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Charitable fund strives to heal Israeli societal rifts

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Thanks to Jeffrey Stutz, an independent public policy adviser in Toronto, it's now possible for Canadian donors to contribute via UJA Federation of Greater Toronto to the Jewish Federations of North America's (JFNA) Social Venture Fund for Jewish-Arab Equality and Shared Society.

Initially, the fund, which was established in December 2007 with endowments of \$50,000 each from the JFNA (formerly known as the United Jewish Communities) and 21 private philanthropies, was meant not for small private donors such as Stutz, but for major donors and foundations.

But Stutz, who heard about the fund on a trip to Israel this past October, thought everyone should be able to give to the cause.

The JFNA intended it to be the first of several such funds, based on the idea of bringing together major donors with similar philanthropic interests, along with existing organizations operating in the field, to strategize together, combine resources and ultimately have a greater impact than each would have operating alone. But because of the global economic crisis, the Jewish-Arab Equality and Shared Society fund has been the only one that got off the ground.

In its first year, donors – among them the sole Canadian contributor, the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies (ACBP) – pooled together more than \$1 million (US) to dedicate to the economic and educational welfare of Israel's minority Arab, Bedouin and Druze populations.

"This particular group of philanthropists looks at Israel and sees inequality in the distribution of resources between Arab and Jewish Israeli populaces. They see that Arab Israelis experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment than their Jewish neighbours, and they see a need for change in Israeli society," said Gail Zucker, the fund's director.

"They believe that providing equal opportunities to these populations and creating a shared society is not only the right thing to do for the sake of social justice and democracy, but that it will serve the state by bolstering the economy and fostering loyalty, and this will ultimately contribute to Israel's safety and security."

Jason Soloway, vice-president of the ACBP, said: "Whether your interest is political, economic, security, or civil rights, improving conditions for Israel's Arab citizens is part of the solution.

"For me, it's a moral issue. It's just the right thing to do."

A first for the JFNA, both in terms of policy area and format, the fund has raised some difficult questions: should North American Jewish financial support go to Israeli Arabs rather than Israeli Jews? How true is the fund's underlying assumption that the state is at fault for current socio-economic realities? Is the fund's promotion of "affirmative action" ethical? Will it actually increase Israeli Arabs' loyalty to Israel? Is this a political move on the part of the JFNA to fight negative notions of Israel in North America, or does the fund, the product of the most mainstream North American Jewish group, represent a shift to a more critical tone in the relationship between the North American Diaspora and Israel?

The fund's contributors – who are currently setting allocations for this year, totalling \$800,000 – see its emergence as a sign their once-marginal cause is moving toward the centre.

They say this shift started in 2003, after Israeli Supreme Court Justice Theodore Orr released his commission's report on the October 2000 Arab riots, which criticized the police for using excessive force against the rioters.

A second factor was the rebuilding of the north after the Second Lebanon War in 2006, when the JFNA ran an emergency campaign to help children in Israel's geographic periphery, many of them Arab.

While the JFNA has helped members of the Israeli Arab community before, until the venture fund, it has never advocated for their equality in such a politically charged way.

"I think it's a sign of the growing recognition of American Jews of the importance of addressing the needs of all of Israeli society. It's a significant statement and a sign of a growing trend," said Jessica Balaban, executive director of the Joint Distribution Committee's (JDC) inter-agency task force on Arab Israeli Issues, which is advising the new fund.

"For many years, there has been a small band of dedicated philanthropists and NGOs that have been working in the Arab Israeli arena, but the issue was on the margins of the American philanthropic agenda," Soloway said.

"The fact that this new fund is coming out of the JFNA gives it a 'communal hechsher.' It's an important and powerful symbol of progress."

But Malcom Dash, associate director of public affairs at the Institute of Zionist Strategies in Jerusalem, attributes the shift not to a genuine change in the perspective, but rather to a desire to be politically correct.

"This 'political correctness' has been in the making for some time – think Goldstone, settlements freeze, and Gilo," he said. "I view this trend with much gravity and see the North American Jews as parting company from Israel. This drift is very negative for the solidarity of the Jewish People."

In contrast, Gerald Steinberg – a Bar-Ilan University professor, CJA columnist and president of NGO Monitor, a watchdog group that promotes accountability for human rights NGOs in the Arab-Israeli conflict – suggests the fund was inspired less by a desire to appear politically correct to the general public and more by a desire to bring younger, left-leaning members of the Jewish Diaspora into the fold.

