrates its diverse minority populations and promotes a sense of belonging through community services. Heidi Emmenegger notes that Canada has been more successful than Nigeria and Switzerland in implementing these policies, owing to its strong commitment to inclusion and equity. Since the 1970s, the government's multiculturalism policy has aimed to preserve cultural identities while facilitating social integration. Community service programs are vital in bridging gaps between different groups and fostering a sense of shared citizenship. These initiatives also encourage participation from both

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[39] Christina Isabel Zuber, *Ideational legacies and the politics of migration in European minority regions*, Oxford University Press., 2022

[40] Alena Bohunická, "Civic rhetoric and social inclusion" in *Journal of Linguistics/Jazykovedný Casopis*, no. 73, 2022, pp. 51-64.

immigrants and Indigenous peoples, enhancing dialogue and collaboration among various communities[41].

Lori Beaman observes that Canadian citizenship has evolved from a predominantly Christian framework to a more inclusive model that embraces various religious and cultural perspectives[42]. This transformation underscored the adaptability of Canadian multiculturalism. Initiatives such as Community Connections support newcomers as they integrate socially and economically into Canadian society. These programs provide opportunities for immigrants to engage with their communities and help them understand Canadian cultural norms, fostering a sense of belonging. Active participation in community service reduces feelings of alienation and enhances civic engagement among minority groups.

The impact of these programs on minority identity in Canada is intricate. Elke Winter analyzes how skilled immigrants perceive Canada's multicultural citizenship[43]. While the naturalization process tends to favor individuals with valuable skills, it still seeks to uphold the principles of multiculturalism. By mandating community service as part of the integration process, the program emphasizes the significance of multicultural citizenship, enabling skilled immigrants to contribute actively to society. However, this framework raises concerns regarding inclusion, particularly for individuals who do not meet the highly qualified criteria, such as refugees and family-class immigrants.

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[41] Heidi Emmenegger, "Multicultural policy: Nigeria, Canada, and Switzerland" in *The Equilibrium*, no. 4, 2018, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wr6p1fg>, accessed 5 January 2025.
[42] Lori G. Beaman, "From religious citizen to multicultural citizen: Changing conceptualizations of citizenship and belonging in Canada" in *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17461979241227845>, accessed 13 November 2024.
[43] Elke Winter, "Multicultural citizenship for the highly skilled? Naturalization, human capital, and the boundaries of belonging in Canada's middle-class nation-building" in *Ethnicities*, no. 21, 2021, pp. 289-310.

Findings of a study on how ethnic diversity is perceived in rural areas, particularly through the lens of the "rural idyll" in Flemish media[44]. They identify four main perspectives: diversity as a threat, an affirmation, a result of rural deprivation, or a solution. Existing social narratives shape these views. The media's portrayal of diversity can significantly influence public opinion and policy. Civic service programs encouraging positive interactions between ethnic groups are essential for changing these perceptions. By fostering understanding and cooperation, these programs can present ethnic diversity as an asset rather than a threat to social harmony.

The Arab minority in Israel faces significant challenges due to the country's strong national identity, which is primarily focused on Jewish culture and religion. Unlike countries like Canada and Belgium, which embrace multiculturalism, Israel's identity is closely associated with its Jewish character, making integration difficult for Arab citizens. Yuval Feinstein discusses the refusal of Jewish Israelis to identify with a specific ethnic label[45]. This lack of ethnic identification often leads to more positive attitudes toward Palestinian Arabs. By rejecting ethnic labels, these individuals challenge the existing ethnic classification system in Israel. However, for Israeli Arabs, the dominant Jewish identity remains a barrier to their integration and sense of belonging.

The study by Ahmad Diab *et al.* analyzes Arab residents in mixed cities like Haifa and Nof Hagalil[46]. It is discovered that integration levels vary significantly among Arab subgroups based on religious affiliation and city of residence. Using Shanel's multidimensional integration model, the study

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[44] Willemien Van Damme, Pascal De Decker and Hans Leinfelder, "Does increasing ethnic diversity challenge the rural idyll? An Analysis of frames on ethnic diversity in relation to rurality in the Flemish written press (Belgium)" in *Rural Sociology*, no. 1, 2024, pp. 132-153.

