

Conferences, meetings and long-range plans: not everyone is giving up on the shared future

In times of growing tension between Jews and Arabs in Israel, northern regional councils, organizations and rank-and-file citizens have decided that there's no choice but to talk about everything, including politics

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At a time of rising tensions between Jews and Arabs in Israel, in the north they are trying to remain optimistic. Several initiatives and meetings that took place recently conducted level-headed discussions of problems created by living together in Israel, and ways to continue to cooperate.

Last Tuesday morning a Nazareth hotel was the venue for a conference sponsored by Sikkuy – the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality. The conference was called: "Regional cooperation between Jewish and Arab local councils: opportunities and challenges." Participants included heads of local authorities from all over the country, intellectuals and social activists, who held lengthy discussions about cooperation among local councils in order to advance society as a whole.

The conference was planned a while ago, before the deterioration of relations between Jews and Arabs, but its organizers admit that due to the new situation the political nature of the conference was expanded and its contents were adapted to the situation on the ground. In his speech at the conference, playwright and author Yehoshua Sobol said that the time has come to write an Israeli convention that will reflect what Israeli citizens have in common, regardless of religion, ethnic origin and belief. Sobol spoke of the need to replace the government, comparing the situation today in Israel to France in the 1930s.

"We must create a popular front to stop this fascism," he said. "The front should be based on the votes of the Arabs, the left and even the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) – who are a deprived population like the residents of the outlying areas. They can all be united around one central accord."



Panel discussion participants including Jabir Asaqla (right), Sikkuy co-executive director

Writer and journalist Oudeh Basharat referred to the proposed nation-state law, claiming that as far as the Arabs are concerned it does not pose a threat at all: "They are asking us to protest and demonstrate against the revocation of equality, which in any case does not exist. As though they'll take away the land that we kept in the attic, the high-tech plants, the Dead Sea Works that we own and the Arab cabinet ministers, and dismantle the Arab hegemony over resources, the economy and the government."

Basharat added that the country has always been hostile to its Arab citizens, with the exception of a short period during the premiership of the late Yitzhak Rabin. "Today the face of the extremist, racist and ugly right is being exposed. We must turn to our partners in the government and call on them to stop dancing with this wolf."

Jabir Asaqla, Sikkuy's co-executive director, admitted that holding the conference at the time that was chosen is "swimming against the tide," adding that in his opinion the conference was crucial. "I think that in order to overcome the difficult political situation, but also in order to meet the needs of our region and the regions where we work, there's a need for such meetings and conferences, and cooperation between a sane leadership, both Jewish and Arab. That could take us to a safe alternative place, to places where the extremists, especially the racists, and I'll say it – those sitting in the government – want to take us, unfortunately."

Asaqla said that there's nothing wrong with talking politics. "I have always thought, and will continue to think, that the discourse is political. Distribution of resources is political, unfortunately, government decisions from beginning to end are political, and that's why I don't separate activity in the field – ours or that of any other organization – from politics. Politics activates both the decision makers and the public."

The head of the Emek Yizrael Regional Council, Eyal Betzer, declared during a panel of local council heads that he held the conference because he is opposed to the expression "coexistence." Instead, he said, "we have to talk about living together." At the end of the conference he said that he hadn't planned to attend due to previous commitments, but that it was because of the timing that he decided to change his plans.

"Today there's a vocal minority that's causing the deterioration in relations between Jews and Arabs. The voice of the majority is not being heard. This was an opportunity for the silent majority to make its voice heard, including the heads of the Jewish and Arab local councils who want cooperation, complete fulfillment and continued cooperation. That was very important at this time."

Dr. Yasser Omar, head of the Al Batuf Regional Council north of Tiberias, which is suffering from serious financial problems and whose population is in category 1 out of 10 in the socioeconomic ranking (the lowest ranking), sounded less optimistic than his colleagues. He expressed great frustration and said that it's impossible to discuss coexistence when the cabinet is discussing the nation-state law, and that he doesn't think that the conference will change anything.

"Unfortunately, everything here is fine and dandy until the first lunatic arrives and stops the process. I'm disappointed at the declarations by the government leaders themselves. I'm talking about regional council heads and cabinet ministers, but also about the Arab leaders who represent us in the Knesset."

