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We are more normal than you think

By [Lily Galili](#)

It is commonly assumed that the best way to tell the story of a group of people is to relay an individual, human story. Data and numbers are considered dry and fail to rouse interest. This said, a new book by sociologist Dr. Aziz Haider dispels such assumptions. "Sefer Hahevra Ha'aravit Biyisrael," (The Book of Arab Society in Israel) published by the Van Leer Institute, is based mainly on statistical findings which reveal the story of the Arab minority in Israel. This is the first book presenting this statistical data from an Arab perspective, which differs from the working premise of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS).

Terms like "deprivation" and "discrimination" do not dominate the book; they are simply derived from the numbers. The author believes that it is particularly important to examine the demographic statistics in this book now - during a period in which crucial decisions will not only determine the fate of Israel's relations with the Palestinians, but will define the essence and character of the nation and its relations with the Arab minority within its borders.

According to Haider, a sociologist at the Truman Institute of the Hebrew University and the Van Leer Institute, "The accepted statistical methods used at the CBS are a form of manipulation." Haider cites the first census taken in Israel in November 1948, which defined Arabs as "non-Jews."

"That is a negative definition which expresses a racist world-view," Haider says. The "non-Jews" definition continued to be used until 1972, but Haider was not entirely satisfied with the statistical terminology that replaced it. According to Haider, the CBS includes irrelevant subgroups in its definition of who is an Arab. For example, until 2002, non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union were included. This practice was abandoned but the definition still includes former members of the South Lebanon Army (Tzadal) and thousands of Arab collaborators with Israel and their families.

"The addition of all of these categories skews the picture," Haider says. "According to our calculations, the Arab population in Israel is 5 percent smaller [than its portion of the total population according to CBS statistics]. That may not sound like a lot, but there is an intentional tendency to expand the rate of Arabs in Israel in order to present them as a demographic threat. This sustains concepts like transferring Umm al-Fahm to the Palestinians."

Likewise, Druze residents of the Golan Heights and residents of East Jerusalem are included in the count despite the fact that they are not citizens of Israel. In 2001, these two groups represented 28 percent of the Arab population of Israel.

"The significance of this addition has implications which reach far beyond the relative value of the Arab population in the population of the state," Haider concludes. "The residents who were officially added to the Arab population are permanent residents rather than citizens. Differentiation of 'citizens' and 'residents,' and an attempt to blur those differences, play a decisively vital role in the attempt to accurately analyze the political situation in the state of Israel."

The use of these all-inclusive categories in accepted definitions of the Arab population in Israel has far-reaching socioeconomic, as well as political, implications. Groups like residents of East Jerusalem, on one hand, and Arab collaborators, on the other, have cultural traits that are different than those of Arab citizens of Israel. When these groups are included in statistics pertaining to education, knowledge, and crime, their inclusion transforms the picture. "This is the reason for exaggerated crime statistics in the Arab population of Israel," Haider maintains. "This is important for the sake of accuracy and mainly because of the fixed stigma based on skewed data."

For the first time, Haider's book segments Arab society in Israel according to variables of religion, geography and status. This reveals an enormous gap between Bedouins in the South and remaining groups. "While they say that 50 percent of the Arab population in Israel are minors under the age of 19 - in the Negev, the rate approaches 70 percent," Haider says. "When fear is instilled by means of a high birth rate - it is actually accurate only in the Negev."

Here is a lesser known finding revealed by the book: Since the '60s, the average fertility rate among Arab women decreased from 9 to 4.3 children. The average fertility rate of women in the Negev is particularly high - 8.7 percent, as opposed to 2.6 percent among Christian Arab women.

Another surprising statistic presented in the book, which contradicts traditional stereotypes of Arab society, is the large percentage of single women. Single women represent 17.4 percent of Arab-Israeli women aged 30-34, as opposed to 13.2 percent of Jewish women in the same age group. "In this instance, there is no difference between Christians, Muslims, and Druze women," Haider clarifies.

The book's importance rests in the fact that it tells the reader that there is no such thing as general "Arab society."

"There are more than the two categories which Jewish society uses to divide 'good Arabs' from 'bad Arabs,'" Haider says, with a note of sarcasm. "There are many categories. We are a heterogeneous society, in every sense."