

# MEMORANDUM

Re: Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues- January 2008 Mission

Date: January 9, 2008

We would both like to thank-you for allowing us to represent the Montreal community on this mission. This was a special experience; not necessarily pleasant.

Our expectation was to be made aware of a level of neglect, which contributes to the lack of Arab progress in Israel. What we did not imagine is the magnitude of this level and how government has been an engineer of the bleak situation. Words that are used by the enemies of Israel, which we vociferously attempt to counter, such as racist and undemocratic, unfortunately carry threads of truth.

These comments, usually used to refer to Israel's treatment of Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza, unfortunately apply also to Arabs within Israel who we cannot forget are ISRAELI CITIZENS who clearly do not enjoy the same benefits as there co-citizens who are Jewish.

We are not assigning blame. This is a very complicated issue. Israel has been engaged with wars against Arab populations from both within and neighboring countries. It is therefore easy to understand that the welfare of its Arab citizens has not been at the top of its agenda. She has also been faced with the Herculean task of integrating over a million new olim and especially the ongoing challenges re the Ethiopian community.

However, this challenge needs to be met head on and now. The Israeli Arab citizens are not going to relocate to a new Palestinian state and therefore it is in Israel's interest to strengthen its democratic underpinning for ALL citizens.

Some basic statistics and facts:

- 1) Arabs (this term includes Druze and Bedouins) make up 20% of the population.
- 2) 56.3% of Arab families are poor (compared to 30.3% of Jewish families. After receiving transfer payments and paying income taxes the percentages are 45.9% (reduction of 10.4%) and 14.7% for Jewish families (reduction of 15.6%).
- 3) Although Arabs are twice as poor and have no upper class, government spending per capita on social welfare is 246 NIS vs. 328 NIS for Jews. Adding in local authority spending the numbers are 378 NIS and 493 NIS.
- 4) 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 day care.

- 5) Arab school classes are 15.7% larger than Jewish school classes. Spending re public schools other than teaching salaries is estimated to be four times greater per capita for Jews rather than Arabs. (Rabbi Michael Melchior- Chairman, Knesset Committee on Education, Culture, and Sports)).
- 6) Bedouins, living in unrecognized villages, (about 80,000) do not receive services and don't count in official statistics (so all of the above is worse).
- 7) Land was purchased by the JNF from Arabs; however a great deal of land was not purchased but rather expropriated.

Minister of Welfare and Social Services Isaac Herzog described how neglect can occur institutionally- he labeled the problem bureaucratic. It seems that an important part of government spending in municipalities is on a shared basis- government offers 75% if the municipality matches 25%, which it accumulates via taxes practical effect is that Arab communities do not have a revenue base to often create this matching. Thus the 75% is lost and a "vicious circle" is created.

Another roadblock is community expansion re land. Sakhnin is an Arab town in the North, which like much of Israel has experienced population growth. But the city boundaries are set. Permission to expand has been routinely rejected. However within the vicinity Jewish settlements have been created, probably on land originally expropriated from Sakhnin Arabs. Jews have the right to take advantage of these settlements living on government-owned land and receiving significant start-up help. An Arab family applied to join a settlement and was refused. The Supreme Court will hear this case.

The above is just a few examples of government policies, which create second-class citizenry within Israel. There are many others. It appears, though that there is a movement for change. Herzog has promised to do away with 75-25 matching in certain circumstances. The Ministry of Education has allocated budget specifically for Arab education issues. A special commission has been created to settle Bedouin land squabbles.

It is hoped that these initiatives will be effected and lead to further corrections. Of course, the skeptic will indicate that in Israel most initiatives, whatever the purpose or objective do not reach fruition, one of the main culprits being the rapid turnover of Ministry positions.

Herzog notes that a contributory effect to the social gap between Jew and Arab is the Diaspora Jew. There has been an incredible transfer of wealth to Israel from the Diaspora aimed at ameliorating the standard of living of Israelis, either via programs or capital projects. How much of this generosity have reached Arab Israeli citizens? How many parks have been constructed in Arab villages? The government created gap is widened by our tzedakah, our attempt to make things right.

Making things right is a tremendous Jewish value and it underscores one of the two main reasons for change.

