

Building a Shared Society from the Municipal Level

Jerusalem Office



Creating change through leveraging Jewish-Arab political coalitions in the local government of mixed cities in Israel: supporting the development of Israel's mixed cities as shared, inclusive and egalitarian spaces through municipal capacity building and best practices research.

CHALLENGES

Israel is a complex and unique place. Its complexity stands out in its mixed cities: in these cities, the majority of the population is Jewish, but there is a big and significant minority of Israeli-Arabs (mostly Muslims and some Christians). Following the Israeli local elections in late 2018, Arab



The Abraham Initiatives' campaign to lower tensions during the violence in 2021

lists joined the coalitions in all seven mixed cities in Israel (Ramla, Lod, Haifa, Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Nof HaGalil, Acre and Tel Aviv-Jaffa). Becoming partners in local management, Jewish-Arab cooperation was established. The communities had a chance to transform - from "mixed cities" to "shared cities" and to show that Jewish-Arab political partnerships are not only possible but beneficial. Despite this encouraging development, in May 2021 Israel experienced eleven

days of nationwide violent conflicts triggered by multiple reasons: years-long historical, cultural, and religious tensions, political discontent and instability; escalation of a long-term property dispute in Jerusalem; violent clashes on the Temple Mount, to name but a few. These widespread riots intensified across Israel, especially in the mixed cities, which experienced unprecedented inter-ethnic violence between Jews and Arabs. Therefore, these outbreaks were an alarming signal to both the citizens and the decision making level: building a Jewish-Arab partnership by sharing social and political responsibility required even more effort. There is a need of concrete recommendations for a shared life to avoid such outbreaks in the future.

APPROACHES

In the past two years, The Abraham Initiatives, partnering with the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) in Israel, launched the "Shared Cities Initiative". It aims to support the development of Israel's mixed cities as shared, inclusive and egalitarian spaces. Therefore, the project activities consist of municipal capacity building, best practices research, conferences and shared cities study missions. Initiatives were started to raise awareness for the promotion of a shared society in the mixed cities and to encourage better cultural and linguistic understanding. One of the issues, for example, is the lack of Arabic-speaking city council staff who have the cultural knowledge to provide tailored services to the diverse populations they serve. The HSF and its partner initiated cultural sensitivity and



The Mixed Cities Leadership Forum

spoken Arabic lessons for elected officials, social workers, and welfare department staff. Another key element in the project is facilitating the „Mixed City Leadership Forum“ of council members (both Jewish and Arab). It serves as a platform for best practice sharing, learning and collective troubleshooting. In May 2021, the forum proved its potential for decreasing tensions through several measures such as putting out a statement signed by local council members condemning the violence and starting a national campaign calling for togetherness. The main ideas of the projects are providing tools to overcome difficulties specific to mixed cities and finding a common ground to share the responsibilities and rights of the citizens. The core of the project is a platform for exchange and a network for promoting shared society.

IMPACT



The Mixed Cities Annual Conference with members of the Mixed Cities Leadership Forum at a panel

Through the interconnectivity of this program, relationships with and among key stakeholders and decision-makers from a local to a national level have been formed. The Leadership Forum was the hub of this: its work has built relationships among its participants and connections to get their voice heard in Knesset (i.e. Parliament of Israel) committee discussions, round tables and other forums. In the aftermath of the 2021 May events, the forum met and discussed how well each municipality performed during the crisis. The experiences of the cities varied greatly. Much can be learned from these events. When there is a partnership on the municipal level, a joint action is possible in emergencies: when all political partners call for mutual listening and calming down, there is bigger feasibility for a quick and common reaction to deal with various outbreaks. These are the fundamentals for shared living. We note an overall amplification of interest among the cities to address the concerns of their Arab citizens e.g. through the increased demand for Arabic courses we offer. The 2021 May events have functioned as a national wake-up call; the issue of mixed cities was of grave importance and a major topic of Israeli national discourse. This and other factors created an unprecedented momentum for action and opportunities for progress in mixed cities policymaking. ■

Ramla is a mixed city. It is important to me to address the Arab residents in their language. I made an effort to learn Arabic (in the project's course) and this enabled me to make statements in Arabic. The positive response I have received from Arab residents of the City has been overwhelming. It has helped to warm our relations.

Michael Vidal, Ramla's Mayor

OUR PARTNER



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