



Arabs in East Jerusalem conflicted about Palestinian state

By Michele Chabin, Special for USA TODAY

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Isham Fteih, who lives in East Jerusalem and works as a bellman at the Dan Jerusalem Hotel, says he wouldn't mind if his home comes under Palestinian rule.

"Something's got to change," Fteih said. "Due to the Israeli roadblocks, it takes me longer to reach Ramallah, where my sister lives, in the nearby West Bank, than it does to Amman," the capital of Jordan.

As the Palestinian leadership goes to the United Nations this week to demand statehood for Arabs in the Palestinian territories, some Arab residents of Israel whose neighborhoods are being proposed for inclusion in the new state are full of hopeful anticipation. Others are reacting with trepidation, regional experts say.

A poll by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion this year indicated that Arab East Jerusalemites are split about who they want controlling the territory where they live.

Asked whether they preferred to become a citizen of a future Palestinian state, "with all the rights and privileges of other citizens of Palestine," or a citizen of Israel, with the rights and privileges of Israelis, 30% said they would choose Palestinian citizenship; 35% Israeli citizenship; and 35% either declined to answer or said they didn't know.

East Jerusalem is home to 288,000 Arabs, and some Palestinian leaders, such as Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, say it should be made the capital of an independent Palestinian state.

Israel captured the eastern part of the city from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War and says Jerusalem will always be its undivided capital.

"People are conflicted," said Nabil Kukali, director of the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion, which conducted the poll for Pechter Middle East Polls and the Council on Foreign Affairs. The poll was conducted in all 19 East Jerusalem Arab neighborhoods.

According to the latest available statistics from 2008, of the roughly 460,000 people living in East Jerusalem, 57% are Muslim and 43% are Jewish.

Although the vast majority of Arabs in East Jerusalem have spurned Israeli citizenship, believing it would undermine Palestinian aspirations to have East Jerusalem as their capital, Israeli ID cards are highly prized, Kukali said.

As ID-card-carrying residents of Jerusalem, Kukali said, East Jerusalemites "receive a lot of services," including access to health care, social benefits such as disability insurance and pensions, higher wages, "and most importantly, the ability to move from place to place and to travel abroad."

Arab Jerusalemites who want to live under Palestinian sovereignty would do so "for nationalistic and patriotic reasons," Kukali said, in spite of the inferior services offered by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

Khaled Abu Toameh, an Arab journalist from East Jerusalem, said the prevailing mood is uncertainty.

"People don't know where they'll end up," he said.

Abu Toameh called it "ironic" that the fence Israel built to keep Palestinian terrorists from the West Bank from entering Israel has encouraged "thousands upon thousands" of Arabs who left Jerusalem years ago to move back. Legally, East Jerusalemites "enjoy all the rights of Israeli citizens except to vote for the parliament. It's pretty comfortable having an Israeli ID or citizenship," he said.

Even so, Abu Toameh said, "just because people would prefer Israel sovereignty doesn't mean they're necessarily pro-Israel."

Many Arabs complain of problems in addition to benefits. Israeli security personnel often order Arabs to show their identity cards, and the municipality has traditionally provided fewer services, such as roads and schools, to the Arab, eastern part of the city.

Ideally, "Palestinian East Jerusalemites would like Jerusalem to be an open, undivided city" with a Palestinian government in the east and an Israeli government in the west, said Yitzhak Reiter, a professor at the Hebrew University and the Jerusalem Institute for Jewish Studies.

But without a series of security checkpoints, such a model could endanger Israel, Reiter warned.

"If Jerusalem is open to Palestinians, a Hamas activist from Nablus," in the West Bank, "could come to East Jerusalem and go to Tel Aviv.

Stressful though it can be, straddling Palestinian and Israeli society creates unique moments.

In a column in the Hebrew newspaper *Ha'aretz*, the writer and humorist Sayed Kashua, an Arab from northern Israel who now lives in Jerusalem, recounts how his wife hired a rabbi to perform their son's circumcision.

Justifying the move, Kashua's wife explains, "A rabbi has more experience than anyone else. If we have to live in Jewish state, then why not take advantage of what it offers?"

Hassam, an East Jerusalem father of four who asked that his last name not be published, fearing harassment, does indeed utilize many of the benefits Israel provides.

"I have two disabled children. Would they receive the same level of care in Palestine that they receive in Israel?" Hassam asked outside his comfortable home near the Hebrew University.

Israel, Hassam said, "shouldn't allow Jerusalem to be divided."

Fteih, the bellman, says he works alongside Jews every day and considers many his friends. He doesn't want to be cut off from Israel under any circumstances.

"My work is here. My life is here. It would be difficult," Fteih said.