The moral issue is powerful. It is not a Jewish value to disenfranchise your neighbor. Can Israel be a Jewish state without Jewish values? Can Israel continue to call herself the only Democratic state in the Middle East when one fifth of its citizens live a second-class existence? Polls indicate in Israel that 62% of Jewish Israelis prescribe to racist intentions towards Arabs (and we understand this given the personal nature of recent conflicts). The Israeli Declaration of Independence calls for equality of its citizens- but no Bill of Rights exists in Israel because existing government policies could never stand up to such a Bill.

The pragmatic issue is equally powerful. By keeping 20% of the population poor, less educated, and without real opportunity you limit the economic potential of Israel. This population, if well educated and economically viable could be the economic motor that ignites significant trade with Israel's Arab neighbours in the future.

But even more worrying is security. The anger is growing. Islamification is growing. The next intifadah will be in the backyard. There is a limit to the power and value of security fences when dealing with Israeli citizens.

There is also a clear demographic imperative, with the average family size in the Arab sector clearly outpacing that of the Jewish side. Studies have shown, that increased education and economic opportunities especially for Arab women can significantly lessen this gap.

We focused our study on the Negev. What can Montreal do to ameliorate conditions in its sister region.

The Bedouin situation is worst of all. There are about 175,000 living in the Negev. Their poverty rates, unemployment, education levels, land issues all make the Negev situation dramatic and critical. A significant factor is the Bedouin himself. The conversion of a Nomadic, pre-industrial people to the 21<sup>st</sup> century is complicated and difficult and comparisons can be made to other populations indicating similar experiences such as Ethiopian Israelis and Aboriginal Canadians. Interestingly (but so sad) the levels of heart disease, obesity and diabetes for our Aboriginals and the Bedouin are far above norms in Canada and Israel, where once these diseases were not indicative to these populations. Also contributing is that the Negev as a whole including Jews has not benefited from economic growth as well as the country centre. There are not enough good jobs for the entire region, but the Bedouins lag behind all.

As previously noted there are 80,000 Bedouins living in unrecognized villages- no services, no status- in many instances worse than shantytown living in many third-world countries. The government's policy of regularly bulldozing homes in these villages does not result in anything except anger (there are too many to bulldoze them all).

Israelis appreciate Bedouins more than Arabs- simply because many have volunteered for the IDF. This is over. Young people we encountered are not volunteering for the army. But worse their anger and frustration is palpable. From the Jewish side the Bedouin crime rate creates a fear and ambivalence.

Ami Nachson, ED of the Abraham Fund characterized the Negev as “volatile, dangerous, potentially violent... drop outs, drugs, crime, illegal weapons”.

There is a road that we are all on in the Negev. It is leading to violence. Can government and the Jewish world manage a detour? If not Montreal’s investment in Beer Sheva will have little consequence.

We remember meeting a girl, amongst a group of Bedouin students at Shamoon College in Beer Sheva. All the students indicated where they were from, age, area of study and family size. This one girl added that both her father’s and brother’s houses had been bulldozed. Gazing downwards she spoke of the loss of dignity. Whether one believes that it is a Jewish value or a security issue to create change we don’t care. It just must be done.

Another myth destroyed-“ Yes, the Arabs lag behind Jews in quality of life, but still are ahead of Arabs in neighboring countries”. For the Bedouin in the Negev this is just not true.

How should Montreal deal with this issue? We propose funding various programs, aligned with our mission, in the Negev concentrated on the Bedouin community and joining the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Issues.

Certainly a small cadre of donors can be invited to make special gifts for any of the above. This is relatively simple. Perhaps we will be successful, perhaps not.

We understood the political ramifications of the FEDERATION making an actual allocation to this issue. Will individual donors react negatively to “spending our dollars helping Arabs” and curtail giving or will some create negative publicity surrounding our allocation.

We believe that education is the key here and this is the goal of the Task Force. There are many articulate task force members who could be invited to address a combined session of the Board and campaign leadership .The membership of the task force alone will be an eye opener to Montrealers as it includes most mainstream Jewish organizations, including UJC, , Hadassah, JAFI, KH, JDC, the United Israel Appeal of the UK, major private foundations and many major North American Federations including Toronto.

We have to stand up and do what is right. An allocation of our Israel dollars must touch Bedouin issues in the Beer Sheva region. Almost half the population in the area that we are twinned with is living with severe poverty and little hope. For we as a Jewish FEDERATION, to close an eye to the situation for fear of repercussions is counter to the Jewish values we use as a foundation for our existence and *raison d’etre*.

Nancy and Bobby