

Yes, this is Zionism

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How do you build a state from the ground up? You invest from within and invite investors from the outside. If the outside investors tell you that their investment is actually a contribution? All the better. And if they say that it is a contribution and want to really manage the asset in Israel and to build additional assets? Even better yet. This is a central characteristic of the relations between the state and the Jewish Agency, which is holding a meeting of its Board of Governors in Israel this week.

After the establishment of the state, the Jewish Agency received legal status as a planner and builder – but, by its nature, did this for Jews only. Successive governments of Israel, whether out of Zionism or historical blindness, followed the investment patterns of the Jewish Agency and did not invest at the same time in infrastructure needed in Arab communities. In the rush of development during the earlier decades of the state, the Arab communities were left behind because, "naturally," it was not the role of the Jewish Agency. And the state, for its part, did not oblige the Jewish Agency to implement equality. Thus, a stable structure of institutional discrimination was created in developing infrastructure for Arab communities – this, in addition to the widespread discrimination against Arab citizens in all areas of life, which works to the detriment of the entire Israeli economy.

But lo and behold – last month, the core of this discriminatory mechanism rose up against its creators. The fresh breeze actually came from the direction of the tired historic body, the Zionist Congress. A "coalition of equality" between Reform and Orthodox Jews passed a resolution in the Congress that is perhaps one of the most Zionist resolutions in its history, in that it recognizes the centrality of the State of Israel's interest: The resolution requires the Jewish Agency to include Arab communities in its development plans in Israel.

Besides the recent decision of the Zionist Congress, there are now processes under way that have the potential to change this reality down to the core. While the Zionist Congress was convening in Israel, a delegation of representatives of about 40 different organizations of U.S. Jewry visited here to learn up close about discrimination against Arab citizens. This delegation represented a coalition that formed during the past two years in the U.S. to deal

with the issue of Arab citizens in Israel. The delegation includes prominent mainstream organizations such as the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Federation of New York, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and leading Jewish foundations such as CRB, Meyerhoff, Kahanoff and more. These leaders understood that there is a serious problem here and decided to examine the issue up close.

In tours of the "backyard of Israeli citizenship" conducted by Sikkuy, the association for the advancement of Civic Equality in Israel in recent years in Wadi Ara and the Galilee, many visitors – including American Jews – have been exposed to the disparities in infrastructure. These participants understand, in retrospect, that they were inadvertent partners to a most serious historical error and find it hard to understand why the state does not respect the citizenship of the Israeli Arabs. The Jews always place themselves at the forefront of the battle against racial discrimination. For them, there is no Jewish value that mandates discrimination against Arabs. Moreover, equal treatment would only make the state more Jewish.

In principle, the demand for equality must be addressed to the sovereign government and not to the Jewish Agency, which is external to the state. Indeed, most politicians and senior government officials in Israel understand today that the discrimination of Arabs in Israel can continue no longer. During the past decade, various steps were taken to correct this injustice, but the full decade required to close the gaps, as a comprehensive strategy of the state, is still ahead of us.

There are those who prefer to wait for the Zionist Congress and Jewish Agency to depart from the stage of history and then, and only then, will there be equality here. But perhaps it is worthwhile taking action before this long process culminates, because Zionism has not died, the Jewish Agency possesses considerable power and a significant change in the way it operates would be decisive already in this generation.

The "coalition of equality" in the Zionist Congress must not relent on implementing the resolution. The closing of gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel is a primary national goal toward which billions should be invested from the state budget as well as the Jewish Agency's budget. The test of equal development in the Negev and the Galilee is the next stage and – even according to the Zionist Congress resolution – there is no goal today that is more Zionist.

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