

**EXCLUSIVE** / 1,102 EAST JERUSALEMITES HAVE REQUESTED CITIZENSHIP SO FAR THIS YEAR; 9 APPLICANTS HAVE BEEN APPROVED

# Israel almost entirely halts citizenship approvals for East Jerusalemites

The government claims to offer citizenship to eligible residents who came under Israeli sovereignty after 1967. In fact, after many years in which applications were handled relatively efficiently and about half were approved, the process has now all but stopped

By **DOV LIEBER** | 26 September 2016, 8:55 am



Young Arab students in class at an elementary school in the Arab neighborhood of Umm Tuba in East Jerusalem, December 13, 2011 (Flash90/Kobi Gideon)

About seven years ago, Sufyan Dabash applied to be a citizen of his country of birth, Israel. His application was rejected. The 37-year-old taxi cab driver — a lifelong resident of the Sur Baher village on the southeastern outskirts of Jerusalem — couldn't prove he was a Jerusalemite.

"I have no citizenship. I have nothing," he recently told The Times of Israel. "I want to feel like I'm from here. I don't want to feel like I'm a second-class citizen."

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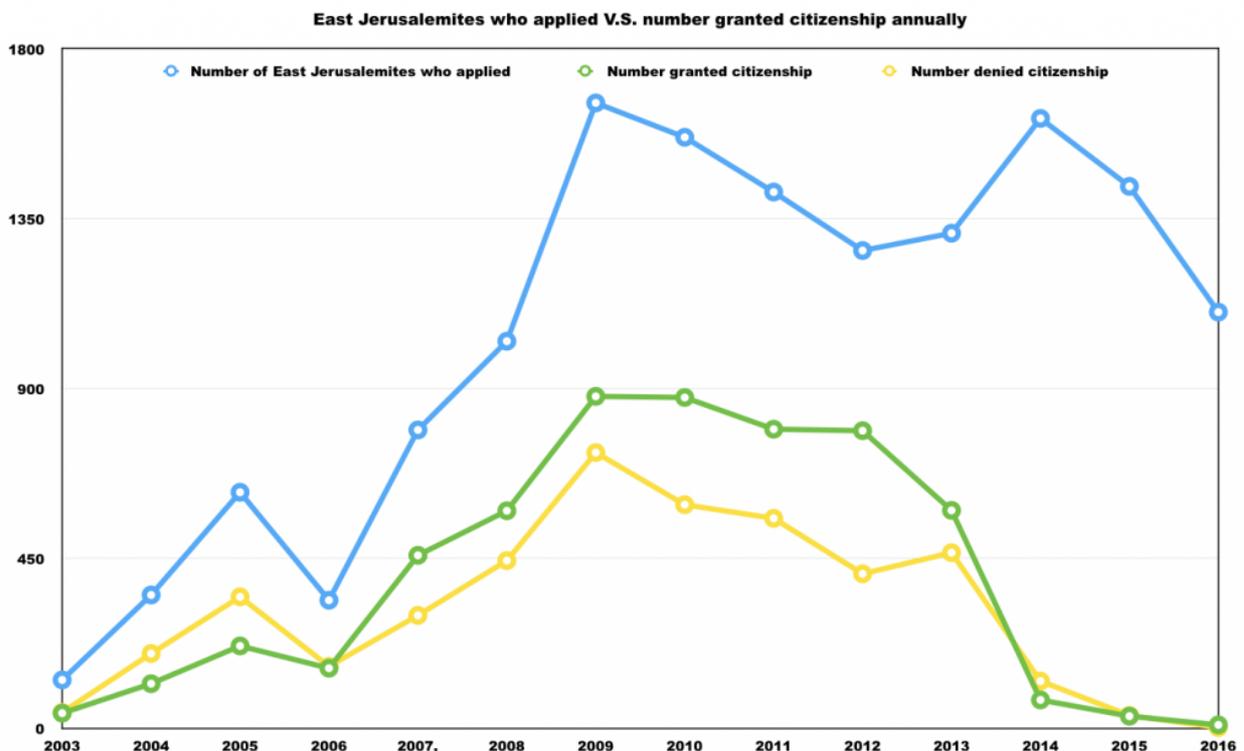
Since Israel captured East Jerusalem in 1967, it has formally offered residents living in that area the option to apply for Israeli citizenship. Until around a decade ago, very few did, as the vast majority identified, and still do identify, as Palestinian. Recent years, however, have seen a surge in the number of Palestinians seeking Israeli citizenship. But

Israel, which in the decade from 2003 to 2013 denied or delayed about half of the citizenship applications by East Jerusalemites, has more recently been failing to accept almost all of them, The Times of Israel has established.