[45] Yuval Feinstein, "Influential in its absence: The relationship between refusing to embrace sub-national ethnic identities and openness to inter-national coexistence among Jews and Arab/Palestinians in Israel" in *Ethnicities*, no. 19, 2019, pp. 390-413.

[46] Ahmad Baker Diab, Ilan B. Shdema and Izhak Schnell, "Arab integration in new and established mixed cities in Israel" in *Urban Studies*, no. 59, 2022, pp. 1800-1818.

shows that Christians In Haifa integrate more fully economically, socially, culturally, and emotionally than Christians in Galilee and Muslims in Haifa. Haifa's well-established urban environment has historically fostered more significant social and economic opportunities, facilitating greater integration for its Christian residents. In contrast, the newer city of Nof Hagalil. Characterized by its underdeveloped infrastructure and community networks, it presents considerable challenges for Arab residents. Furthermore, the data underscore significant diversity within Arab communities, suggesting that integration pathways and outcomes can vary markedly based on religious affiliations and local contexts.

This chapter has analyzed how different countries integrate minorities and the role of the civil service framework in fostering a civil identity and reducing tensions. Examples from Germany, Canada, Belgium, and Catalonia indicate that successful integration hinges on inclusive multicultural policies and fostering a sense of belonging. Canada succeeds through multicultural policies and community programs promoting equality and cultural recognition. In contrast, Israel struggles with its Jewish national identity, making it hard for Arab citizens to feel included. VNS is often seen as a loyalty tool, exacerbating identity issues for Arabs. While international models provide insights for Israel, any application must be adapted to its unique context. To foster effective integration, national service must emphasize equality and respect for minority identities.

5. Discussion

The literature review presented above shows that Israeli Arab's views on VNS are shaped by the conflict between their Palestinian identity and the civic expectations imposed by the Israeli state. Many perceive VNS as an assimilation tool that threatens their cultural identity despite the government promoting it as a means of integration and socioeconomic advancement.

This situation reflects Kymlicka's theory of multicultural citizenship, which emphasizes recognizing minority rights for proper integration[47]. However, the predominance of a Jewish national identity complicates this recognition in Israel. Israeli Arabs often see VNS as part of the state's efforts to enforce a single national identity, disregarding their unique cultural and political identities.

Moreover, state narratives and media representations influence Israeli Arab's perceptions of VNS. Golan and Ben-Ari argue that Arab citizens are often depicted through a security-focused lens, reinforcing their marginalization[48]. This disconnect from state institutions, along with resistance from their communities and families, intensifies the identity conflict and alienation felt by Arab youth.

Comparative analyses with countries like Canada and Belgium show that inclusive multicultural policies, which respect minority identities, enhance civic participation. In contrast, Israel's requirement for loyalty to the state limits full civic inclusion and creates barriers for Israeli Arabs to engage in VNS[49].

Conclusions

Israeli Arabs face significant identity dissonance when engaging with VNS due to the conflict between their cultural heritage and the state's national-religious framework. The main conclusions are:

1. Identity Dissonance: The tension between Israeli civic identity and Palestinian national identity creates barriers to participation in VNS, leading to feelings of alienation and resistance.

2. Community and family influences: Strong familial and community ties influence perceptions of VNS. Resistance often stems from fears of cultural erosion and the loss of Palestinian identity.

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[47] Will Kymlica, *op. cit.*
[48] Oren Golan and Eyal Ben-Ari, *op. cit.*
[49] Tamir Rozental, *op. cit.*

3. State Narratives: The state frames VNS as a loyalty requirement rather than an inclusive civic duty, undermining integration efforts. Many Israeli Arabs view VNS as a representation of state control rather than civic belonging.

4. Countries like Canada, Belgium, and Germany demonstrate that inclusive multicultural policies, which recognize minority identities, are more effective in promoting civic participation.

To make VNS an effective tool for integration in Israel, we must prioritize equality, cultural recognition, and respect for diversity. The views expressed here show that Policymakers should collaborate with Arab communities to develop programs that align with their values. The lessons from this article apply to Israel and other multicultural and democratic societies facing minority integration issues. The conflict between state expectations and minority identities is a common challenge worldwide. The insights and findings can guide policy development in various socio-political contexts, emphasizing the need to balance civic integration with cultural recognition.

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