The situation of Israel’s Arab citizens has always been immensely complex. On the one hand, Jews and Arabs have lived together side by side in what Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua calls “a kind of remarkable co-existence.” On the other hand, the unresolved Israeli-Arab conflict has cast Israel’s Arabs as perpetual outsiders and figures of suspicion by both Jews in Israel and their Arab brethren abroad.

For most of Israel’s history, the question of how they should be treated has not been clearly answered. “In 1948 when the state was born, there was no policy for a situation in which a Jewish state would be established with an Arab minority,” says historian Elie Rekhess, the Crown Visiting Chair in Middle East Studies at Northwestern University and head of Tel Aviv University’s Adenauer Program on Jewish-Arab Cooperation. “Zionist ideologies evaded the question entirely.” Faced with a minority of 100,000 Arabs, the state granted them citizenship but pursued what Rekhess describes as two diametrically opposed principles: one based on democracy, the other on security.

The escalation of the Israeli-Arab conflict in the latter decades of the 20th century exposed the widening chasm between the Jewish state and its Arab citizens. The first intifada, lasting from 1987 to 1993, ignited anger and sympathy among Israeli Arabs. Many provided the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza with money, food and clothes and joined solidarity strikes held throughout Israel. The second intifada, which began in the fall of 2000, led to greater radicalization. During the October 2000 demonstrations, 13 Israeli Arabs were killed by police, leading to a large-scale Arab boycott of the 2001 elections.

The government investigation into the October 2000 deaths was eye-opening. Beyond reprimanding the police, the 2003 Or Commission report was an indictment of the state’s neglect of its Arab minority. “The Arab citizens of Israel live in a reality in which they experience discrimination as Arabs,” the report concluded. “Although the Jewish majority’s awareness of this discrimination is often quite low, it plays a central role in the sensibilities and attitudes of Arab citizens. This discrimination is widely accepted, both within the Arab sector and outside it, and by official assessments, as a chief cause of agitation.”
FOR MOST OF ISRAEL’S HISTORY, THE QUESTION OF HOW ITS ARAB CITIZENS SHOULD BE TREATED HAS NOT BEEN CLEARLY ANSWERED. “ZIONIST IDEOLOGIES EVADED THE QUESTION ENTIRELY,” SAYS HISTORIAN ELIE REKHESS. FACED WITH A MINORITY OF 100,000 ARABS, THE STATE GRANTED THEM CITIZENSHIP BUT PURSUED TWO DIAMERICALLY OPPOSED PRINCIPLES: ONE BASED ON DEMOCRACY, THE OTHER ON SECURITY.

In the aftermath of the report, Arab and Jewish leaders and organizations have advocated for greater equality, with mixed success. Just a year after its publication, Judge Theodore Or, the retired Supreme Court Justice who headed the Commission, himself criticized the government for not doing enough to implement its recommendations. Systemic discrimination in education, budgets for Arab towns and villages and employment opportunities has continued. Nearly half of Israel’s Arab families live under the poverty line, compared with about 15 percent of Jewish families.

The rare cases where Arab citizens were either convicted or suspected of involvement in terror attacks or their planning, combined with the Gaza War and disillusionment with the state of the peace process, have bolstered Jewish fears about a “fifth column.” The popularity of Avigdor Lieberman’s nationalist party Israel Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home) illustrates just how deeply divided Israelis remain on the status of Israel’s Arab citizens. In February’s parliamentary elections, it became the third largest party in the Knesset.

Lieberman, now foreign minister, successfully campaigned on a thinly veiled anti-Arab platform, casting doubt on the loyalty of Arab citizens with the slogan: “No Loyalty. No Citizenship.” It was Lieberman who sent a message to Israeli Arabs in a Knesset floor debate last year: “You are only temporarily here. One day we will take care of you.” Knesset bills on a loyalty oath and against public commemorations to mark the Nakba, or “catastrophe,” the term Arabs use to describe the events of 1948, have further exacerbated Jewish-Arab tensions.

While some see in Lieberman a strong leader who may succeed where dovish leaders failed, others believe that his talk of transfers and loyalty oaths is splitting the country. “What I see now is a dangerous deterioration after 60 years,” says Yehoshua, who lives in Haifa, one of the country’s most integrated cities.

“THE ARAB CITIZENS OF ISRAEL LIVE IN A REALITY IN WHICH THEY EXPERIENCE DISCRIMINATION AS ARABS,” THE OR COMMISSION REPORT CONCLUDED. “ALTHOUGH THE JEWISH MAJORITY’S AWARENESS OF THIS DISCRIMINATION IS OFTEN QUITE LOW, IT PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE ATTITUDES OF ARAB CITIZENS. THIS DISCRIMINATION IS WIDELY ACCEPTED, BOTH WITHIN THE ARAB SECTOR AND OUTSIDE IT...AS A CHIEF CAUSE OF AGITATION.”