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, nor run for mayor in their own city. They can vote in municipal elections, yet most choose not to, in protest of what they — and the broader international community — consider Israel's illegal occupation of their land. Around 80% of East Jerusalemites live under the poverty line, according to the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

Dabash is among the 14,629 permanent residents of East Jerusalem who have applied to become Israeli citizens since 2003.

According to [statistics obtained by The Times of Israel \(PDF\)](#), between 2003 and 2013, Israeli citizenship was denied or delayed to about half of East Jerusalemites who applied for it. However, over the past three years, the processing of citizenship applications for East Jerusalemites has come to an almost complete halt. Between 2014 and September 2016, of 4,152 East Jerusalemites who applied for citizenship, only 84 were approved and 161 were rejected. The rest of the applications are pending — formally, still being processed.



Source: Israeli Population and Immigration Authority

Dabash says he is now readying his papers to apply for citizenship again. “I want to officially be Israeli,” he said. He also wants his wife and family — two children, with a third on the way — to be naturalized.

“It’s not about Israel or Palestine,” he said, shrugging of any political motives. “This is a democratic country and I would like to be a citizen. I don’t want my children to feel like I do.”

Some East Jerusalemites and the lawyers who deal with their citizenship requests say the government deliberately makes the application process itself difficult in order to discourage East Jerusalemites from even requesting citizenship. This includes the long-standing demand they have proficient Hebrew, even though Arabic, their native tongue, is an official language of the Israeli state.

The Population and Immigration Authority, which is responsible for the process, strongly denies this accusation, and contends that it is carrying out its responsibilities under the law.

“The claim of allegedly posing obstacles is unfounded and each request is examined in its own right,” the authority’s spokesperson told The Times of Israel.

In a response to the question of why, in the past three years, the number of applications processed has so greatly decreased, the authority argued: “Since there is a great number of requests for naturalization, processing them takes time. The requests that are dealt with in these years are usually not those submitted in the same year. This situation has existed for many years.”

For many years, indeed, applications have almost never been processed in the same year that they are submitted. But from 2003-2013, the authority did manage to either approve or reject a total number of applications that was close to the total number submitted that same year. In other words, it wasn't building up a growing backlog.

In 2009, for example, there were 1,656 applications — a relatively high number for the period. That same year, 1,609 were either approved or rejected. In stark contrast, so far in 2016, 1,102 applications have been submitted, while only nine applications have been approved and two rejected.

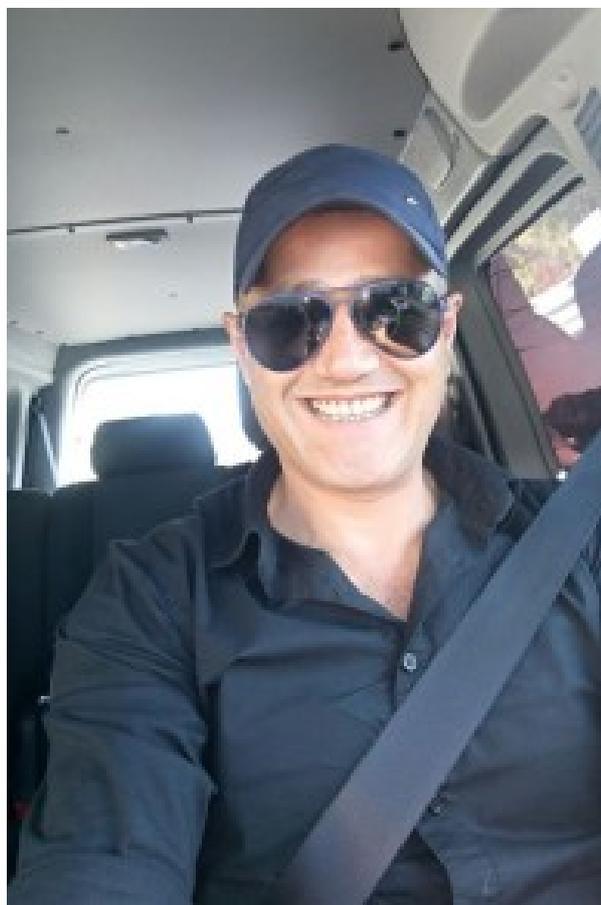
The Times of Israel pressed the Population and Immigration Authority for an explanation of why the pace at which citizenship applications are definitively processed has so dramatically slowed in recent years.

