Episode Book

EPISODE #5686

What Arab Israelis Actually Say About Identity

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SYNOPSIS

Ask what Arab Israelis think about their own identity and you'll get two completely different headlines from the same polling data. This episode digs into the measurement problem underneath: what the Central Bureau of Statistics asks versus what the Konrad Adenauer Program asks, and why a single-label question and a component-rating question produce numbers that look like they came from different countries. Along the way: the Druze-Muslim belonging gap, the Balad numbers, and the nine-year-old statistic nobody has replaced.

The conversation centers on the polling itself — the Adenauer series' four waves a year, the December 2024 anomaly where Israeli citizenship briefly overtook Arab identity, and what happened after October 7th. The through-line is Yusri Khaizran's frame of "integration without identification," and why any single statistic about Arab Israelis is close to useless without the subgroup attached.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel wrote in this week. He wants to talk about Arab Israelis, citizens of Israel who are Arabs, and how they construct their own self-identity. And he opens by saying he's read very conflicting things about this. He suspects each outside group interprets the question to suit a specific narrative. So what does the polling actually show about how Arab Israelis regard themselves?



Herman

That's the whole question in one line.



Corn

It gets better. He asks whether it's fair to say the polling supports the idea that the term itself is a framework imposed on them, and that they mostly regard themselves as Palestinians living inside the Green Line. He flags that as a description used in internal Palestinian discourse, in Arabic. Have perceptions shifted over time, and specifically since October seventh. Who are the Arab Israelis, how fractured is the community internally, is there hard and reliable data on what percentage supports Israel's right to exist as a Jewish democratic state, and what percentage even endorses the label Arab Israeli in the first place.



Herman

Six questions and a trap.



Corn

The trap's the interesting part.



Herman

Two point one million people, roughly twenty one percent of the population. And that's where the monolith dies. Muslim, about eighty two percent of that group, then Christian, then Druze. Geographically you've got the Galilee, the Triangle, the Negev Bedouin. Politically, four parties, historically the Joint List, now Hadash-Ta'al, Ra'am, Balad.



Corn

Four parties that can't sit in one room.



Herman

That's not a bug in the community, it's the community. And here's the thing about your framing problem. The same body of polling gets read two ways. Israeli-leaning outlets headline it as only three percent identify as Palestinian. Palestinian-leaning outlets headline the same people as Palestinian citizens.



Corn

Both true, which should be impossible.



Herman

Neither is lying. They're quoting different instruments. The Central Bureau of Statistics asks for a single primary label, and you get three percent Israeli, three percent Palestinian, fifty six percent Arab, twenty five percent Muslim. The Konrad Adenauer Program at Tel Aviv University asks about components of identity, and suddenly Israeli citizenship shows up in the high twenties. Same population, same year, wildly different numbers.



Corn

So before we even get to what people believe, we've got a measurement problem.



Herman

The measurement problem is half the answer. That's why Daniel's been reading conflicting things. Some of the conflict is in the respondents. A lot of it is in the questions.



Corn

Then let's go to the hardest data we have. The Adenauer series. What does it actually say?



Herman

It's the most methodologically consistent series running, four waves a year, five hundred respondents, four point four percent margin. May of this year: Arab identity thirty three point three percent, Israeli citizenship twenty seven point seven, religious affiliation twenty four point five, Palestinian identity thirteen point five.



Corn

Palestinian fourth.



Herman

Fourth, and it's never been higher than fourth. November of last year, Arab identity thirty five point nine, Israeli citizenship thirty one point seven, religious seventeen point three, Palestinian fourteen point seven. Go back to December twenty twenty four and you get the one anomaly in the series. Israeli citizenship thirty three point nine overtakes Arab identity at twenty six point nine.



Corn

By seven points. That's not noise.



Herman

That's the only wave in the whole series where Israeli citizenship came first. And the reading at the time was regional upheaval. The Hezbollah war, Assad falling, people looking around and pricing what citizenship was worth.



Corn

So the component series says Arab first, Israeli citizenship second, Palestinian a distant fourth. And CBS says Arab first, Muslim second, and Israeli basically invisible at three percent.



Herman

Which sounds like a contradiction until you notice what each question is asking. CBS is asking you to pick one thing you are. KAP is asking you to rate the parts. If someone says their Arab identity is strongest and their Israeli citizenship matters a great deal, both instruments are recording the truth. They're just recording different truths.



