

Social Justice Starts with the Arab Population

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By Dr. Sami Miaari

Israel's state budget is an expression of the way in which the government sets goals, policy and vision. It is actually the government's way of intervening in the economy and defining general fiscal policy. The 2016 state budget, which passed its first reading earlier this month, is NIS 343.5 billion. This is NIS 24 billion more than the last budget that was approved for 2014. This increase is made possible, among other things, by a calculated risk that the government is taking by increasing the national debt from a target of 2.5 percent in 2014 to one of 2.9 percent in 2016.

Fiscally, the budget is a balanced one: A deficit of 2.9 percent is not egregious or extreme. It should not affect Israel's rating in the various international indices. Still, the question arises as to whether the increases in the deficit, and in the total amount of the budget, will bring about change and social rectification.

In Israel, the rate of budget expenditures from the gross domestic product is approximately 40 percent, one of the lowest among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. This statistic reflects the lack of investment in underprivileged citizens.

The budget put forth by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon contains no concrete or comprehensive reference to the hardship suffered by Israel's most underprivileged population — its Arab minority. The advancement of that minority — which comprises more than 20 percent of Israel's population and has suffered discrimination for many years — is a key to reducing disparities.

There are no concrete proposals for solving the housing problem in Arab society or expanding the amount of territory under the jurisdiction of the Arab councils. There are no plans for the construction and development of advanced industrial and employment zones, programs to integrate Arab women into the job market, or even improving the educational infrastructure, teacher conditions or enrichment for children and youth. It does not even mention surplus or pinpoint budgeting for assisting the Arab municipal authorities, some of which are on the brink of collapse. This list could go on.

According to statistics from the Mossawa Center, the specific line for affirmative action for Israel's Arab citizens amounts to a few hundred million shekels of the total state budget. This is a drop in the ocean of hardships in which the Arab minority will continue to swim. Kahlon and other members of the government have to realize the most effective way to integrate Arab citizens is not through mandatory enlistment in the army or conditional citizenship based on participation in Israeli life, but by narrowing gaps and improving the socioeconomic situation of the Arab population.

When the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin decided to place the Arab minority at the center of his priorities, he succeeded in lowering the poverty rate within several years and blazed a path to the hearts of hundreds of thousands of citizens who had felt severely alienated from the state until that time. This policy, which was cut short 20 years ago by three bullets fired from a gun, also cut short a positive process of advancement of the Arab population, which could have brought the Arabs closer to the state. Although Rabin did not aspire to turn the Arabs into Zionists, he realized that economic advancement would lead to productivity for the country and would also have a moderating effect on other national security issues, even before dealing with basic social justice.

So if Kahlon wants to be a bearer of good news, wants to increase tax revenue, increase the gross

domestic product and make hundreds of thousands of Israel's Arab citizens feel they are citizens with equal rights, he must demand that the various government ministries set aside larger amounts of money to invest in the Arab sector. And he must require these ministries promote reforms for the good of the Arab citizens as a condition of receiving the budget allocations that were passed and assigned.

This measure will be worthwhile for the country in the long term — economically and in terms of security. Just as important, it will also lead to true social justice, a social justice that exists in reality rather than in slogans.

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