The spokesperson, Sabin Hadad, responded: “We do not know how to explain trends. This is also not our job.”

### **If this was normalization, they'd make it easier**

Sara (not her real name), a 20-something female who didn't want her age or profession published for fear she may be identified, said she applied two and a half years ago for Israeli citizenship.

As an East Jerusalemite, she has no citizenship and therefore no passport, and wanted one because she travels a lot for work. As things stand, she can only leave the country with temporary documents and must get a visa every time she does, no matter where she goes. She said she became sick and tired of the hassle.



Sufyan Dabash, 37, an East Jerusalemite seeking Israeli citizenship. He says he doesn't want to be a 'second-class citizen' anymore. (Courtesy)



Palestinian children pose for a photo on top of cement blocks placed by the Israeli army in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Ras al Amud, on October 21, 2015. (Hadas Parush/Flash90)

The large majority of East Jerusalemites have Jordanian passports — a remnant of the time Jordan controlled their neighborhoods between 1948-1967 — but no Jordanian citizenship.

Sara refuses to be a part of such a system.

“If I get a Jordanian passport, it means I’m a part of the Jordanian state. But I don’t belong to there. I belong here, to the place I was born, where I live, where I pay taxes and where I work. I do all my obligations. I should be able to live here as a citizen, not a resident,” she told the Times of Israel.

East Jerusalemites, like all permanent residents seeking Israeli citizenship, must give up any other citizenships, passports, or residency statuses — like a US green card — on gaining Israeli citizenship. (Different rules apply to those seeking citizenship under the Law of Return, who may retain foreign passports.) In the case of most East Jerusalem applicants, that means renouncing Jordanian citizenship.

Since applying for Israeli citizenship, Sara said, her hassles have compounded. Every six months, she goes to the Interior Ministry’s office to check on the status of her application, and each time is asked to bring in updated documents.

When she asks why her application is taking so long, “they have no answer for me except for that it’s a long line,” she said.



A view of East Jerusalem as the sun sets, August 8, 2016. (Zack Wajsglas/Flash90)

Her own conclusion: “They aren’t rushing to give citizenship to East Jerusalem residents. As much as they can elongate the process, they do.”

Is Sara concerned about her application for Israeli citizenship contributing to “normalization” — a term used to describe the strong taboo of Palestinians cooperating in any way with the Israeli government and sometimes with Israeli civilians?

“At the end of the day, if this was normalization, the government would give us citizenship with ease,” she said. “But we work so hard to get it. In order for normalization (to take place), the other side has to accept you and welcome you. But they (Israel) don’t welcome us — the opposite,” she said.

### **What East Jerusalemites must prove**

In seeking citizenship, East Jerusalemites must meet the same Israeli legal requirements as any foreign national who has attained permanent residency status in Israel — perhaps through marriage, or having come to Israel to play for a sports team.

As in the case of Sufyan Dabash, the primary reason requests for citizenship are denied to East Jerusalemites is because they cannot prove Jerusalem is their “center of life.”

Adi Lustigman, an independent Israeli attorney who has worked extensively with East Jerusalemites seeking citizenship, said proving center of life includes (but is not limited to): producing three years of water, electricity and municipal tax bills, bank slips, confirmation by social security offices and letters from employers, and if one has children, their vaccination records.

For some East Jerusalemites, producing the bills is impossible, as their homes get these resources outside of the state companies. Additionally, rent may have been agreed upon without a formal contract, and those who work in construction — a popular career — switch workplaces often, so can’t get a letter saying they’ve been working in the same place for three years.

Hadad told The Times of Israel many East Jerusalemites have difficulty proving Jerusalem is their “center of life.”

Even for the ministry itself, she said, confirming an applicant’s “center of life” is so arduous that the process almost always takes more than a year.



Adi Lustigman (Courtesy)

## Why the surge in citizenship requests?

The majority of East Jerusalemites apply for Israeli citizenship for one reason, according to Ahmad al-Khalidi, a field worker in East Jerusalem: to ensure they won't be expelled from the city.

"They consider themselves to be Palestinians, but request citizenship to guard their residency status," he said.

Al-Khalidi's contention has some corroborative evidence.

Despite the state having transferred its authority onto their neighborhoods after 1967, Israel applies the 1952 "entry into Israel law" to them. This law, which was not legislated with East Jerusalemites in mind, gives the Interior Ministry the right to revoke the residency status of anyone who has been out of the country for seven years, has received the status of permanent resident in a foreign country, and/or became a citizen of a foreign country.