"While there is a peripheral trend of this sort [of political correctness] – we see it in the emergence of organizations like JStreet and the New Israel Fund – the JFNA is not part of this," he said. "The federation system doesn't want to alienate this segment of Diaspora Jewry from the establishment. I hand it to the [JFNA] for not writing them off and for creating something to bring them in."

Steinberg said the thinking behind the fund is brilliant, because its potential donors would give to such causes anyway, and it's better to keep them "inside the family" and giving to an organization that has a JDC, Jewish Agency and Israeli government seal of approval and are subject to the JFNA's high standards of due diligence than push them toward more radical groups.

"You have Israelis with more radical agendas that take the money and give it to more radical organizations on the ground, and people in the U.S. don't necessarily realize what they're contributing to," Steinberg said. "[JFNA] has the potential to be much more careful in funding specific programs that will limit this kind of political impact."

Indeed, Zucker said that all 15 organizations that have received financing from the fund so far were subject to extensive due diligence.

Others have criticized the fund for promoting affirmative action, which they see as a form of reverse discrimination.

Howard English, vice-president of strategic communications at UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, said that people can donate to the fund through his organization, but the federation will neither allocate money nor solicit contributions to it: "We have made a strategic decision to focus on strengthening peripheral communities [in Israel]. We do not support any programs that are exclusively for Arab Israelis."

Others say the fund blames Israel for the economic and social conditions of Israeli Arabs – which is also controversial.

In a recent article in the Jerusalem Report titled "Jews for a Just Society," the chair of the new fund, Carol Smokler, said that in 2007, 51 per cent of Arab families and 62 per cent of Arab children were living under the poverty line, compared with 15 per cent of Jewish families and 24 per cent of Jewish children. She also noted that only 22 per cent of Arab women were in the labour force, compared to 76 per cent of Jewish women.

But to blame this situation completely on Israel is unfair, Dash said. "Like the haredim, whose men spend

their days studying in yeshiva and consequently do not earn an income, Arab culture discourages its women from seeking outside employment and this, too, contributes to their lower income status.”

Another assumption, critics charge, is that improving the condition of Arab Israelis will deepen their loyalty to the state, noting that Israeli Arab Knesset members often speak out in loyalty not to Israel, but to the Palestinians.

Dan Diker, senior foreign policy analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, said that although Israeli Arab leaders are often hostile to the state, the actual population is loyal, by and large.

The competition for Israeli Arabs’ loyalty is pretty stiff, with Israel up against strong Islamic influences and a Palestinian Authority that has launched what Diker calls a “discreet diplomatic jihad,” which accuses Israel of apartheid, occupation and war crimes.

“[Israeli Arabs] are being incited daily by Al Jazeera and Palestinian media to break away and join this narrative against Israel,” he said. “The Arab Israeli public can be made to be loyal to the state and we can enhance loyalty and good citizenship by investing in them and in making Israel an honourable place for Arab Israelis to live and work.”

Dash is less optimistic. “I’m all for economic improvement in the Arab sector, but I firmly believe that this will not affect their ideology,” he said, pointing to what happened after Israel’s Gaza pullout in 2005.

“When Israel withdrew... the Palestinians were faced with a number of choices. They could have taken the many hundreds of millions of dollars that the European community was prepared to advance to them and turn the strip into a Singapore of the Middle East. Instead, they turned Gaza into a military camp with the sole aim of destroying Israel – this at great economic sacrifice to the Gazans, who had overwhelmingly voted for and supported the Hamas regime... For the Palestinians, ideology trumps economic advancement.

“Until there is a final settlement between Israel and the West Bank Palestinians, it is most unlikely that Arab Israeli loyalty to Israel will be obtained,” he said.

In her Jerusalem Report article, Smokler, whose family foundation is among the fund’s founding 21, raised another point of dissension against the fund: “Sometimes North American Jews question our work saying that ‘Arab Israelis live better than Arabs in the rest of the Arab world.’”

But she said this comparison is irrelevant, because “Arab Israelis are entitled to the same benefits and opportunities as Jewish Israelis.”

Soloway, who said the ACBP intends to begin introducing other Canadian philanthropists to the new fund, believes Smokler’s social justice argument will resonate with Canadians.

“I am optimistic about engaging Canadian Jewish philanthropy, because I believe Canada is a society with a deep understanding of multiculturalism and equality.”

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