

# Jewish support for Israeli-Arab cause goes mainstream, irking some

By Gil Shefler

NEW YORK (JTA) — When the Reform movement passed a resolution endorsing advocacy for Israeli Arabs, it wasn't the first time an American Jewish group had backed the cause of Israeli-Arab equality.

In recent years, a growing number of American Jews have thrown their support toward Israeli-Arab causes, including civil rights and advocacy organizations, women's empowerment courses, student-exchange programs and even film festivals.

More than 80 Jewish groups belong to the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli-Arab Issues, which works on behalf of equal treatment of Israeli Arabs and Jews.

The Jewish federations' Venture Fund for Jewish and Arab Equality and Shared Society, a mix of 21 private family foundations, federations and philanthropists, has raised more than \$1 million for Israeli-Arab causes since its launch in 2007. And in 2006, the Jewish Agency for Israel announced it would invest in projects

benefiting Israeli Arabs, scrapping a policy, in place since its founding in 1922, of exclusively helping Jewish causes.

Last week's unanimous endorsement of the cause by American Jewry's largest religious movement, at the biennial conference in Toronto of the Union for Reform Judaism, was the latest sign that Jewish support for Israeli-Arab causes has gone mainstream.

"There's no doubt that more money has been given to this issue than ever before. It's become a mainstream issue," said



A controversial poster depicting an Israeli soldier touching a Palestinian woman with a caption stating "Her husband needs a permit to touch her," was created by an Israeli-Arab group that receives funding from Diaspora Jews.

Rabbi Brian Lurie, co-chair of the Inter-Agency Task Force, a former CEO of the Jewish federation of San Francisco and one of the key Jewish activists raising money in the Diaspora for Israeli Arabs. "Whether your mind-set is equality, whether it's the security of Israel, whether it's building bridges, all three reasons are involved and these are compelling reasons."

Arab citizens constitute approximately 20 percent of Israel's population of 7 million. Though they have the same rights

accorded Israel's Jewish citizens, studies have shown that Israeli Arabs routinely suffer from employment discrimination and receive fewer government funds than Israel's Jewish sector in such areas as education, infrastructure and welfare.

In 2006, an Israeli government committee set up to investigate riots in October 2000, in which Israeli police fire left 12 Arab protesters dead, determined that Israel long had neglected its Arab citizens. The Or Commission finding helped pave the way for mainstream Jewish groups to support a cause long championed by organizations such as the New Israel Fund and the Abraham Project.

Not everyone is happy about it.

Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, says American Jews should not be sending funds to an Israeli community that is disloyal toward Israel. He cited visits by Israeli-Arab lawmakers to enemy states such as Syria by way of example.

"I think it's a mistake to be raising money for Israeli Arabs, at least until they show their support for Israel and its rights," Klein said. "There's been an inverse relationship between the monies being allocated to the Israeli-Arab communities and their loyalties and commitment to Israel."

The New Israel Fund, for example, has come under fire for its support of Israeli-Arab advocacy groups that take controversial positions, including calls for eliminating Israel's Jewish character. Just last week, three NIF-funded Arab Israeli

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