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BRIEF REPORT ON THE INTER-AGENCY TASK FORCE ON ISRAELI ARAB ISSUES

Sixty years ago, on May 14, 1948, on the day in which the British Mandate over Palestine expired, the Jewish People's Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum and approved the Declaration of Independence, which included the following line:

The STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigrants and for the ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

by Marc Wallman, Arthur and Betty Levy, and Sydney Perry,

Participants in the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues Discussions in Israel From Sunday evening, January 6 through Wednesday evening, January 9, 2008, the four of us, together with about sixty other participants from other federations and organizations in the United States, Canada and the UK, and Philanthropies and philanthropic professionals who work in and out of Israel met to learn about priorities and problems of education, economic development, social services and leadership development in the Arab sector in Israel and to participate in discussions about the current climate of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel.

The trip was sponsored by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, a coalition of over sixty North American Jewish organizations, foundations and private philanthropists, led by a steering committee comprised of the JpC, the Anti-Defamation League, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the New Israel Fund, the Bronfman Philanthropies and other organizations including the UJA-Federation of New York. The Task Force was organized to educate the American Jewish community about majority/minority relations in Israel, to increase awareness of the economic, educational and social service shortcomings confronting the Israeli-Arab communities, and to attempt to provide funds for solutions and ultimately strengthen civil society activity in Israel.

Over the course of the three and one half days of the trip, we were addressed by representatives of the government, including Minister Isaac Herzog, the Minister of Welfare and Social Services, Rabbi Michael Melchior, Chairman of the Knesset Committee on Education Culture and Sports and Co-chair of the Knesset Jewish-Arab Caucus and Shawki Kahtib, Chairman of the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee, which is the umbrella organization for all Arab mayors and members of the Knesset. We traveled to and met with the Mayors of several Arab cities, as well as with Shuli Dichter and Ali Haider, the co-chairs of the Sikkuy Organization (an Israeli NGO which develops and implements projects to advance equality between Arabs and Jews in Israel), and many other persons.

We met in smaller groups with Israeli-Arab teachers, students, artists, community organizers and, in our trip to the Negev, with representatives of the Bedouin Arab community in both recognized and non-recognized Arab-Bedouin villages.

The experience of the trip was overwhelming and what we learned was both troubling and inspiring. We think it is fair to say that, contrary to the Israeli Declaration of Independence, we learned that there is a significant amount of discrimination and neglect of the Arab community in Israel and that many members of the Arab community feel, with some substantial justification, that they are treated both officially and unofficially as second-class citizens. Most importantly, much of the treatment of the Arab citizens can be directly attributed to official government policy.

For example: Arabs, including Druze and Bedouins, make up twenty percent of the population of Israel. However, the following facts are applicable: a. Government spending per capita for Arabs is substantially less than that for Jews. Although Arabs are twice as poor and have no upper class, government spending per case on social welfare is 900 NIS for Arabs versus 2100 NIS for Jews. This disproportionate spending is a part the result of Israel government policy which provides matching spending grants to localities in Israel, although many Arab municipalities, which are poor, cannot afford to match the spending and thus receive no grants.

b. Arab children are 25% of Israel's child population, yet Arab children make up only 5.25% of Israel's 80,000 children attending government subsidized daycare.

c. Arab school classes are over 15% larger than Jewish school classes. Spending for public schools, other than teaching salaries, is estimated to be four times greater per case for Jews rather than Arabs.

d. Arabs constitute only 5.7% of Israel's civil service and less than 1 % of university faculty and employees of government corporations.

e. Bedouins living in unrecognized villages (approximately 80,000 or 2/3 of the Bedouin population in the Negev) do not receive services (no electricity, water etc.) other than national health insurance and do not count in official statistics. Further, they live in fear of having their houses demolished because they were not built in "officially recognized" areas and thus did not have building permits when their homes were constructed, although they may have lived in that location for many years. Since our visit, the government has announced that it has ceased demolishing houses.

f. 52% of Arab citizens live below the poverty line and 59% of Arab children live below the poverty line. These figures do not include the numbers for the Bedouins in the Negev, which are far worse. Further, 90% of Arab citizens live in municipalities, which are ranked as poor or very poor on a municipal ranking index.

g. The economic and social problems are compounded by the education system. Jewish children learn only Hebrew and English in their classes while Israeli-Arab children learn Hebrew and Arabic. To the extent that English is used as a commercial medium, Arab children are at a distinct disadvantage in obtaining employment opportunities. We also learned that Jewish children are falling

behind their counterparts in the EU, a separate but equally serious concern.

h. While there are mixed cities where Jews and Arabs live together, most of the Arab population lives in Arab towns in the north. Unfortunately, however, the city boundaries of the Arab towns have been restrictively set by the national government, which refuses to allow these cities to grow. Permission has been requested by many of the Arab cities for additional land for needed development and natural expansion but is commonly rejected, although similar requests from Jewish municipalities are commonly granted. In the vicinity of the various Arab cities there are Jewish settlements that have been recently created, frequently on land appropriated from the citizens of the Israeli-Arab cities.