In 1995, without any public statement, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, the Interior Ministry began demanding East Jerusalemites prove the capital was their center of life. Retroactively, thousands of families were legally liable to have their residency statuses revoked — and that's what happened, [with revocations in many subsequent years](#) reaching numbers beyond anything East Jerusalemites had previously experienced.



Israeli Border Police block the entrance to the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Issawiya, checking Palestinians wanting to pass, on October 20, 2015. Amid a wave of terror attacks in Jerusalem and Israel, police closely monitored access to some East Jerusalem neighborhoods, checking for knives and anything that could be used as a weapon. (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

This policy hit its peak in 2008, during which an unprecedented 4,577 East Jerusalemites had their residency statuses revoked, according to Interior Ministry statistics obtained by Hamoked, an Jerusalem-based rights group. This was nearly four times more than in any year since 1967.

The following year, the number of applications by East Jerusalemites for citizenship jumped from 1,025 to 1,656 — a 61% leap and by far the highest increase since 1967.

Lustigman said some of her East Jerusalemite clients say they want to "live in equality and be the same as anyone else." But many she said, specifically say they want citizenship because they are afraid they may need to go abroad, or their children may need to go abroad, and may not be allowed to return if they are away for more than seven years.

"If they aren't citizens, the state can take away their residency status like flies," she said.

## The 'ridiculous' Hebrew requirement

"Doesn't meet requirements," was the second-most cited reason for denying citizenship to East Jerusalemites. The majority of cases in this category of refusal, according to a response from the ministry, related to the failure to prove

sufficient Hebrew-language proficiency. (A rejection by Israel's security establishment was the third most-cited reason for denying East Jerusalemite citizenship applications.)

The ministry said that by law, all permanent residents seeking Israeli citizenship, not just East Jerusalemites, must learn Hebrew. This requirement has been in force since 1967.

Lustigman, however, argued that it's "ridiculous" to force East Jerusalemites to learn Hebrew, when Arabic, their native tongue, is an official language of Israel.

She added that there is a clause in the law that would allow the ministry to waive the Hebrew requirement for East Jerusalemites, and said it was choosing not to provide such an exemption.

Additionally, the Hebrew test is not standardized, according to Lustigman and several applicants who spoke to The Times of Israel. Rather, it consists of speaking and writing on a random subject chosen by an interviewer from the ministry, who judges on the spot whether the applicant has strong enough Hebrew to become Israeli.

According to Khaled Salhab — who is by default the highest ranking East Jerusalemite in Jerusalem City Hall, because he's an aide to a Jerusalem city council member — the Hebrew requirement is troublesome for applicants from East Jerusalem because the language is hardly taught in their schools.

Around 20-30% of schools in East Jerusalem are managed by the Palestinian Authority or the Waqf (Muslim Trust); in these schools, no Hebrew is taught.

But the schools directly managed by the city or private schools funded by the municipality, Salhab said, aren't much better. Hebrew is given around the same amount of hours as sports, he said.

Salhab said he went to a city-funded school and didn't know "a word of Hebrew" when he finished the 12th grade. Today, he is fluent in Hebrew, after paying thousands of dollars to take courses at the Hebrew University.

### **'A duty to serve all residents of the city equally'**

Yoav Yeivin, a city council member (for the Hitorerut/Wake-Up Jerusalem movement) who has taken up the issues of East Jerusalem on his own accord, and to whom Khaled Salhab serves as an aide, said Israel has a duty to "serve all residents of the city equally."

"The statistics show that as the years pass, the residents of East Jerusalem are submitting more and more requests to become citizens, in order not to be second-class citizens: They want to improve their lives in a significant way, to be able to travel freely, to trade around the globe and more."

"The more residents of East Jerusalem will be able to earn a decent living, raise their standard of living and education, the better it will be for the city of Jerusalem and the State of Israel," he said.

Lastly, he said: "integrating the population of East Jerusalem into Israeli society is an important step to reduce tensions and mitigate the hostility that many residents of East Jerusalem are absorbing from radical Islamic organizations."

Whether or not the Interior Minister shares this assessment, the hard figures show a fast-growing backlog of thousands of applications, and a near halt to their resolution. This, despite Israel's formal insistence that it offers citizenship in good faith to the residents of East Jerusalem and their descendants who came under Israeli sovereignty, as part of the expanded, unified capital, in 1967.



Yoav Yeivin, Jerusalem city council member for 'Wake-Up movement.' He has taken up the issues of East Jerusalem on his own accord. (Courtesy)

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