Corn

What about the label itself? Arab Israeli. Does anybody actually endorse it?



Herman

This is the gap and I want to be honest about it. The closest direct read is twenty eleven, the Abraham Fund survey. Thirty two percent chose Arab Israeli, twenty seven percent chose Arab, so fifty nine percent combined for the two that don't include Palestinian. Seventeen percent Palestinian Israeli, nine percent Palestinian, twenty six combined.



Corn

And then twenty twenty.



Herman

Twenty twenty, the Jewish People Policy Institute, fifty one percent chose Arab-Israeli, twenty three percent Israeli, fifteen percent Arab, seven percent Palestinian.



Corn

Those don't look like the same country.



Herman

Same country, different options on the card. The twenty eleven poll forced a choice among four. The twenty twenty offered a different menu. And I looked for a recent one. I couldn't find a poll since October seventh that asks the direct question, do you endorse the term Arab Israeli. Nobody's asking it. That's a real hole.



Corn

So when Daniel asks what percentage endorses the label, the honest answer is we don't know, and anyone who tells you they do is quoting a fourteen year old survey.



Herman

Correct. Now test the other framing. Palestinians living inside the Green Line. Palestinian identity peaks around fifteen percent as a top component in the KAP series. Three percent as primary identity in CBS. It's real, it's not nothing, and it does not describe most respondents in any survey I can find. That's a description in internal Palestinian discourse. It isn't a majority self-description in the data.



Corn

Then the thing Daniel asked that I think is the actual story. How fractured is the community. Because you said Muslim, Christian, Druze, and I don't think those are labels on a pie chart.



Herman

They're three different relationships to the state. Druze respondents in the May survey, eighty one point seven percent report a strong sense of belonging to the state. Muslims, fifty point five. Christians, fifty three point three.



Corn

So a twenty six point gap between Druze and Muslim respondents. Same citizenship, same ballot, same country.



Herman

Israeli citizenship is the dominant identity component for Druze at sixty four point eight percent. For Christians at thirty seven point eight. For Muslims, Arab identity dominates at thirty five point four, and Palestinian identity sits at thirteen point seven for Muslim respondents specifically.



Corn

The Druze number is the one that should stop people. Eighty one point seven percent strong belonging.



Herman

And it's not a new fact. Druze men serve in the army, the community has a different historical bargain with the state. But if you're reading a headline that says Arab Israelis feel X, you have now been told that statistic is hiding a twenty six point spread between two groups inside it.



Corn

Politics cuts the same way?



Herman

Balad supporters, dominant identity Palestinian, forty four point three percent. Ra'am and Hadash-Ta'al supporters lead with Arab identity instead. And the Balad numbers get darker. Eighty one point seven percent report a weak sense of belonging to the state. Fifty nine point one percent say they don't believe in Arab-Jewish political partnership at all.



Corn

Now hold on. Balad at eighty one point seven weak belonging and the Druze at eighty one point seven strong belonging. Same number in the same survey pointing in opposite directions.



Herman

That's a lovely accident and I'm going to be thinking about it all day.



Corn

So the fracture isn't Arab versus Jewish. It's religious and political fracture inside the Arab community, and it's wider than the gap between Arab Israelis and the state on some of these measures.



Herman

Which is why any single statistic about Arab Israelis is close to useless without the subgroup attached, and why Daniel's question about how fractured the community is turns out to be the load-bearing one.



Corn

And now the hard question. Does the polling say anything about support for Israel as a Jewish democratic state?



Herman

The hardest number we have is twenty seventeen, the Israel Democracy Institute. Sixty seven percent of Arab respondents said Israel had no right to be defined as the national home of the Jewish people. Only a minority accepted the Jewish nation-state definition.



Corn

That's two thirds.



Herman

And I want to flag the date on it, because I searched for a post October seventh update and I couldn't find one. That twenty seventeen figure is still the most cited hard number and it's nine years old. Nobody has replaced it.



Corn

What's in the same poll? Because a single number out of a poll is how you get misled.



Herman

Same poll, fifty four percent said they do feel part of Israeli society. Sixty six percent said they were proud of Israel's accomplishments in science and in sports.



Corn

So the same people who say the state has no right to be defined as the Jewish national home, two thirds of them, will tell you they're proud of the country's scientists.



