



## Op-Ed: Why Jews should care about the rights of Israeli Arabs

**By Rabbi Sid Schwarz - January 13, 2012**

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- About a year and half ago, I participated in a fact-finding mission to Israel sponsored by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arabs (IATF). Established in 2006 as a consortium of some of the major organizations in American Jewish life -- including the Joint Distribution Committee, the Conference of Presidents, Jewish Federations of North America, the ADL and the American Jewish Committee -- the IATF is committed to raising awareness of the circumstances of the 20 percent of Israel's citizens who are Arab.

The issue was not new to me. A large part of my rabbinate has been devoted to advancing human and civil rights at home and abroad. Because I love Israel deeply, I was long concerned that issues of human and civil rights were raised only by progressive organizations, both in Israel and abroad. It was long overdue for the Jewish communal establishment to understand why the rights of Israeli Arabs should be a priority for anyone concerned with Israel's future.

Upon my return from the mission we established the first local affiliate of the IATF in the country in Washington, D.C. The Greater Washington Forum on Israeli Arab Issues (GWFA) was dedicated to educating the local Jewish community about Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, including the economic, educational and social challenges faced by Israel's Arab citizens.

The test of any democracy is how it treats its minorities. It is all the more challenging in Israel because it was founded as a Jewish state. However, there have always been non-Jewish citizens living in Israel and the country's Declaration of Independence guarantees them full equality.

Arabs today make up 20 percent of Israel's population yet they represent only 1 percent of the gross domestic product. There are vast inequalities between Jews and Arabs in Israel in terms of the schools they attend, the municipal services they receive and the employment opportunities available to them. Israel's own government admits that they have a long way to go to create true parity for Israeli Arabs.

It is worth noting that in forming the GWFA, we were committed to having the representation of the full range of our Jewish community. Our steering committee now includes the Israeli Embassy, the Washington Jewish Federation and the Jewish Community Relations Council. At our first Community Education Day last January, 300 people showed up for a four-hour program on a Sunday afternoon.

We succeeded in drawing many younger Jews who are thirsty for a conversation about Israel that is rigorous and honest but who, for the most part, have absented themselves from the Israel conversation sponsored by Jewish communal groups. Even more importantly, we were able to attract to our event both those who would identify with the political right as well as with the political left. Nonetheless, the conversation at our event last year was both civil and respectful.

I am well aware that there are those in the community who would deem this effort to be misguided. They will offer a list of reasons why Israel is still a country at risk. They are not wrong about that sad reality, but their disdain for efforts that might help Israeli Arabs enjoy full equality is shortsighted.

There are dangerous trends in Israel today that threaten the country's democratic character. Racist attitudes are on the rise and the Knesset is now considering several pieces of legislation that are overtly discriminatory. It is clear that Israel is not immune from the religious extremism that has poisoned Islam in recent years.

Jews who care about Israel should pay as much heed to the Jewish state's democratic character as they do about its security. This position was eloquently framed at last year's program by Noam Katz, the Israeli Embassy's minister for public diplomacy.

He said: "The Israeli-Arab and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts are full of bitterness, bad blood and mistrust. The self identity of Arabs in Israel is strongly linked and connected to the Arab nation and the Palestinian people. It makes the effort more difficult. However, it doesn't exempt us, as a nation, as society and as a government, from trying to make it work ... These relations are a test of our national vision and morals, and a vital issue to the survival of Israel as a Jewish state and democratic society."

Democracy is not a right/left issue. At the core of democracy is a respect for the infinite value of every human being, a central premise of the Jewish teaching that every person is made b'tzelem elohim, "in the image of God."

In its brief history, Israel can boast many great achievements. If Israel could successfully meet the aspirations of its Declaration of Independence and accord its Arab minority the same opportunities and rights enjoyed by its Jewish citizens, it will have accomplished something that few other countries in the world have done -- and under the most challenging of circumstances.

This is a cause worth rallying around.

*(Rabbi Sid Schwarz is the founder of the PANIM Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values and the co-chair of the Greater Washington Forum on Israeli Arab Issues. He is the author of "Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World.")*