



Published on *The Jewish Week* (<http://www.thejewishweek.com>)

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Israel's Legitimacy: A Prophetic Strategy

Tuesday, February 1, 2011

Sid Schwarz

Special To The Jewish Week

Even as many sectors of the American Jewish community struggle to return to pre-crash contribution levels, the Israel advocacy sector is booming once again. With challenges to Israel's legitimacy coming from both outside and inside the Jewish community, significant new resources are flowing to those organizations that are seen as defending Israel from its detractors.

But more effective than all of the defense and advocacy strategies would be an effort to strengthen the fabric of Israel's democracy. The threats abound.

A Knesset bill being considered would sanction Israeli NGO's critical of government policies, another would require loyalty oaths of Israeli citizens, and a third would make it legal to exclude individuals from settlements if their political views were not approved by the existing residents.

The recent letter endorsed by some 30 Israeli haredi rabbis that prohibits selling or renting property to non-Jews distorted halachic norms and was every bit as intolerant as what might be expected of Taliban clerics.

Recent polls by the Israel Democracy Institute indicate that about half of Israeli Jews would oppose extending full civic equality to Arab citizens if it threatened the Jewish character of the state of Israel.

Supporters of Israel are quick to point out that the country's Declaration of Independence calls for a state that is both Jewish and democratic. It would be naïve, however, not to recognize how hard it is to satisfy both standards given the facts on the ground. A government-appointed Or Commission studied the riots in Nazareth in 2000 that resulted in the deaths of 13 Arab citizens of Israel. It documented how decades of discrimination had created massive social inequity between Arab and Jewish citizens in the state of Israel.

Virtually every country in the world is challenged to advance social equality. Israel is hardly alone in having a minority that does not believe it receives fair and equal treatment by its government. In Israel the phenomenon is more complex because Arab citizens have ethnic, religious and family ties to people who live in jurisdictions that are in conflict with the state of Israel. The loyalty question is far more complicated than anything the U.S. ever had to grapple with in regard to its minorities.

None of this is to excuse or defend Israel for not doing enough to support its Arab citizens in the areas of employment, health care, housing and education. But it does help us understand the difficulty of the issue and the resistance of many Israelis to advocate for public policies that would bring about greater equality for Israel's Arab citizens.

It makes it all the more remarkable that Israel's government has made ending discrimination against Israeli Arabs one of its highest domestic priorities. Avishai Braverman, former president of Ben Gurion University, took on the cabinet post of minister for minority affairs to advance this agenda. Recently, the Netanyahu government committed 800 million shekels (\$200 million) to invest in a handful of Arab towns to stimulate greater economic activity.

While commendable, the government of Israel will need to do much more to make Arab Israelis believe that the country sees them as full citizens. That includes a willingness of Netanyahu to stand up to anti-democratic statements and actions, whether they originate from his cabinet, from settlers or from the IDF. To his credit, he did quickly condemn the outrageous rabbinic letter forbidding the sale or rental of property to non-Jews. Some forward-thinking Israelis understand that progress on this front could create an economic boom for 20 percent of the population that currently only represents 1.5 percent of the country's GDP. In addition, such efforts could create an environment that will make peaceful coexistence with neighboring Arab countries more likely.

It is heartening to note that in 2006 an [Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arabs](#) was created; it was made up of over 90 organizations, including most of the leading organizations of American Jewish life. The IATF has professional staff on the ground both in New York and in Israel and a close working relationship with the Israeli government and civil society there. I now co-chair the first local affiliate of that Task Force in Washington, D.C. We recently hosted a Community Education Day on Israeli Arabs, co-sponsored by a wide cross-section of Jewish organizations, including the Israeli Embassy. The program was not only standing-room-only but it attracted many younger Jews who have often found the communal dialogue on Israel overly circumscribed, if not censored.

American Jews would do well to give this issue more attention. We are a community that rallies quickly and aggressively to external threats to Israel's survival. We are far less attentive to internal issues that would enhance Israel's role as a center for Jewish spiritual unity. This was the vision of many early Zionists and it is a vision that we have lost sight of, to our communal detriment.

There is no more effective response to the challenges to Israel's legitimacy than to help her become more fully Jewish and more fully democratic. It may well be that the expressions of justice and peace of the biblical prophets is also the most effective political strategy available to defend the state of Israel.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a senior fellow at Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. He is the founder of the PANIM Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values and the author of "Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World."