

Civic Service and the Concept of Israeli Citizenship

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This paper takes the opportunity offered by the recent debates and platforms regarding civic service in the Knesset in order to open the more general debate regarding the concept of citizenship in Israel. The paper has a descriptive part and a more normative part. In the descriptive part — the first two sections — it offers a historical account of the concept of citizenship in general and civic service in particular and tries to answer the question why the conversation on civic service is at the center of public debate in recent years. The first section is more general and historical. It traces the origins of Israeli citizenship and argues that though it suffers from genetic defects since its inception, nonetheless it has gained some meaning over the years. This development reached its peak during the nineties and its most articulate form was the slogan and demand to turn Israel into a state of its citizens. The second section is more specific and surveys the development of the institution, practice, laws and platforms related to the issue of civic service in Israel, both for Orthodox Jews and for Palestinian citizens.

The third and fourth sections are more normative. The third section offers the different arguments that can be made by the Israeli government as to why the Palestinian citizens of Israel are under a duty to provide such service. Among the arguments developed in this section is the argument based on fair play, as it has been developed by Hart and Rawls. This section suggests other pragmatic arguments why it might be in the interest of the Palestinians in Israel to provide such service regardless of the moral justifications for it.

The last section is an attempt to deal with the arguments brought by the state in the third section as to why the Palestinian citizens are not under such a duty. In part, this section argues that it is hard to evaluate the project of civic service without taking into account the intentions of the Israeli government. Therefore, the paper argues, Palestinians have good reason to think and believe that the project is not being conducted in good faith by the state; rather, it aims to question their civic status and to legitimize the state's discriminatory laws and policies.