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The Advocacy Center for the Arab
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PRESS RELEASE

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Lieberman presses for population transfer of Arab citizens of Israel

Monday May 11 2009 — In an exchange with Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini in Rome on Monday May 4, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman again raised the possibility of transferring the Palestinian Arab minority from Israel to a future Palestinian state. Lieberman cited the "Cypriot model" as an example that may serve as a template for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Mossawa contends that legitimizing population transfer publicly, which is defined as a crime against humanity under Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, will only undermine the status of the Arab community in Israel and will complicate the Middle East conflict.

The "Cypriot model" was the de facto partition of Cyprus in the 1970s, where the Turks were transferred to the north and the Greeks to the south. According to Lieberman, "Since then, there has been security, economic prosperity, and stability." To the contrary, the two key obstacles in Cyprus currently are the right to recover property for citizens forced from their homes, and the right to return.

Following World War I and World War II, population transfer was considered legal. The Allies transferred fifteen million Germans living in the eastern part of Germany, after the region had been granted to Poland. Today, however, population transfer is no longer accepted or legal. After the atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia, the term "ethnic cleansing" is now used to describe the uprooting and displacement of populations, and it is officially identified as a war crime.

In the Middle East, a recent example is the proposed transfer of the citizens of Ghajar Village. On May 3, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his support of Israeli troops withdrawing from the Lebanese portions of Ghajar village, as mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the war. All Ghajar residents, in both the Lebanese and Israeli areas, have Israeli citizenship. The cabinet ministerial committee will vote on the proposed withdrawal next week. Residents will however be able to retain their Israeli citizenship and Israel will remain responsible for the town's public services.

The Mossawa Center calls on the international community to denounce the agenda of ethnic cleansing promoted by the extreme right wing in Israel. Any effort to transfer native and indigenous populations will complicate the Middle East conflict. By contrast, transferring the Jewish population from settlements in the West Bank and Gaza is not illegal as they were founded in breach of International Law and greatly inhibit the peace process. The international community needs to send a clear message to Israeli leaders that they need to abide by international human rights conventions.

Furthermore, the Mossawa Center is concerned about the Interior Minister Eli Yishai's decision to revoke the citizenship of four Arab citizens from northern Israel, who are suspected of having been involved in activities hostile to the state. The decision implies that citizenship of Arabs inside Israel is conditional and subject to review by the state, though Jewish citizens who break the law are not subject to the same process. As Member of the Knesset Ahmad Tibi, of the United Arab List-Ta'al, observed, Yitzhak Rabin's assassin, Yigal Amir, did not have his citizenship revoked nor did Jewish rapists and murderers. Unequivocally, Yishai's decision further undermines the Arab population as equal citizens of Israel.

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The Mossawa Center, the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that works to promote equality for the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel. Established in 1997, the Mossawa Center strives to improve the social, economic and political status of the Arab citizens of Israel, while preserving their national and cultural rights as Palestinians.