

2021 State Budget Workshop





On Thursday, August 26, the Mossawa Center, in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, hosted a workshop to clearly define the Palestinian Arab community's needs from the upcoming State Budget and develop a workplan for the next several weeks in order to effectively advocate for these needs in the Knesset. The workshop was attended by over 70 individuals including Knesset Members, ministry representatives, mayors, NGO representatives, and more.

Suha Salman Mousa, Mossawa Center Executive Director, and Judith Stelmach opened the workshop, with Stelmach emphasizing that "the purpose of this workshop is to improve our work in the public sphere and in the government."



Mossawa Center General Director and founder Jafar Farah opened the discussion by giving an overview of the 2021 and 2021 State Budgets, as well as the upcoming Five-Year-Plan and outlined the Mossawa Center's position regarding the State Budget. Farah pointed to



the fact that of the 15 billion shekels (\$4.64b) allocated for Government Resolution 922 - a 5-year government plan passed in 2015 aimed at investing in the Palestinian Arab community in Israel - only about 9 billion shekels (\$2.78b) were in fact spent. Farah highlighted the Mossawa Center's demand that 9.4 billion shekels (\$2.91b) ought to be allocated for the Palestinian Arab community from the 2022 State Budget.

Additionally, Farah spoke of the extreme gaps in healthcare between the Palestinian Arab community and the Jewish community in Israel, noting that the average life of expectancy of a Palestinian Arab male - the lowest in the country - is a whopping 8 years shorter than that of a Jewish female - the highest in the country.

First Session - Lessons Learned from the 2016-2021 Government Budgets

The first session of the workshop addressed the lessons learned from the 2016-2021 State Budgets. It was opened by Fouad Awd, Head of the Mazra'a Local Council and member of the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Authorities, who called on the participants in the workshop to work together, stressing the need for a "unified force in order to effectively advocate for the needs of our Palestinian Arab community."

When referring to his experiences as a council member, Awd explained that "budgets should be distributed according to the needs of the Palestinian Arab community and not according to the plans formulated by the ministries," adding, "there is clear discrimination and deep racism within the Interior Ministry - which is meant to act like a 'safety net' for localities in Israel - against Palestinian Arab localities."

Omar Waked Nassar, Mayor of Arraba, illustrated the issue of budgets being distributed according to government plans instead of the needs of the Palestinian Arab community. "We run projects worth 100 million shekels [\$30.94m] to build schools, but the government



refuses to give us the budget for non-formal education courses, which leads to only 40% of the course budget going to children,” he said.

Salima Sliman, Head of the Local Authority Division at the Ministry of Social Equality, said that “one of the weaknesses of Government Resolution 922 is that there were no clear indicators and key metrics set in place in order to track the progress and spending of the plan. There was no clear goal of where we want to see the



Palestinian Arab society in five years. The mechanisms and bureaucracy did not allow the Ministry of Housing to utilize the budget intended for Palestinian Arab society effectively.”

Sliman asserted that clear indicators regarding industrial development, education, and healthcare must be tracked. “Simply spending money with no clear goal or vision in mind will not bring about meaningful change or impact to the Palestinian Arab community,” she said.

Yossi Haddad, Head of Special Population Groups at the Ministry of Construction and Housing, echoed Sliman’s criticism of the dense bureaucracy in the Israeli government which aims to suppress development in the Palestinian Arab community.

“In recent years, we have made advancements in planning and public buildings but there are bureaucratic obstacles that delay the spending of budgets. In the Negev, we are dealing with responsibilities and powers being distributed across different government offices. As a result, of the 95 million shekels [\$29.40m] allocated, only 25 million shekels [\$7.74m] were in fact spent,” he said.



Raghad Jaraisy, Co-Director at Sikkuy, also added that the Transportation Ministry is not qualified enough to address the needs of the Palestinian Arab community. “It is difficult to formulate solutions and gather appropriate information and data regarding the situation on the ground to fill the gaps in the community,” she said.



Moria Schlusel, from the Accountant General’s Division at the Ministry of Finance, noted that the Accountant General was not involved in formulating the budgets earmarked for Palestinian Arab society. “The Accountant General’s Division has appointed a team to address the gaps and barriers when it comes to budgeting for Palestinian Arab society,” she said, adding, “we will streamline the issue of votes and support. In cases where funds go unused, we will be happy to streamline the process. We will create a uniform support mechanism, we know there is a lack of support for Palestinian Arab associations by the government.”



Mossi Raz, Knesset Member from Meretz, affirmed that “we need to make sure that 100% of the budgets allocated to the Palestinian Arab community are used. The defense budget always exceeds 100% utilization compared to the underutilization of social welfare budgets, especially for the Palestinian Arab public.” He also added that there should be a division of ministries among Knesset Members in order to effectively monitor the State Budget, especially in terms of long-term programs such as infrastructure projects.



Sami Abu Shehadeh, Knesset Member from the Joint List, closed the first session by mentioning the importance of empowering Palestinian Arab civil society in Israel, saying, “we need to strengthen Palestinian Arab civil society and research institutions as they provide critical tools and help for us in terms of long-term planning and development



strategy in our community.”

