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# THE INTEGRATION OF EAST JERUSALEM RESIDENTS INTO THE ISRAELI EMPLOYMENT MARKET: LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

Abstract

Efrat Saar



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## **The Integration of East Jerusalem Residents into the Israeli Employment Market: Learning from Success**

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# Abstract

## Background

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This study, conducted in cooperation with the **Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom**, addresses the integration of East Jerusalem residents into the Israeli employment market. The study examines the challenges facing these residents when seeking to integrate into the Israeli employment market and society, their coping strategies, their outlooks, and the considerations that guide their personal and professional decision-making.

The study is based on interviews with ten native residents of East Jerusalem neighborhoods, men and women, who successfully integrated into the Israeli employment market.<sup>1</sup>

The research questions were: (1) What are the key factors that contributed to the interviewees' ability to integrate successfully into the employment market in Israeli society? (2) What insights may be drawn from these successful cases with respect to policies for promoting employment integration among East Jerusalem residents?

A cross-cutting examination of the case studies highlights significant points in time during the course of the interviewees' lives and points to common barriers and behaviors. This examination yields insights on ways of improving the implementation of a government decision on promoting employment in East Jerusalem. At the same time, it is important to note that the interviews conducted in this study do not constitute a representative sample; the findings and recommendations presented here should therefore be viewed as an invitation to pursue in-depth discussion, surveys, and follow-up studies.

<sup>1</sup> One of the ten interviewees is not currently integrated into the Israeli employment market, but his story is presented in this study in order to give voice to additional population groups whose potential integration is not being realized.

## Key Findings and Insights

- An analysis of the interviews revealed a common denominator among all the interviewees: **Nearly all had attended private schools<sup>2</sup>, and they therefore approached the Israeli employment market from a problematic starting point** – with a Tawjihi certificate (the Jordanian secondary education certificate) and almost no proficiency in the Hebrew language.
- The study found that families, and **brothers and sisters in particular, play an important role in the decision to integrate into the Israeli employment market.** Most interviewees reported that their successful integration led their siblings to follow the same path, or alternatively, that they saw their older siblings succeeding and therefore decided to follow them.
- The study found that **the interviewees' transition to the Israeli arena occurring at two principal points in time: (1) After completing an academic degree** – a transition primarily characteristic of older interviewees. These interviewees explained that when they were younger, the possibility of studying in Israel seemed completely unrealistic, but after pursuing academic studies abroad or in the West Bank, they realized that they had no employment prospects in the Palestinian market, and therefore chose to try to integrate into the Israeli market. **(2) After high school** – a transition primarily characteristic of young interviewees. These interviewees described a prevailing change in outlook in East Jerusalem and the realization that because there are no employment prospects in the Palestinian market, it is preferable to pursue integration into the Israeli market. On the face of it, this looks like the more promising approach. In practice, however, lack of knowledge and lack of maturity evidently result in these young people wasting a great deal of time through trial and error, and by initiating and abandoning a given course of studies or frequently changing course, before managing to embark on a path well suited to them.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees described themselves as having attended private schools, but a review of the legal status of the educational institutions they attended found that nearly all had actually attended institutions with the status of “recognized but unofficial” schools. Importantly, the legal status of educational institutions is not a factor for East Jerusalem residents, who differentiate primarily between municipal and private institutions. As they see it, an educational institution is private if it requires tuition payments, admission is conditional on qualifications, and it prepares its students for the Tawjihi exam, which is more highly regarded than the Israeli matriculation exam. According to the local outlook, these parameters classify an institution as private even if in practice its legal status is “recognized but unofficial.”

