

# **THE ARAB AND ISRAELI SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF ARAB ADOLESCENT MUSLIM AND CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL**

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**Abstract:** Two of the main social identities of Arabs in Israel are Arab and Israeli. On the one hand they belong to the Arab world but they also wish to assimilate to the Israeli society in order to gain resources and opportunities. These two identities are often conflicting. Most Israeli Arabs are Muslims. The Christians are a minority both in the Arab society in Israel and in the general Israeli society, which they prefer to assimilate to. In the current study, 271 Arab adolescents living in northern Israel rated the regard and salience they have for their Arab and Israeli identities. It was found that the regard and salience Muslim adolescents attributed to their Arab identity was significantly stronger than those attributed by the Christians. However, Christians attributed higher regard to their Israeli identity than the Muslim. There was no difference between the groups in the salience of their Israeli identity. Only for Muslim adolescents the regard and salience of their Arab identity was significantly negatively correlated with the salience of their Israeli identity. These correlations were not found among the Christians.

**Key words:** Arab, Arab Israeli, Israel, Social Identity, Religion, Muslim

The current study focused on a unique minority group - Arabs living in Israel. In 2016, 20.8% of the Israeli population were Arabs (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In general, most Israeli Arabs have four significant social identities: Arab, Palestinian, Israeli and religious (Muslim, Christian, Druze). The study focused on two of these identities – Arab and Israeli and the relationships between them. Their Arab identity signifies their sense of belonging to the general Arab world. At the same time, most Israeli Arabs identify emotionally with the Palestinian people, specifically those living in the West Bank and Gaza and hold strong in aspirations for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state (Rodnizki, 2014). At the same time, they continuously try to assimilate to the dominant Jewish majority and become equal Israeli citizens in order to enjoy the same resources and opportunities as the rest of the

population (Bligh, 2003). However, they experience continuous and systematic deprivation and discrimination in the Israeli society, partly because they are ethnically similar to Israel's enemies. This makes it harder for them to identify with the state of Israel and feel they belong in its society (Rekness, 2007). Previous studies found that Arab adolescents hold a stronger Palestinian or Arab identity than Israeli one and there is a negative correlation between the two (i.e. Abu-Rayya & Abu-Rayya, 2009a; Diab & Mi'ari, 2007).

Most of Israeli Arabs are Muslims and a small minority are Christians. Their Muslim identity is manifested in their strict adherence to religious rituals and norms, clothing, symbols and the importance given to family relations (Bligh, 2003). Christians in Israel are "a double minority" – both in the Arab, mostly Muslim society and in the Jewish majority in Israel. Economic indexes of income and employment show that the Christian community lags considerably behind the Jewish majority, however it is doing significantly better than the Muslim Arabs (see review Horenczyk & Munayer, 2007). In a study with Christian adolescents (Horenczyk & Munayer, 2007) it was found that they were more willing to adopt elements of the Jewish society and assimilate as part of it, while they wanted to be separated from the Muslim Arabs.

The current research examined how these differences between the two religious groups will be manifested in how Muslim and Christian adolescents will perceive each of their social identities – the Arab one and the Israeli one and how these two identities will be related to one another.

**The research hypotheses were:**

1. Muslims will exhibit a stronger regard and salience of their Arab identity than Christians.
2. Christians will exhibit a stronger regard and salience of their Israeli identity compared to Muslims.
3. Muslims will exhibit a stronger negative correlation between the regard and salience they perceive their Arab and Israeli identities – compared to the Christians.

**Methods**

The study was conducted with 271 adolescents 16 to 17 years old – 54 (46.6%) Muslim, 52 (44.8%) Christian and 10 (8.6%) Druze living in northern Israel. The Druze group was not included in this study. The adolescents filled a self report questionnaire that included four questions: how satisfied are you to have been born

an Arab?; how important is it to you to belong to the Arab people?; how satisfied are you to have been born an Israeli citizen?; how important is it to you to be an Israeli citizen? For each of these four questions, participants were asked to rate their response on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5). Internal consistency couldn't be assessed as each question was analyzed separately, but Hertz-Lazarowitz et al. (1978) found it to be highly reliable and valid. The current article only presents some of the research findings.

