

Jewish Task Force To Aid Israeli Arabs

Addressing 'neglect' of minority is more crucial than ever, say leaders at conference here.

Adam Dickter - Staff Writer

American Jews must play a greater role in improving the lives of Israel's 1.2 million Arab citizens, members of a newly created task force of communal organizations that met in Manhattan last week agreed.

The task force will work to raise awareness of the socio-economic disparities that confront the minority population and steer funding to organizations that address those differences.

"Twenty percent of any country can't be neglected," said Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League. "This is an issue we care about, and we're ready to be helpful.

According to research by the Jerusalem-based Meyers JDC Brookdale Institute, Israeli Arabs face shorter life expectancies, higher infant mortality rates, higher rates of poverty and lower education levels than their Jewish fellow citizens.

While many of the task-force participants framed their call to action in humanitarian terms, others noted an additional strategic component to addressing growing tensions between Jewish and Arab citizens at a time when the radical, militant Hamas faction dominates the Palestinian Authority. Recent years have seen some Israeli Arabs arrested for involvement in terror activities.

"We have to weaken the appeal of Arab extremists," said Malcom Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. "They are trying to penetrate the Israeli Arab community."

When asked what prompted the task force to be created at this particular time, Jessica Balaban, the director said, "Part of the agenda of the country today and especially among the government soon to take office is to address the social, economic and health needs of the citizens of Israel. With the support of North American Jewry and the State of Israel, the task force aims to advance civic equality in Israel, so that Israeli Jews and Arabs can contribute, participate and benefit as full citizens."

The task force represents a victory for Israel-based human rights groups that have been working for years to bring the Arab minority issue to the forefront of American Jewish consciousness.

"Emerging civil society organizations in the past decade, encouraged by the New Israel Fund [an international philanthropic partnership supporting a range of "social change organizations" in Israel], have started to look at the Israeli reality from a civic point of view," said Shuli Dichter, co-executive director of the Jerusalem-based Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality. "We have brought together Jewish and Arab citizens and developed a shared agenda based on understanding and an agreement that equality and sharing resources would be absolutely essential and the basis for shared citizenship."

Those efforts have increased since October 2000, when a series of pro-Palestinian riots broke out in Israeli Arab areas. Twelve Israeli Arabs and one Jewish citizen were killed in the violence, which resulted in the formation of the Or Commission to investigate the incidents. The commission found that government handling of the Arab sector was "neglectful and discriminatory" and that not enough was done to enforce the law in those areas. The commission also found that "ideological-political radicalization" contributed to the unrest.

Speaking to reporters at the conference, Hoenlein said understanding the nature of that flare-up was essential in avoiding recurrences.

"We are not justifying the riots, but you have to look at the causes," said the Presidents Conference leader. "It's symptomatic of a problem."

The task force conference occurred against the backdrop of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert putting together a government coalition in which right-wing groups are a key component. Many conference participants feared that including Knesset Member Avigdor Lieberman of the Israel Beiteinu Party — who has advocated drawing some Arab villages out of the country's map — in Olmert's cabinet would be a setback for Arab-Jewish relations in Israel. As of Monday, it appeared unlikely that Lieberman, whose party won 12 seats in the parliament last month, would be given a cabinet post.

The full-day conference, organized primarily by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, featured dozens of Jewish community leaders from across the country in panel discussions with Jewish and Arab Israeli civil rights activists, philanthropic leaders and coexistence advocacy groups.

While no official representative of the Israeli government was present, members of the task-force steering committee said there was strong support for this initiative.

"Every Israeli we met with says 'help us,' " said Brian Lurie, president of the Alfred and Hanna Fromm Fund. "There are people in the Israeli government looking for encouragement in this." He noted that Olmert served as an adviser on Arab affairs to Yitzchak Shamir when he was prime minister in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Rami Nuseir, executive director of Ishmael and Isaac, a U.S.-based group of Jews and Arabs that works toward Middle East coexistence, said he was encouraged by the task-force formation, but lamented that American Arab organizations were not included in the conference.

"We are discussing Arabs in Israel but didn't have representation from organizations that can be partners in this initiative," said Nuseir, a Christian Arab born in Ramle, near Tel Aviv. "The same way we invite a few speakers we can bring organizations to witness what's going on."

Terming the task force as "way overdue," Nuseir said tensions between Jews and Arabs inside Israel are worsening. "The gap is getting bigger," he said. "In northern Israel where a majority of Arabs live, businesses are not opening branches, which creates unemployment and poverty and resentment and hostility."

Increasing awareness and building support in North America, he said, was crucial. "There is a lot of power in the United States between Arabs and Jews. If we build relationships here it can certainly affect and influence the Middle East."