Herman

And that's not incoherence, it's a coherent position. Which is where Yusri Khaizran from the Dayan Center comes in. He calls the pattern integration without identification. Arab citizens want the budgets, the services, the local government, the integration into civic life. They do not embrace the state's ideological foundation.



Corn

Integration without identification. That's the whole episode in three words.



Herman

It's the cleanest frame I've found for it. He's also pointedly dismissive of the reading that seventy percent of Arab citizens identify with the state. He calls that wishful thinking more than reality.



Corn

Both of those things can't be reported at the same time, which is why they aren't.



Herman

Right. You either get the sixty seven percent or you get the seventy percent depending on which article you picked up.



Corn

Now Daniel asked specifically about since October seventh. What actually happened?



Herman

The KAP series is unusually well placed here, because it has before and after and it's the same instrument throughout. Their own November twenty twenty five analysis says this. Arab identity, Palestinian identity, and religious affiliation have returned to their pre-war levels of importance. In contrast, the component of Israeli citizenship has strengthened significantly.



Corn

So the war didn't reorder the hierarchy. It moved one item up.



Herman

And they say the war pushed many Arab Israelis to clarify their sense of personal identity. Which is the kind of sentence that sounds soft until you look at the numbers attached to it. December twenty twenty four, that one wave where citizenship overtook Arab identity.



Corn

But then it snaps back.



Herman

It snaps back. November twenty twenty five, Arab identity back on top thirty five point nine, citizenship still elevated at thirty one point seven. So the shift is real but it isn't a conversion. And the same survey has the other side of it. Seventy four point six percent said Arab-Jewish relations had deteriorated over the two years of war. Thirty seven point five percent said their sense of belonging to the state had weakened.



Corn

So the same period produced strengthening citizenship and weakened belonging.



Herman

Both. And I think KAP actually explains their own paradox. Their line is that in times of national conflict, members of a minority group tend to downplay the elements of their identity that might directly clash with the identity of the dominant majority. Which is a polite way of saying the war made it expensive to emphasize one part of who you are, so people led with another.



Corn

That's the most honest sentence in the whole literature, and I don't love what it implies about reading any wartime poll as pure.



Herman

It implies you have to ask whether you're measuring identity or measured identity. And no survey resolves that for you.



Corn

What about the political question? The two state thing has shifted.



Herman

Notably. May of this year, forty six point four percent said two states on the nineteen sixty seven lines is the most realistic outcome. November twenty twenty five, forty seven point three. One state from the river to the sea, fourteen percent in May, eighteen point seven in November.



Corn

So the maximalist option is a fifth at most.



Herman

And the bigger shift is that before October twenty twenty three, a majority of Arab Israelis believed no political solution was on the horizon at all. Now a plurality is naming one. That's a change in posture, not just a change in preference.



Corn

What do they actually care about. Because I suspect the answer to that question is the most misreported thing in this whole area.



Herman

Violence and crime, seventy one point three percent name it as the top issue. The Palestinian issue, eight percent.



Corn

Seventy one versus eight.



Herman

And that number has a body count behind it. Two hundred forty four Arabs murdered in twenty twenty three. Two hundred thirty seven in twenty twenty four. Two hundred twenty eight through November twenty twenty five.



Corn

Those are Israeli citizens being killed inside Israel, and it's the number one concern by an enormous margin.



Herman

And the rest of the survey is about machinery, not sentiment. Seventy seven point two percent support an Arab party joining the coalition. Seventy five point eight percent support Arab civic or national service. That's not a community asking to be left out of the state. That's a community asking to be let in on terms it can live with.



Corn

Which is Rudnitzky's line. He says Arab citizens present a roadmap for rebuilding Israeli society through integration and influence, politically and socially.



Herman

And I'll give you the counterweight, because he's not naive about it. He's explicit that this doesn't mean Arab citizens now ignore their Arab and Palestinian national identity. He says it's a statement that they'll willingly collaborate in rebuilding Israeli society. Both of those sentences are doing work at the same time.



Corn

So let's go back to Daniel. He asked whether the polling supports the idea that Arab Israeli is a framework imposed on them. And I want to give him a straight answer.



Herman

The polling supports neither strong framing and I think that's the finding. It doesn't support they're really Palestinians. Palestinian identity is a fourth-place component that's never led the series. And it doesn't support they're basically Israelis. Sixty seven percent reject the state's own self-definition, and that's the number we have.



