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## The illusion of assistance to the Arabs in Israel

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Ron Gerlitz

The government plan to allocate NIS 800 million for the economic development of 12 Arab communities is praiseworthy: a concentration of effort for several consecutive years in these communities is likely to constitute a critical mass that will bring about a certain change in their inferior condition. But along with wishes of success for those implementing the program, we have to consider the difficulties they will face.

Unfortunately, the plan is already encountering criticism due to the allocation of public resources for the benefit of Arab society. Minister of Tourism Stas Misezhnikov (Yisrael Beitenu) suggested transferring the resources only to Bedouin, Druze and Circassian communities, thereby adopting a policy of "divide and conquer." The minister's proposal to use loyalty tests as a condition for allocating state resources to its citizens is very dangerous, since it conveys a message to the Arab citizens that they do not deserve equal treatment, and that the state is working to cause deterioration in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

As opposed to the view of Yisrael Beitenu, a comprehensive public opinion poll conducted by Sikkuy in recent years indicates that the government has broad public support for investing resources to promote equality between Jews and Arabs: 65 percent of the adult Jewish public supports the promotion of equality, and if that is not sufficient, 40 percent declare their willingness to support a plan to reduce gaps between Jewish and Arab citizens even if the plan harms them personally.

That is an encouraging and hopeful finding, which attests to a widespread internalization among the public of the fact that reducing the gaps between Jews and Arabs is a paramount interest of the State of Israel. But these findings about public support must also be examined in light of the results of another survey published recently, which found that 50 percent of Jewish youth are opposed to equal rights for Arabs. So it turns out that the government now has public support for taking steps to promote equality, but the tendency toward extremism among the youth indicates that the window of opportunity is closing. The government must therefore begin immediately to implement the decision.

But who will guarantee that the plan will be implemented? Past experience demonstrates that when it comes to plans for investing in Arab society, the main obstacle comes during the stage of government implementation. The last comprehensive plan in this area was Ehud Barak's famous NIS 4 billion plan in 2000. An examination by Sikkuy revealed that from the outset only NIS 2 billion represented a genuine addition to the budget, and in the final analysis only NIS 740 million of these additional funds were actually allocated, about 40 percent of the original plan.

Is the government now creating a mechanism for implementation and follow-up that will guarantee that the new plan will be implemented in full? Who will promise the public that we will not reach a situation of incomplete implementation that will cause the entire plan to fail and cause disappointment among the Arabs? Israeli society can ill afford another Arab disappointment with the government.

Even if the plan is carried out in full, we face another danger, which is that the plan will be a fig leaf for a continuation of the overall policy of discrimination, since it provides assistance to only 12 communities, only a quarter of the Arab citizens and only some areas of life and policy.

What about the pervasive discrimination? For years the government built almost all the industrial zones and infrastructure in Jewish local and regional councils. As a result, only 1.5 percent of industrial areas and infrastructure in Israel are located in Arab communities, which is the reason for the poverty and weakness of the Arab local authorities.

In the area of social welfare, the average public expenditure on social welfare per resident in the Jewish local authorities is 50 percent higher than in the Arab local authorities. In the area of housing – the number of publicly initiated building starts in the Jewish local authorities is 13 times as high as in the Arab authorities. In almost every area there is an ongoing policy of discrimination.

So that the true challenge facing the Israeli government is not to create special programs for taking care of Arab society, but to ensure that all the country's resources – in education, social welfare, infrastructure, the economy – are divided in an egalitarian manner, without being conditional on fulfilling obligations, whether real or imaginary.

This calls for a dramatic change in outlook and in policy, which is of greater budgetary significance than this plan. But the time has come, and there is public support for adopting this step. But time is running out. Fast.

Civil society organizations will monitor implementation of the new program and demand that the government report on progress to the public. We will not rest or remain silent until we can live in a country that treats all its citizens equally.

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