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## All in favor

By Jessica Balaban

With so many Jewish and other Israeli issues needing to be addressed, why should world Jewry rally to the aid of Israeli Arabs?

The answer is two-fold. First, our tradition teaches that all who reside within the Jewish state should be accorded dignity, respect and equality. Second, the security of the Jewish state requires that it normalize the situation of, and its relationship with, its Arab citizens. Islamic extremism is sweeping across the Middle East. The thought of an Israeli Arab population that is inspired by and pledges allegiance to religious groups like Hamas or Hezbollah should be enough to make the need for change clear within Israel. Israeli Arabs, if accorded full civil rights, can be a positive bridge between Israel and her neighbors. It is not only the right thing to do, it is a thing we believe Israel must do. Israel's future depends on it.

There are nearly 1.2 million Israeli Arabs living in Israel, representing 20 percent of the population. Relative to their fellow Jewish citizens, they face clear differences in quality of life, including discrepancies in life expectancy, infant mortality, education, access to employment and standards of living. These are indisputable differences that call for intervention by the government and equalization of civic services.

The Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, a coalition of more than 70 Jewish organizations, was officially formed in January 2006 to educate American Jews about Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. This educational initiative arises out of deep-rooted support for the Jewish state's right to a secure, healthy and peaceful existence, with social and political equality for all its citizens, as guaranteed in Israel's Declaration of Independence. We are led by major mainstream organizations, which include the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, the Anti-Defamation League, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the New Israel Fund and UJA-Federation of New York. Our membership ranges from the Orthodox Union to the Union for Reform Judaism and includes 26 foundations, 19 federations and UJC. We have conducted meetings with our Foundation Forum and a Federation Forum will be launched at this year's UJC General Assembly (GA). These forums gather like minds to study the issues and search for effective solutions. UJC, with support from the Task Force, added an additional workshop session to this year's program on federation involvement in the Israeli Arab arena. Additionally, at the GA, UJC will give exposure to its new Venture Fund for Jewish-Arab Equality and Co-existence in Israel, whose aim will be to leverage collaborative, strategic investments among funders in this area.

Task Force activities include educating the American Jewish community on majority-minority relations in Israel by way of national and international conferences, study tours to Israel, and distribution of educational materials - all being done in partnership with our Israeli colleagues, Jewish and Arab, who are devoted to strengthening the fabric of Israeli life. The topic increasingly appears on the agenda of national board meetings, in synagogue and college visits to Israel, and in discussion forums among our members.

This knowledge has translated into increased funding for economic, educational and social service initiatives in Israel. All of these developments symbolize a shift in American Jewry's recognition of the necessity for Israel to address the basic needs of its Arab minority. Task Force members have the support of the Government of Israel as well as the Jewish Agency, which partnered with the Abraham Fund, a Task Force member, after last summer's war with Lebanon, on a program to increase the number of Jewish students learning spoken Arabic in Jewish schools, so as to bridge gaps of culture and fear.

We recognize that Israel has a host of priorities - Qassam rockets hitting Sderot, long strikes in the educational system, and poverty, just to cite a few. However, the Task Force remains concerned about the situation of Israeli Arabs. After the violent riots in northern Israel in October 2000, the government pledged to make elimination of inequality between Jewish and Arab citizens, and of discrimination against the latter, a top national priority. These recommendations have yet to be implemented. The recent events in Peki'in, however, remind us that the issue of majority-minority relations in Israel is still bubbling beneath the surface. Until the inequalities are corrected, a major foundation stone of the State of Israel will not be stable.

This is not a right-wing or left-wing issue. Member organizations recognize the need for the Arab citizens of Israel not only to benefit but also to contribute and participate in strengthening the fabric of Israeli society. Israel's treatment of its minority population is an issue of Jewish values and the Jewish majority must see equality for Israeli Arabs as an issue of immediate and significant importance, regardless of ideological or political beliefs.

We are partners with Israel in great and challenging times. Most importantly, we are partners in striving to ensure the well-being of all the people of Israel, and the future of Israel as a Jewish state.

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