Moment will explore the lives of Israel’s Arab citizens in a multipart series, covering politics, economics, education, the media, women and the growth of the Islamic movement. The series will examine future possibilities under discussion—from a shared society along the lines of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland to separation via population and land transfer.

In our introductory story, Moment correspondent Dina Kraft, who has reported from Israel since 1997, talks to three Israeli Arab women—a grandmother, mother and daughter—about what it means to be both Arab and Israeli. Through the lenses of three generations, her story traces the evolution of identity from Arab to Israeli Arab to Palestinian Israeli.—Moment editors
It’s been almost three years since Shams Kalboni renamed herself. She grew up with the modern Hebrew name Revital, which means “quenched thirst.” It was given to her by her Arab parents in the hope it would pave her way to an easier life in Israeli society.

And as Shams walks past blossoming purple bougainvillea plants, up the stairs and onto the veranda of her grandmother’s house in Jaffa, calls of “Revital” and “Revi” still greet her as she is embraced by aunts and cousins.

But to the outside world she is Shams, Arabic for “sun.” Her new name is her way of announcing to the world, and particularly Jewish Israelis, that she is not one of them. Instead she is, as she says, a “Palestinian Israeli.”

“When we define ourselves and say we are Palestinian Israelis they [Jewish Israelis] get freaked out,” says the 35-year-old Shams, pushing back her long reddish brown curls as she nestles into one of the white plastic chairs.

“Arab Israeli is a definition I refuse to accept because an Arab can be Egyptian or Iraqi, also, it’s not part of a nation. The nation I am part of is Palestine,” says Shams. She is a member of a young generation, fluent in Hebrew, steeped in Israeli culture and bold about demanding its fair place in a country many feel has relegated them to a status of second-class citizens.

Olive skinned with a pair of expressive large dark eyes, she wears snugly fitting dark shorts and a turquoise T-shirt, the same color as her long, dangling earrings. In her neighborhood in Tel Aviv, where she lives in a one-bedroom apartment just a block from the beach, her dress is not considered modern or provocative. In more conservative Arab Jaffa, it sometimes is.

STORY BY DINA KRAFT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY GASTON ZVI ICKOWICZ
WE’VE HAD A GOOD LIFE. THE ECONOMY DID WELL, THERE WAS PEACE AT FIRST, PEOPLE STARTED TO WORK, BUT THEN THE WARS Began. THE JEWS WANTED TO EXPAND, AND WAR DESTroys EVERYTHING.

—ZEINAB EDRIS

With a name like Revital, the looks of a young sabra and accent-less Hebrew, everyone always assumed she was Jewish. So one encounter with discrimination came as a shock. In 2006, she found a nice flat on a shady, central Tel Aviv street in a building owned by a progressive lawyer. When Shams faxed a copy of the lease to the landlord, she was asked if she had any additional income. Shams, still going by Revital, proudly replied that she had started working at an Arab-Jewish dialogue group. "I am the Arab facilitator," she added. The phone line went silent. When the lawyer spoke again she told Shams she could not rent the apartment to her because other residents would complain that she refused to rent the apartment to her because she was Jewish.

"The words, she had rented to an Arab. The words, she used were, ‘They will be upset that you are American and have a Jewish identity, which is also a national identity related to Israel. Well, that is also what I want. I want to remain Israeli and have the same equal opportunities but stay here while identifying with a Palestinian state.’"

She reflects a new dynamic among young members of Israel’s 1.3 million Arab minority in which there is a simultaneous process of two seemingly opposite trends, what are referred to as "Israelization" and "Palestinianization." Members of Shams’ generation are well-versed in the ways of Israeli society and more deeply integrated than most of their parents and grandparents.

"We studied in Israeli universities and, despite discrimination, proved ourselves, and we’re more confident. We’ve been released from the fear of previous generations," says Ali Khader, co-executive director of Sikkuy—a nongovernmental organization that promotes equality between Arab and Jewish citizens on issues such as government budgets, hiring policy and land usage. "It is very clear this generation has high expectations of the state and takes its citizenship seriously," he says.

Especially since the outbreak of the second intifada, young Arabs in Israel have become more outspoken about their feelings of kinship with their counterparts in the West Bank and Gaza, and increasingly alienated from a state that defines itself as Jewish—a definition they claim is incompatible with a democracy responsible for delivering equal treatment for all of its citizens.