- In general, **the first step in transitioning to the Israeli market is to learn Hebrew in a *mechina* (preparatory course) or *ulpan* (intensive Hebrew language program). This experience is significant professionally as well as socially because participants meet people like them, who are also seeking to integrate into a new and unfamiliar society.** The group that forms has the potential to serve as a “peer group” and offer participants the feeling of belonging that they lost by following a different path from high school or university friends. The study recommends that *mechina* and *ulpan* programs adopt a mechanism for alumni to maintain and reinforce the connections they formed allowing the group to provide a professional and social support network.
- The study pointed to **the importance of speaking and communicating in Hebrew immediately after completing *mechina* or *ulpan* studies.** To ensure that participants do not forget the knowledge they acquired or lack the confidence to use the language, it is recommended that *ulpan* and *mechina* programs incorporate significant interaction with Hebrew speakers as an inherent and compulsory aspect of the curriculum.
- **Their decision to integrate into the Israeli market raised concerns in the interviewees’ immediate environment, although most of the concerns seemed to be practical and cultural rather than ideological:** Integration was perceived, rightly, as a difficult process, professionally as well as culturally, because it involves a different culture and society. The success of the interviews in coping with these difficulties has an effect on their surrounding environment: they prove that “even if it’s difficult – it’s possible,” and some became a resource for questions and consultations. The study recommends identifying such “success stories” and drawing on their assistance as leaders through social media (on a voluntary basis or with payment by stipend), so that they can serve as a resource for the necessary information about academia and employment in Israel – information that the study’s interviewees found very much lacking. The advantage they present lies not only in their serving as a model of personal conduct but also in the personal outlook they offer, as the emotional resilience many of them demonstrate in coping with a complex reality and their ability to view hardship as temporary rather than absolute are qualities they can convey to others as well.
- To assess the effectiveness of policy implementation in the area of employment in East Jerusalem, it is recommended that future surveys monitor additional variables relevant to employment: **a comparative assessment between Tawjihi graduates**

of private schools and those who attended municipal schools; a comparative assessment between private school graduates who integrated directly into the Israeli employment market (Tawjihi + bachelor's degree in Israel) and those who integrated through the indirect route (Tawjihi + bachelor's degree in the West Bank); and a mapping of education and employment among siblings, in addition to those of the parents. Such data could contribute to a deeper understanding of the emerging social change.

In conclusion, **the study points to the tremendous potential among graduates of private schools in East Jerusalem to integrate into quality employment in the Israeli market, in stark contrast to their disadvantageous starting point – without an Israeli high school matriculation certificate (*bagrut*) and without proficiency in the Hebrew language.** The study's recommendations emphasize the importance of allocating resources to removing these barriers and to addressing them systemically. The study recognizes that **private education is still the natural choice among the East Jerusalem elite, and it will take time for them to begin viewing the municipal system, and the Israeli *bagrut* curriculum specifically, as a comparable, worthwhile alternative. Until then, therefore, it is necessary to find a systemic solution for those skilled graduates who seek to enter the Israeli employment market but lack the basic tools to do so.**

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The perpetual transition of East Jerusalem residents – between segregation and integration – creates a complex and challenging reality for the East Jerusalem community and its individual members. At the same time, this dynamic sense of identity also offers opportunities to improve the integration of residents into the Israeli employment market and society.

This study, conducted in cooperation with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, examines the barriers facing East Jerusalem residents when seeking to integrate into the Israeli employment market, as well as their modes of coping, their outlooks, and the considerations that guide their personal and professional decision-making.

The research included ten case studies based on interviews with men and women who were born in East Jerusalem and successfully integrated into the Israeli employment market. A cross-cutting examination of the case studies highlights significant points in time during the course of the interviewees' lives and points to common barriers and behaviors.

The findings provided a basis for insights and recommendations on ways of improving the implementation of a government decision on the development of East Jerusalem (Decision No. 3790) in the area of employment.

**Efrat Saar**, a senior researcher in the field of evaluation, has more than ten years of experience conducting evaluations of governmental, municipal, and philanthropic programs, and providing guidance for organizations in the construction of internal measurement and evaluation mechanisms. She has a BA in psychology and philosophy and an MA in research psychology.

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