## Results

In order to test the first hypothesis, the mean regard and salience Muslims and Christians gave their Arab and Israeli identities were compared using t-tests. Table 1 presents this analysis. As can be seen, the regard and salience Muslim adolescents gave their Arab identity was significantly stronger than that given by the Christian adolescents – a difference that was more pronounced in their identity Salience than in its regard (which is only marginally significant). The regard for the Israeli identity was higher in the Christian adolescents than in the Muslim – a difference that was only marginally significant. However, there was no difference between the salience Muslim and Christian students gave their Israeli identity.

**Table 1: Regard and salience of the Arab and Israeli identity in Muslim and Christian adolescents**

		<b>Muslim (N=128)</b>		<b>Christian (N=125)</b>		
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Sd</b>	<b>t</b>
<b>Arab identity</b>	<b>Regard</b>	4.45	0.963	4.22	1.046	1.811 (p=.071)
	<b>Salience</b>	4.4	0.959	4.04	1.125	***2.731
<b>Israeli identity</b>	<b>Regard</b>	2.44	1.182	2.69	1.153	-1.076 (p=.089)
	<b>Salience</b>	2.45	1.196	2.38	1.249	0.399

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

In order to test the second research hypothesis, we computed the correlations between the regard and salience the participants perceived each social identity. This

analysis was conducted separately for Muslims and Christians. As can be seen in table 2, only for Muslim adolescents the regard and salience of their Arab identity was significantly negatively correlated with the salience of their Israeli identity. These correlations were not found among the Christians.

**Table 2: Correlations between regard and salience of Arab and Israeli identities in Muslims and Christians**

	Muslims			Christians		
	Saliency Arab	Regard Israeli	Saliency Israeli	Saliency Arab	Regard Israeli	Saliency Israeli
Regard Arab identity	** .758	-.12	** -.272	** .65	-.089	-.134
Saliency Arab identity		-.065	* -.197		-.171	-.137
Regard Israeli identity			** .797			** .532

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

Muslim adolescents attributed higher regard and salience to their Arab identity, in comparison to the Christians. This finding results from the fact that most Arabs in Israel are Muslim (close to 85% - Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017) and most Arabs in the world are Muslim. As such, Muslim adolescents will feel more connected to the Arab community in Israel and the Arab world in general and will identify more with its culture and heritage – compared to the Christians. In addition, because Israeli’s enemies are mostly Muslim, people of this religion are perceived more negatively by the state of Israel and more restrictions are placed on how they practice their religion (i.e. Abu-Saad, 2006). This perception and social rejection might emphasize for Muslim adolescents that they are different from other Israelis and do not belong as part of it. This might heighten how important their Arab (and

Muslim) identity is for them and their need to affiliate more closely to it in order to protect themselves from the threat to self posed by the Israeli society. Supporting this explanation is the negative correlation found only in Muslim adolescents between their regard and salience of their Arab identity and the salience of their Israeli identity. In other words, these adolescents saw these two sub-identities as contradictory. One reason for this correlation might be that they felt that if they accentuate aspects of their Arab identity and behave more outwardly according to their faith and ethnicity, they would not be accepted by the Israeli community and would be discriminated against. Similar findings of a negative correlation between their ethnic (or religious) and national (civic) sub-identities were found in a previous study conducted with Muslim Dutch (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012).

In contrast, Arab Christians in Israel are a minority, compared to Muslims and thus might have a harder time identifying with other Arabs in Israel and feeling they are a part of it. Supporting this are findings of previous studies that showed that Arab Christian adolescents in Israel wanted to be separated from the Muslim Arabs (Horenczyk & Munayer, 2007).