Shams’ views of herself and her relationships with the state of Israel are relatively new for the country’s Arab citizens. She is at once more Israeli and more Palestinian than her mother, Mariam Edris, 53, and her grandmother, Zeinab Edris, 85. The three generations of women in the family symbolize the changes in identity of Israel’s Arab citizens.

Zeinab Edris lives on the first floor of what was once the home of a wealthy Jaffa family. It still has a grand air, with high ceilings, geometrically patterned tile floors and a wrought-iron gate with "1933," the year it was built, interwoven in its design. She is sitting in one of the house’s sun-drenched bedrooms, light pouring through narrow high windows, her traditional galabia gathered around her and hair tucked neatly under a white headscarf. A Muslim, she is devoutly religious, unlike most of her children, rising at dawn every morning to pray.

"Our house is the only house in the neighborhood where the kids take exams," she says. "It is very clear this generation has high expectations of the state and takes its citizenship seriously," he says.

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"We had land, groves of olive trees," recalls Zeinab, puffing on one of a chain of cigarettes, her voice trailing off. "The deed is still in the city of Acco."

Her most vivid memory, though, is of 1948, soon after David Ben-Gurion declared independence and fighting between Arab and Jewish militias turned the bustling port city of Haifa, where she had been living since the age of 10, into a battleground. At the time, she was a young mother of three small children, including a newborn.

"The Hagana defeat of Arab forces was quick. There were bursts of gunshot and mortar-fire, firebombs thrown into..."
homes, and a haze of black smoke hanging in the streets. Jewish fighters came at night and shot into houses, and 36 people in our neighborhood were killed, but we escaped. My daughter was one week old and I grabbed her. My husband took our six-year-old Fawzi, and our three-year-old son Ibrahim was already hiding with my mother’s family,” says Zeinab. Throwing her hands in the air, she says, in a voice that still recalls the mayhem six decades later, “It was a war. I was escaping. I was afraid, terrified actually.”

She found refuge in a neighbor’s home farther away from the fighting. A few days later she and her husband returned to their house and loaded their belongings onto a truck her father-in-law had rented. “We took mattresses, blankets, only basic things. We thought we were going to come back. We thought we would only be away for about two weeks,” she says. “But we did not go back.”

The family made its way east to Umm-el-Fahm, a town then untouched by the fighting. It was also a period of large-scale land confiscation. The majority who had made their living as farmers now had to take low-paying service jobs.

“The late 1940s and early 1950s were a period of tremendous uncertainty for the Palestinian population that tried to make sense of its situation in a newly born state in which it was suddenly a minority. The bulk of its upper and middle classes, including its leaders and intellectuals, had fled, leaving behind a largely poor and agrarian population that needed time to regroup.

Although Arabs were guaranteed equal rights under Israel’s Declaration of Independence, their lives were separate and far from equal. Based on 1945 emergency regulations set by the British, military restrictions were put in place largely to prevent Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes and land, says Shira Robinson, a professor of Middle Eastern history at George Washington University. Until military rule was repealed in 1966, Arab citizens were subject to curfews and needed difficult-to-obtain passes to travel between cities, including for work. Political organizing was restricted and newspapers censored. It was also a period of large-scale land confiscation. The majority who had made their living as farmers now had to take low-paying service jobs.

“The late 1940s and early 1950s were a period of tremendous uncertainty for Palestinians and Jewish Israelis alike,” writes Robinson in her study of Israel’s military rule in the Negev Desert, the Galilee and the “Triangle” area in central Israel on the border with the West Bank. “The establishment of the state had been announced, but what that state would look like, how it would function, and the meanings people would make of it, and in it, were still open questions.”

Jaffa was only briefly under military rule, but Zeinab, like most other Arabs, had little time for politics. She was focused on making a living and creating a stable environment for her growing family. “We have had a good life,” she says. “The economy did well, there was peace at first, people started to work but then the wars began,” she said, referring to the Six-Day War in 1967. “The Jews wanted to expand, and war destroys everything.”

Still, Zeinab bears no grudge, saying she feels blessed with her 10 children and the fact that Israel’s monthly social security payments ensure that she is provided for. She remembers the Jewish militias telling Haifa’s Arabs that if they did not rise up and fight, the war would pass peacefully for them. “We were not angry about the Jews. My grandfather used to say this state will be like America. We will benefit from it. He thought it sounded as if it would become a good, modern place,” she says. “Overall I believe my grandfather was right.”