Abu Shehadeh also asserted that “our struggle with the Israeli government is not merely over budgets. To describe it as such is incorrect. It is a political struggle. There are policies and plans adopted by the government that deliberately ignore and marginalize the Palestinian Arab community. When we advocate for budgets, it must be done through a political lens and framework.”

Second Session - The Needs of the Palestinian Arab Community from the 2021-2022 State Budget and Government Plans

The second session in the workshop was led by journalist Mohammad Majadli and was an in-depth discussion on the needs of the Palestinian Arab community from the upcoming State Budgets in various fields ranging from healthcare to culture and sports.

Sondos Saleh, Director of the 5-Year-Plan at the Ministry of Education and former Knesset Member with the Joint List, opened the discussion by explaining that the COVID-19 pandemic has “set back the Palestinian Arab student a year and half compared to their Jewish counterpart as at least two-thirds of Palestinian Arab students struggled to study online.” Ashraf Jabbour, General Manager of Al-Ruwad, presented interesting statistics regarding Palestinian Arab university students. He noted that the 52,000 Palestinian Arab university students represent 18% of the total student population in the country. However, Jabbour said that while such numbers are good, “Palestinian Arabs represent 27% of all Israeli citizens aged 18 to 29 - that is the percentage of Palestinian Arab students in universities we should be aiming for.” He also underscored the fact that the Palestinian Arab community still faces a dropout problem in universities that must be addressed.



Bshara Bisharat, Director of the Association for the Advancement of Healthcare in the Arab Society, spoke of the gap in life expectancy and healthcare between the Palestinian Arab and Jewish communities. “The infant mortality rate in the Bedouin communities in the Negev is 6 times higher than Tel Aviv,” he said. Bisharat also added that a plan was approved by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Equality in 2019 to close healthcare gaps in the Palestinian Arab community, however, “we do not know how much will come of it,” he said.

Professor Bisharat also said that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vast gaps and inequalities between the Palestinian Arab and Jewish communities in terms of healthcare, highlighting the fact that the infection rate is twice as high in the Palestinian Arab community compared to the Jewish community while the death rate is 3 times as high.

Dr. Fahid Hakim, Head of the Nazareth Hospital EMMS, echoed Professor Bisharat’s statements by emphasizing the fact that 1 in 5 people in our Palestinian Arab community don’t have access to healthcare because they cannot afford it. Highlighting the poor health of the Palestinian Arab community, Dr. Hakim mentioned that “of the almost 2 million Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, there are only 100,000 above the age of 65. The Finance Minister once told me that the Palestinian Arab community is the best source of income for the country; they pay taxes until their 65 or 70 and then die.”

He also detailed the discrimination Palestinian Arab hospitals face, noting that despite Nazareth Hospital EMMS conducting more dialysis than Rambam Hospital and Rothschild Hospital (two of the largest hospitals in the country) combined annually, it has not received a single shekel of funding from the government.

Finally, Dr. Hakim spoke of the importance of empowering women in Palestinian Arab society. “54% of our staff and doctors at the Nazareth Hospital EMMS are female and the statistics show that when we empower women, the entire community benefits. It is imperative that we empower women in our community,” he said.



Meanwhile, Fakhri Hasan, Head of the Union for Dentists, pointed out the success of Palestinian Arab dentists in Israel despite all the challenges they face. “The world average of dentists per capita stands at 1 dentist per 2,200 people. In our Palestinian Arab community, we have 1 dentists per 600 people. We have an incredible supply of dentists in our community and only keep rising,” he said.

Fathi Abu Younis, Head of the Forum of Welfare Divisions in the Arab Local Authorities, pointed to the fact that about 50% of Palestinian Arab families live below the poverty line. “About 60% of Palestinian Arab children live at or below the poverty line. This will lead to an increase in crime rates as well as further deterioration in terms of health,” he said.



Ofer Cassif, Knesset Member from the Joint List, pivoted to discuss the political aspect of the State Budget. “The central problem facing the Palestinian Arab community is that the discourse surrounding the State Budget is treated as if the Israeli government is doing a ‘favor’ for the Palestinian Arab community, rather than it being a right to which Palestinian



Arab citizens of Israel are fully entitled to. This is a social justice issue, not a budgetary one.”

Cassif went on to say, “our struggle with the government over the State Budget should not be transactionary - ‘we will do this if you give us this.’ This is a market relationship. As citizens of the country, Palestinian Arabs are entitled to take full advantage of the budget without making promises to the government - it is their right as citizens of the country and that is what the struggle should focus on.”

Jafar Farah concluded the workshop by saying, “the fight for the State Budget for the next 5 years is from now until October. We must unitedly demand as a Palestinian Arab community in order for the government to take us seriously. We need to activate and mobilize the political parties to start working and pushing for the necessary reforms. We need to push the local councils to get their act together. There needs to be mobilization in the Knesset, in the cities and villages, in the workplace, everywhere in our community.”

The Mossawa Center will work closely with the various actors who attended the workshop, as well as others, in order to closely monitor and advocate for the needs of the Palestinian Arab community from the upcoming State Budget.