Jews have the right to take advantage of these settlements living on government owned land and receiving significant startup help but generally speaking Arab families do not.

i. Land has historically been allocated by the central government to municipalities in the Jewish sector on a highly favored basis and different criteria are applied to requests from Arab municipalities. The government makes significant allocations of funds for benefits including education to municipalities and communities in National Priority Zones. However, almost all of the municipalities in the National Priority Zones are Jewish municipalities. Despite the recommendations of the Or Commission, (which was established by the Israeli government to conduct an in depth inquiry into the causes of the outbreak of riots and serious loss of life and property in the Israeli-Arab sector in October 2000), which urged that discriminatory policy of allocating priority treatment in the National Priority Zones exclusively to Jewish municipalities be changed immediately, there are currently 535 towns in the National Priority Zones and only four small Arab towns are included.

j. After the Land Day riots in 2000, which resulted in the deaths of 13 Arab citizens of Um El Fahm, a Commission headed by former Supreme Court Justice Or made many recommendations to reverse the discriminatory policies of the past. To date, few have been implemented.

The Israeli government is making some beginning efforts to deal with these problems. Rabbi Michael Melchior shared his opinion that we will exclude the Arab Israeli population at our own peril; the time is now to shift from problems to solutions. At the regional level, there are efforts being made by some Jewish and Arab communities to try to jointly address some problems. There are even one or two agreements to eventually share industrial parks, because there is no land available in the Arab municipalities for industrial parks.

These efforts are just in the early stage and many years away from producing real results, but are encouraging. There have also been some recent attempts to address the minority position of the Arab community in Israel by increasing the number of Jewish students learning to speak Arabic in Jewish schools. However, this is a very small program and is not part of the national education program.

The situation in the Negev was portrayed as being quite desperate. Approximately 150,000 Bedouins live in the Negev. The Bedouin population doubles every thirteen years and 60% of the population is under eighteen. Approximately 50,000 buildings dispersed throughout the area are defined as illegal by the government. The rate of unemployment is over 50% and

significantly higher among women. The government has a program for the development of the Negev, which is inconsistent with the location of many; if not most, of the Bedouin communities and apparently little consideration has been given to the views of the Bedouin community with respect to the development program.

There are some hopeful starts. Some municipalities have recently been recognized by the national government after much effort. There are some new schools being constructed in some of the municipalities and we met with a group of young Bedouin men and women who were attending the University in Beersheba. However, the efforts are just scratching the surface of the problem. Overall, there is a total lack of services such as electricity, schools, and even running water in many of the Bedouin communities. While the situation of Israeli Arab citizens in the north is somewhat better, it is clearly not equal to that of the Jewish citizens and there is a critical need for employment, education and economic development everywhere.

All these conditions exist in the face of the basic law of Israel, which incorporates the principle of equality for all Israeli citizens, articulated at the time of the proclamation of the State. Why do we care? First, our tradition teaches us that our experience in Egypt and in the Diaspora should sensitize us to the plight of the powerless. In Exodus 23:9, we are commanded: "Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger since you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." We should have one law for the powerful, the poor, the Israelite, the non-Israelite, the stranger and the citizen. This is the Torah's social vision; this is Israel's social vision. Second, the security of the Jewish state requires that it normalize the situation of, and its relationship with, its Arab citizens.

Israeli-Arabs, if accorded full civil rights can be a positive bridge between Israel and her neighbors. Otherwise, there will be increasing frustration and anger, instead of a well-educated, economically comfortable citizenry. In the Haftarat that we read every Shabbat, our sages have dictated that they should end on a positive note, a note of hope. There are positive trends to report. Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora are recognizing that the mistakes of the past must be rectified and are working to do so. For 60 years, priorities were understandably focused on survival in the face of wars and intifadas, on aliya to the Jewish homeland from the four corners of the world, on successful absorption of the waves of immigrants, and on nation-building for the nascent State. We can be rightfully proud of so much. Now is the moment in which we can use the same commitment and the same talents to undertake a narrowing of the socioeconomic gap that divides Jews and Arabs.

It is not only the right thing to do; it is something Israel must do. Her future depends on it. As Israel moves past her 60th Anniversary, we can look forward to a continued deep and fundamental commitment to a just and inclusive Jewish democratic State where the rights of the non-Jewish minority are respected and the Arab minority can respect the aspirations of the Jewish majority as they together live in peace.