Corn

The stable plurality is just Arab. Thirty three to thirty seven percent across the series, regardless of what's happening in the region.



Herman

Which is the least dramatic headline available and the one almost nobody runs. Israeli-leaning outlets can't run it because it doesn't say Palestinian. Palestinian-leaning outlets can't run it because it doesn't say Palestinian either. It says Arab, and Arab doesn't fit anybody's story.



Corn

The label Arab Israeli doesn't fall out of the polling as imposed or as embraced. It falls out as contested, and the contest is the finding.



Herman

There's a version of that where the word citizenship carries more weight in Arabic than it does in Hebrew, which is a thing I'd never thought about until today.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

The Hebrew is ezrachut. The Arabic is muwatana. Muwatana doesn't only mean the paperwork. It carries the sense of belonging to a political community, of being a citizen with standing rather than a subject with rights. So when a survey asks an Arabic speaker how important Israeli citizenship is as part of their identity, the word on the page is not just the flag and the passport.



Corn

The same question in Hebrew and Arabic isn't the same question.



Herman

That's my read on it. And I'll say plainly I could be wrong about the weight it carries, I'm not a native speaker and I haven't seen a study testing it. But it would explain part of why citizenship keeps climbing in a series where nothing else does.



Corn

Fifty three percent strong sense of belonging to the state overall, forty four and a half weak. That's a community split nearly down the middle on the most basic question you can ask.



Hilbert

You keep saying framework.



Corn

Say that again?



Hilbert

Framework. Imposed framework. It's not a framework. It's a translation.



Herman

Go on.



Hilbert

I did a job in the late nineties. Market research outfit, north Tel Aviv, they ran Arabic focus groups for a client I won't name because I signed a thing. And the questionnaires came over in Hebrew, they went out to a translator, and the translator was one woman. Good translator. Fast. And one day she'd had enough and she said to me, this word doesn't exist the way you're using it. Muwatana. You keep putting it where the Hebrew says citizenship and you think you're asking the same question. And the client said, it's the dictionary word. And she said, it is the dictionary word, that's the problem.



Corn

The instrument itself had an accent.



Hilbert

Every questionnaire has an accent. We'd do a group and somebody would answer the question and then add a sentence at the end, and she'd translate it back and the client would say, where did that come from, and she'd say, that's what he said. Word for word. And they'd cut it, because it didn't fit the box. I sat in on maybe forty of those. Same thing every time.



Herman

The answer people gave was the answer to the question they'd been asked in Arabic. Not the question written in Hebrew at the top of the sheet.



Hilbert

Two different questions. Same number on the spreadsheet. Which is why I laugh, quietly, when a survey comes out and everybody's very serious about the trendline. The trendline is real. What it's a trendline of is less certain than the chart makes it look.



Corn

This is a market research outfit in the nineties doing focus groups.



Hilbert

Yeah. Mostly soap.



Herman

This is the best thing that has happened to this episode.



Hilbert

I'm not saying don't use the numbers. I'm saying the woman doing the translating is doing more of the work than anybody credits her for, and she gets paid by the hour and nobody calls her afterwards.



Corn

Daniel's two thirds figure and the seventy percent figure might be less about which pollster you trust and more about which language the question was spoken in.



Hilbert

It's a possibility. I'd want to see the Arabic instrument from both surveys before I'd stake anything on it. But I'd want to see it.



Herman

Right. And that gives us a reason to read KAP with real confidence and to be careful with everything else. Same instrument, same language panel, same field house, quarter after quarter. That's why the series is worth more than the headlines built from it.



Corn

The most common belief about this whole topic, and the one that shows up in every article Daniel's been reading, is that there's a definitive answer. That at the end of the data there's a true identity and the polls will hand it to you if you read the right one.



Herman

There isn't. Identity isn't a fact sitting in a drawer waiting to be measured. It's a question that gets asked, in a language, by someone, with a card of options they chose, in a month when a war is on or isn't. Change any of those and the answer moves.



Corn

The polling supports neither the strong they're really Palestinian framing nor the strong they're basically Israeli framing. What it supports is Arab as a stable plurality, citizenship strengthening since October seventh, and a community fractured by religion and politics more than by anything the state did.



Herman

The label is contested, which means the contest is the story. Nothing to resolve there.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. Hilbert Flumingtop produces the show. If this one made you think, a review helps more than you'd guess. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you then.