The smell of strong, cardamom-roasted coffee wafts through Zeinab’s living room. With its stuffed maroon velvetene couches and walls hung with Koranic verses, the room is a favorite gathering place for her children and grandchildren. I join Shams on the veranda, where she tells me more about her life.

She grew up in Jaffa, amid its run-down streets, gangs of drug dealers and overcrowded schools, and felt privileged to attend a private Christian school run by French nuns. Most of the students, like her, were Muslim, but there were also Christians and even a few Jews. An avid reader, nicknamed “the professor,” Shams excelled in school and wanted to go on to higher education. But she came from a family where almost no one had been to university before and felt compelled to support her family
financially, so she took a job at a local jewelry factory. In her five years there she earned a nice living and advanced to the position of manager. But she felt something was missing and applied to study at Tel Aviv University for a degree in Middle Eastern studies and Islam.

She started classes in 1999, a year before the second intifada erupted. “There was still hope after Oslo,” she says, referring to the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords. “We were in a state of euphoria. I thought I would study to become a bridge between Palestinians and Israelis.”

As the only Arab citizen in the department, she attracted a lot of attention. “There was not a moment that I ever sat alone in the cafeteria. I was a curiosity. I helped others with their Arabic translation assignments and because I had started to become politically active on campus, I could give them a different perspective from what we were reading in our books.”

It was in university that she took the first steps of her journey. “Everything was new to me,” she says. She joined the small Arab student association on campus. It also became increasingly clear that her degree would not lead where she had hoped. She realized that most people who graduate in Middle Eastern studies join either the Mossad or the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security service. She was contacted four times by Israel’s defense ministry, which hoped to hire her.

For the newly politicized Shams, working covertly for the state would be akin to being recruited as a “collaborator.” The term, laced with connotations of betrayal of one’s own people, is perhaps the darkest in the Palestinian lexicon.

“When approached like this only caused me to feel separated from what until then was a very Israeli identity,” she says. “I felt like I was being told that the only way you can work in your field and be a welcome citizen is to collabo-
scheduled second interview only to be informed the job was not a suitable fit. When she inquired as to whether she had been turned down because she was an Arab, she was curtly told that the results of her handwriting analysis—an arcane practice that has survived in Israel as a common tool of potential employers to screen job candidates—had come back.

“The analysis said that you are sensitive and if there was a suicide bombing or attack, people might talk about Arabs in a harsh way and you could get hurt,” the woman executive, a Russian-speaking, working-class family, these young Palestinian men and women came from highly politicized families from the Arab Galilee, many of them long-time activists in the Hadash—the Communist party—or Arab parties. And their Arabic was more literate. Having grown up in Jaffa, so close to Tel Aviv, hers is jumbled with Hebrew phrases and words, and her written Hebrew is better than her written Arabic. “I could connect to them but I did not feel a sense of 100 percent belonging,” she says.

As she grew more politically aware, she started feeling isolated from her family. Finally, she found a job at a nonprofit organization called Windows that promotes interaction between Jewish and Arab youth. Shams, the administrative director, works with director Rutie Atsmon, a Jewish woman, and helps oversee the magazine her young charges produce in both Hebrew and Arabic. The 12- to 16-year-olds tackle thorny issues that they must write about together, such as the shared anniversary of Independence Day and the Nakba [“catastrophe” in Arabic] and the recent war in Gaza.

With time, and through her work at Windows, she has gained a clearer sense of who she is: “I am a mixture of everything and that’s okay. It’s a result of how history evolved—I have a new identity and that’s okay,” she says.

Shams has inherited her mother’s deep olive skin and ropey curls and the glint of hazel in her brown eyes, but not her even temperament. Mariam Edris moves languidly from room to room. A smoker like most of the family, her low voice has a raspy huskiness. Born and raised in Jaffa, Mariam grew up largely unaware of military rule and its restrictions, although her father, Khaled, must have worked hard to convince the authorities to grant him permits to move from Umm-el-Fahm to Jaffa. She remembers an idyllic childhood growing up in the streets of Jaffa, where Arab children—both Muslim and Christian—mixed seamlessly with Jewish children whose parents were recent immigrants from countries like Bulgaria, Syria and Morocco.

“There was no discrimination. There was naivety. There was fun. We played together—jump rope, hopscotch,” she tells me, smiling at the memories as she dishes out generous portions of her mother’s maklube chicken (a traditional Palestinian dish that includes rice and pine-nuts) from an industrial-sized metal cooking pot.