In addition, Christian Arab adolescents exhibited a higher regard to their Israeli identity than do the Muslims. This finding is supported by previous studies that showed that Arab Christians in Israel were more willing to adopt elements of the Jewish society and assimilate as part of it – than do the Muslims. They felt they needed to exhibit their loyalty to the state of Israel and that they see themselves as an integral part of its population – so they can receive the resources and opportunities that are available to the Jews in Israel. The relatively high regard Christians hold for their Israeli identity might also be an outcome of being perceived by Israeli Jews as more similar to them and thus less of a threat – compared to Arab Muslims. This was manifested in Arab Christians experiencing less discrimination and prejudice by Israeli Jews and less limitations are put on their social mobility (see review, Horenczyk & Munayer, 2007). As a result, Christian Arab adolescents might have had less anger or resentment towards Israeli Jews – felt less hurt by them and could focus on the benefits of being Israeli. In light of this, Christian adolescents might perceive their Arab and Israeli identity as independent and separate of each other and not as contradictory as do the Muslims. This was supported by the lack of significant correlations between the regard and salience the Christian adolescents attributed to their Arab and Israeli identities. Similar differences between Arab minority Muslims

and Christians were found in a study conducted with Muslim and Christian Arabs in the U.S. (Ames & Hovey, 2005).

In contrast, there was interestingly no difference between the Muslim and Christian adolescents in how salient their Israeli identity was – it was rather low in both groups. This finding might show that the specific religion Israeli Arabs hold, doesn't significantly effects the degree to which they identify with the state of Israel. This finding might signify the basic conflict Israeli Arabs are experiencing. On the one hand, they understand how much their family is dependent on the Israeli society – for education, jobs, social security, health care and so forth – thus perceive their Israeli identity as important. On the other hand, all Arabs in Israel, no matter what religion they belong to, experience discrimination and prejudice by the Israeli society, where their rights and social status is dependent on their loyalty to the state. This might minimize how important they perceive their Israeli identity.

The current study had a number of methodological limitations that should be taken into account when drawing conclusion from it. First, the sample used was not randomized but a convenience sample. As such, it doesn't necessarily represent the Arab and Israeli identity of this population in general. In particular, the study participants came from families with a high socio-economic status and having a father working full time. This is in contrast to a large proportion of Arabs in Israel who live in poverty and impoverished conditions compared to Israeli Jews. As such, it is possible that the findings do not reflect the actual issues this population deals with. It's thus important in the future to draw a more representative sample of this population, in order to learn more reliably the strength of the different sub identities of this population. Another significant limitation of this study is that the data was collected in 2007 – a time between two major Israeli-Arab wars and a period of changes in the Palestinian world. These changes were a result of the Palestinians regaining control of the Gaza strip, the election of Hamas elected to lead the Palestinians in Gaza – which created a split between Gaza and Yehuda and Samaria, both defined as Palestinian governed but with no connecting land between them. As such, the findings might not represent how Arab adolescents feel about their different sub identities today. Further testing should be done to see the changes that occurred in their social identities over the years and what factors or events triggered them.

Future studies should take into account the degree these adolescents or close family and friends suffered discrimination or rejection by the Israeli society.

According to the literature, when the minority group is more negatively perceived and not accepted as part of the majority group, they feel a weaker civic (or national) identity and a stronger ethnic identity. Another question to examine in future studies is the effects of personal losses as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict (either during War or by other circumstances) on these two sub identities. These can intensify the conflict between the two identities and make it harder to choose sides between the two fighting parties.

In sum, the Arab ethnic identity of Arab adolescents in Israel is stronger than their civic Israeli identity in both religious groups. The regard and salience Muslim adolescents gave their Arab identity was significantly stronger than that given by the Christian adolescents. However, the regard Christians gave their Israeli identity was higher than the Muslim. However, there was no difference between the salience Muslim and Christian students gave their Israeli identity. Only for Muslim adolescents the regard and salience of their Arab identity was significantly negatively correlated with the salience of their Israeli identity. These correlations were not found among the Christians. These findings show that Arab Muslim adolescents, will struggle more in defining their self concept and combine their Arab and Israeli identities. As such, it seems important to give Arab Muslim adolescents in Israel support and tools as to how to connect to the Israeli society and feel more a part of it, in order to help their success and wellbeing in the future. This step might help reduce their sense of isolation as a separate group in Israel and increase their productivity and contribution to the state of Israel as adults. Specifically, Christians might benefit by receiving tools and support in connecting with their Arab heritage and culture and finding a way to connect more to the Arab community. This might help strengthen their sense of belonging and allow them to establish a more coherent and rich social identity.

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