

Situation is 'a serious failure that harms us as a Jewish and democratic state' -- MK Yehudah Glick

Surge of East Jerusalemites getting citizenship still leaves lion's share in limbo

More Palestinians in Jerusalem became Israeli in 2017 than in the last 3 years combined, but a massive backlog remains; Supreme Court has ordered the Interior Ministry to explain why process takes so long

BY DOV LIEBER | August 28, 2017, 12:53 pm |

The number of East Jerusalem Arabs obtaining Israeli citizenship has spiked so far this year, but thousands of families are still waiting for approval as officials deal with a massive backlog created by a near freeze in naturalizations in recent years.

Though there are still four months left in 2017, this year has already seen more East Jerusalemites obtain Israeli citizenship than the past three years combined, according to numbers provided by the Population and Immigration Authority of the Interior Ministry.

The relative surge, though, represents only a tiny fraction of East Jerusalemites left in limbo, thousands of whom are awaiting word on whether they can become Israeli citizens. A Supreme Court justice last month ordered the Interior Ministry to explain why the process takes so long, and a Likud Knesset member, Yehudah Glick, last week wrote to Interior Minister Aryeh Deri to protest the “serious failure.”

In 2017 so far, 174 East Jerusalemites have been granted citizenship. A total of 530 requests for citizenship, which can include more than one person as in the case of parents and children, were submitted by East Jerusalemites so far this year.

That is in comparison to 2016, when more than 1,102 applied for citizenship and just nine were naturalized.

Between 2014 and September 2016, the processing of citizenship applications for thousands of East Jerusalemites came to an almost complete halt, [The Times of Israel reported last year](#).

During those years, of the 4,152 East Jerusalemites who applied for citizenship, only 116 were approved and 161 were rejected. The rest of the applications were pending — formally, still being processed.

The slow pace of cases being dealt with has drawn criticism from the Supreme Court and the Likud's Glick, among others..

“The fact that such a relatively high number of applications were processed this year shows they were able to deal with them more rapidly. It shows something has been wrong in this area,” said Adi Lustigman, an independent Israeli attorney who has worked extensively with East Jerusalemites seeking citizenship.

Since Israel captured East Jerusalem in 1967 and subsequently claimed sovereignty there, it has formally offered residents living in that area the option to apply for Israeli citizenship. Until around a decade ago, very few did, as the vast majority identified, and still do identify, as Palestinian. Recent years, however, have seen a surge in the number of East Jerusalemites seeking Israeli citizenship, but with the majority of such applications yet to be processed.

Currently, there are some 350,000 Arab East Jerusalemites, around 37 percent of the capital's population. As permanent residents, they pay taxes and are entitled to state benefits like healthcare and social security.

However, they cannot vote in national elections, apply for an Israeli passport, or run for mayor in their own city. They can vote in municipal elections, yet most choose not to in protest of what they — and much of the international community — consider Israel's illegal occupation of their land.

Around 80% of East Jerusalemites live below the poverty line, according to the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

The Population Authority said it was “not authorized” to say how many East Jerusalemites are currently in the process of seeking citizenship, nor would it say how many were denied citizenship in 2017 or for what reasons.

However, [the authority did release information for the years between 2003 and 2016](#) after a request by a Jerusalem city councilman last year.

According to Lustigman, the 174 East Jerusalemites granted Israeli citizenship this year likely applied in 2014, a year in which there were 1,615 applicants.

The process of naturalization for East Jerusalemites, when successful, takes an average of more than four years, Lustigman said. Just to receive an appointment to begin the process takes over a year, she added.

Many applicants can also go years without getting an update about their applications, or a response to inquiries, according to a decision handed down by Supreme Court Justice Yoram Danziger in July.

The process can be shortened by two years if applicants choose to take the Population Authority to court. Lustigman said those who can afford it choose this route to force an answer out of the authority a year after submitting their applications. Historically, around half of East Jerusalemites have their applications for citizenship rejected.

Applications are usually rejected because the applicants either can't prove they live in East Jerusalem, can't show Hebrew fluency, or fail to win a recommendation by security authorities.

The Interior Ministry has argued that the fact that so few applications are processed, and that it takes at least three years to do so, is due to a rapidly increased workload in recent years.

A single office in Wadi Joz is responsible for overseeing the complex process of naturalization for East Jerusalemites.

In 2003-2013, though, the authority did manage to either approve or reject a total number of applications that was close to the total number submitted each year. In other words, it didn't develop an increasing backlog.

Applicants must submit a wealth of documentation proving Jerusalem is their main area of residence, including three years' of water, electricity and municipal tax bills, bank slips, confirmation by social security offices and letters from employers, and, if they have children, the youngsters' vaccination records. They must also know Hebrew and swear an oath of loyalty to Israel.

On July 31, Danziger ordered the Interior Ministry to submit a formal explanation as to why the process takes so long, why applicants can go three years without receiving an update, and what internal procedures exist to deal with the problem.

Danziger ordered the explanation during a hearing over the case of Ashraf and Majda Dallal, who had asked the ministry eight times over two years for an update on their application, but received no responses.

According to Danziger's decision, soon after heading to court, the Dallals were invited for a security interview. The security authorities then promptly recommended they not be given Israeli citizenship.

Danziger said he was seeking an answer as to why their application had “sat like a useless stone” on a desk for three years. He said his demand for an explanation from the Interior Ministry followed a “string” of similar cases dealt with in the courts since 2016.

On Thursday, MK Glick sent a letter to Interior Minister Deri, drawing attention to the hardship East Jerusalemites face while trying to become Israelis.

“It is important for me to emphasize that time and time again, I see the painful situation in which, instead of encouraging Arabs...from East Jerusalem who are loyal to the state to receive full citizenship, [the ministry] puts wrenches in the gears,” wrote Glick.

In his letter, he told the story of one East Jerusalemite who sends his children to Israeli schools, pays his taxes, and has “established and built” many buildings in Israel. Yet this “loyal” man, who Glick requested not be named, has been unable to help his family become Israeli citizens after “many years” of attempting.

“The fact that out of the many hundreds of people who wish to receive citizenship every year only a few dozen people are granted it is a serious failure that harms us as a Jewish and democratic state and our commitment to the Declaration of Independence and our Jewish belief in true peace,” Glick wrote.

Experts say the reason for the surge in citizenship requests by East Jerusalemites is to protect their ability to live and work in Jerusalem. In 1995, Israel began a policy of revoking, sometimes retroactively, the ability of East Jerusalemites to live in their city if they move away or have lived abroad for more than five years at any time. This policy hit its peak in 2008, during which an unprecedented 4,577 East Jerusalemites had their residency statuses revoked.

In total since 1995, over 14,500 East Jerusalemites have had their permanent residency statuses revoked, according to Hamoked, a Jerusalem-based rights group.

In March, the Supreme Court ordered the Interior Ministry to treat [East Jerusalemites as “indigenous” to the city](#) when deciding whether to revoke or restore their residency status.

Until then, East Jerusalemites had been considered as having the same legal standing, in terms of their rights to live in Israel, as a foreigner who attains permanent residency status.