Mariam’s teachers were almost entirely Jewish immigrants from Iraq who could teach in Arabic, since most native Arab teachers had left in 1948. “What helped me be so open to the setting,” she says. As for the trauma of war her parents had experienced less than a decade before her birth, she says they didn’t speak about it much. They did not say it, but we knew where we had come from and why we were now here,” she says. “But who really suffered? Not us, but the refugees who left the country and were left without money, without homes. I would sometimes think that it could have been me who ended up in Lebanon.” Having grown up in a traditional home, she was taken out of school when she reached puberty at age 12. “My parents...
What was the Jüdische Kulturbund? It was a Nazi-sanctioned Jewish cultural association 1933-1941, in which Jewish musicians and artists performed in theaters in 42 cities across Germany. The power of music, the resiliency of the human spirit, and the will to survive: the legacy of the Jüdische Kulturbund. We want to tell this story to the world. For more information and to offer support, please visit tisproject.com

Mariam was too young and sheltered to be deeply influenced by Israel’s control of the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 Six-Day War, a pivotal moment in the Arab-Jewish relationship. After the war, the Arabs in Israel became more politically aware. The government hired them at high salaries to build up the new territories, spurring the growth of the Arab middle class. “Suddenly the Palestinians started competing with the Jews for the country,” says Mahmood Yazbak, a professor of Middle East history at Haifa University and chairman of Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, a prominent Arab nongovernmental organization.

They used this money first and foremost for education. By the early 1970s, Yazbak says, the number of Arab citizens going to university soared from no more than 50 new students a year to the thousands. The newly educated bolstered the ranks of Palestinian intellectuals and ushered in an era of activism.

At the same time, Israel’s control of the territories put its Arab citizens into direct contact with their brethren from the West Bank and Gaza for the first time in almost 20 years. It would take nearly a decade, however, for what is considered...
Continued from page 67

their political coming of age. On March 30, 1976, a general strike was called to protest government plans to confiscate hundreds of acres of Arab-owned land, and some Jewish land, to make room for Jewish towns and villages, part of a policy to “Judaize” the predominantly Arab Galilee. Six Israeli Arabs were killed by police fire and hundreds were arrested during the unrest that followed.

Marches each March 30—now known as Land Day—commemorate the turning point of what is called the “Stand Tall Generation.”

“It was the first alarm bell marking a new era for the Israeli establishment and society,” says historian Elie Rekhess, the head of Tel Aviv University’s Adenauer Program on Jewish-Arab Cooperation and the Crown Visiting Chair in Middle East Studies at Northwestern University. “It was a sign of national awakening of the changes that would mark the transition from the 1950s-1960s to the 1970s-1980s.”

Headline-grabbing protests were not the only ways in which this new political consciousness was manifested. Civic organizations all over Israel have formed over the last 30 years to raise concerns from economic equality to Palestinian statehood. Nabila Espanioli, 54, is founder of one such group, Women in Black, a feminist peace group and director of the Al-Tufalah Center for Childhood and Women’s Empowerment. “We have learned,” she says. “We are more sophisticated. We know now if you want to really change democratic systems, you have to use all the means available to you.”

While her mother and grandmother prefer to keep their views to themselves, Shams is part of this evolving political shift. In addition to her job, she established a committee two years ago to prevent further house demolitions in Jaffa. She created it as a local voice of protest against gentrification efforts that are displacing some Arab families in the city.

We walk to a nearby plot of land that has been sold to a group of religious Jews who want to build an apartment building. Shams fears they want to “settle” Jaffa as their peers have settled the West Bank and other mixed cities within Israel like Lod, Ramle and Acco. Their ideological motives are unclear, but Shams believes their goal is to displace local Arabs, and she is defiant: “The first stone that is put here will be removed.”

There’s yet another project that she is pursuing with zeal. Shams is researching the vanished village of Bassa, where her grandmother was born, gathering information to piece together what looked like and who lived there. She is arranging a trip to bring her grandmother and her large extended clan—dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins—to the Jewish town, Shlomi. While there, she plans to shoot a video of her grandmother in front of the rest of the family and interview her about her childhood. “I feel like our family’s children know nothing about our history,” Shams says.

Zeinab would like to make the trip; she is curious to see if anything of her childhood remains. But she’d prefer that her granddaughter spend her time finding a lucrative job more worthy of her university degree. Shams brushes off her suggestion. It hasn’t been easy, but she finally feels secure in who she is and that she has found her calling.

Like the majority of Arab citizens in Israel, the woman once known as Revital would choose to remain in the country she was born if a Palestinian state were ever established. Israel is where her roots are, where her life is. Meanwhile she’s going to fight for her democratic rights. If she ever meets Benjamin Netanyahu, she knows just what she will say to her prime minister: “I’ll ask him to commit himself to protect our equality and rights as citizens. All this is good for Israel.”

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