In addition to conferences, local councils in the north are trying to initiate cooperation among themselves. On Sunday the head of the Maale Iron Regional Council, Mustafa Agabria, and the head of the Megiddo Regional Council, Itzik Holbeski, signed a cooperative agreement between their communities. The initiative is part of a program for cooperation between communities being administered by Givat Haviva in other locales in the country.

"Regretfully, in our situation the timing is always in a certain context," says Holbeski. "We're always in the midst of an outbreak of tensions with our Palestinian or Arab neighbors." He believes that cooperation with Arab local councils is also very important in terms of values, in light of the expressions of

racism. As an example he cites the anti-Arab song publicized by popular singer Amir Benayoun and the behavior of fans of the Bnei Yehuda soccer team (who shouted "Death to Arabs" and other racist slurs at the Bnei Lod team), as well as "phenomena we experienced last summer, during Operation Protective Edge, after the kidnapping of the boys in Gush Etzion. It's important for us to be in the forefront of an attempt to live together."

The planning adviser for the cooperation project, Prof. Ghassem Khamaisi, is mapping the interests and needs in the two local councils – Maale Iron and Megiddo. The mapping began in late November and will continue until the end of January, when the results will be presented. In the field of education there is already cooperation between the two local councils, and Holbeski says that this will lead to cooperation in other areas such as environmental quality and sports. One of the ideas raised is the construction of a joint soccer stadium near Kibbutz Givat Oz. The Givat Haviva projects for Jews and Arabs are already being implemented successfully in several local councils, including Menashe and Baka al Garbiyeh, Pardes Hannah-Karkur and Kafr Kara.

Nor has Haifa abandoned attempts at cooperation. On Tuesday there was a Jewish-Arab conference in the city, entitled "Yes to cooperation and full equality." It was initiated by a group of Jewish and Arab activists who began organizing in the summer, in response to the consequences of the fighting in Gaza. "We decided to hold the conference in the Haifa municipality conference room in order to say that the leadership, including the municipal leadership, must take responsibility for opposition to racism of all kinds," says Uri Waltman, a social activist who is one of the initiators of the conference.

Speaking at the conference were people who stand at the crossroads of the encounter between Jews and Arabs in the city. Asaf Ron, the director of Beit Hagefen, a Jewish-Arab cultural center that belongs to the municipality, spoke about the fact that even Haifa, which has a tradition of coexistence, is not immune to the events taking place all over the country.

Nasreen Murkus, director of the community center in the Halisa neighborhood, spoke about the difficulties of the Arab and mixed neighborhoods. The headmaster and CEO of the Hebrew Reali School, Yosi Ben Dov, spoke of his school's commitment to bringing students to meet with Arab elected officials. Attorney Nidal Othman, director of the Coalition Against Racism in Israel, turned to Ben Dov at the conference and asked why there are no regular encounters between Jewish and Arab students as well. The two exchanged particulars in order to organize meetings in the future.

Not only groups and municipalities, but ordinary citizens too have decided to take the initiative. Yaakov Yonish, a member of Kibbutz Beit Hashita, who along with his friends saw already in the summer where the wind was blowing,

decided to start a new social movement called Marching Together for a Shared Future. "The initiative began before all hell broke loose. We felt that things weren't going in healthy directions," says Yonish.

The movement he started includes hundreds of residents of the region. He emphasizes that "We operate in a spirit of moderation, we don't cater to extremists from the right or the left. Almost every day we attend 'parlor meetings' – once in a Jewish community, once in an Arab one. When we go for a meeting in an Arab community at least seven Jews come, and vice versa. Two weeks ago we issued a work plan written during a meeting on Kibbutz Hazorea. The plan went back to people for comments, and about 10 days ago it was issued officially."

The movement's work plan relates to various fields of endeavor. In addition to holding parlor meetings, there is a plan for an exchange of civics teachers between Jewish and Arab schools, meetings of business owners, meetings of artists and of teenagers. In the chapter about the movement's vision, which is on hold until a later stage, there are also plans for building a bilingual school in the north and increasing national service slots for the Arab sector. The movement is planning a big meeting in the Afula cultural center in January, to sum up half a year of activity.