

THE FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE FOR ARAB LOCAL GOVERNANCE



The first annual conference for Arab local governance was organized by Injaz Center in collaboration with the National Committee for Heads of Arab Local Councils. It was held on May 10, 2023, at the Ramada Hotel in Nazareth. The conference attracted a diverse and extensive audience, which included prominent individuals such as the Director-General of the Ministry of Interior, the Director-General of the Ministry of Social Equality, and over 55 Arab local authority leaders from Galilee, Triangle, and Negev.

Additionally, senior employees from government ministries such as Interior, Social Equality, Finance, and Education were in attendance, along with senior personnel from Arab local authorities in Galilee, Triangle, and Negev, encompassing 58 accountants, 46 directors-general, several engineers, directors of education departments, youth departments, and resource executives. Moreover, directors and employees from civil society organizations and institutions, representatives from charitable funds, and members of the public (who were part of Arab local authorities) contributed to the overall participation, which exceeded 300 individuals.



Nazareth

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During his speech, Mr. Jaraisy highlighted Injaz Center's strategic vision, which includes establishing professional platforms like the Treasure Forum, Directors-General Forum, and Youth Departments Directors Forum. These initiatives aim to enhance professionalism in monitoring economic plans, proposing practical solutions, overcoming obstacles, and promoting training and development within Arab local authorities. Mr. Jaraisy emphasized the importance of preserving social cohesion in the Arab community, forging partnerships to address political challenges, and promoting unity of action. He called on heads and candidates in the upcoming local authorities' elections to ensure youth and women representation and engage the public in decision-making processes.

Mr. Mudar Younis, Chairman of the National Committee for Heads of Arab Local Councils, praised the conference for its diverse audience and the presence of decision-makers from government ministries, local authority leaders, and active civil society organizations in the Arab community. He emphasized the importance of strengthening the professional relationship between the National Committee and civil society organizations, as well as enhancing cooperation with government ministries. This ensures the implementation of economic plans aligned with the needs of the Arab community and maximizes budgets to improve quality of life and services in Arab towns.

The conference set out to accomplish various objectives, including monitoring the progress of implementing the 550 and 1279 economic plans for the Arab community, overseeing budget utilization, introducing new data, and engaging in discussions about the challenges and opportunities arising from these plans in Israel's complex political landscape. Specifically, the focus was on examining their impact on the Arab community and local authorities and implementation. Moreover, the conference fostered a professional and unbiased dialogue with government ministry directors, with the aim of proposing effective solutions, strengthening partnerships, and promoting collaboration between the National Committee, Injaz, civil society organizations, and senior government ministry employees.



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First Session: A year into Government Decisions (1279, 550): Opportunities and Challenges

The session commenced with an overview of government decisions 550 and 1279 presented by Mr. Meir Bing, the Director-General of the Ministry of Social Equality, who highlighted and detailed the allocation of 3.9 billion shekels in 2022 for the Arab community under the economic plan 550. This budget distribution encompassed various sectors, with 21% (803 million) allocated for enhancing local authorities' services, 9% (338 million) for promoting economic development and employment opportunities, 24% (941 million) for advancing social development, 8% (319 million) for planning and housing initiatives, and 38% (1.497 billion) for infrastructure development across Arab towns.

A panel discussion followed, facilitated by Journalist Jackie Khoury with in the presence of Mr. Ibrahim Al-Hawashleh, the head of Wahat Al-Sahraa Local Council in Al-Naqab, Mr. Khaled Hajirat, the head of Bir Al-Maksur Local Council, Mr. Liyur Khalifa, the Director of the Economic-Social Development Department for the Arab community in the Negev, and Mrs. Salima Suleiman, the head of the Local Authorities Department at the Economic Development Authority for the Arab community. The discussion centered around the challenges confronting Arab local authorities and explored strategies to overcome them, with a specific emphasis on aligning economic plan projects with the needs of the Arab community and actively involving Arab professionals and experts in project planning. Additionally, the panel discussed and emphasized the importance of fostering cooperation and collaboration among local authority leaders, civil society organizations, and senior government ministry officials from various departments.



The Second Session: "Gefen Reform Plan" - A Year in the Arab Education System

The discussion was moderated by journalist Shireen Younis, with the presence of Dr. Samir Mahamid, the Mayor of Umm al-Fahm, Mrs. Shireen Nattour-Hafi, the Director of the Arab Education Department at the Ministry of Education, and Mr. Jalal Safadi, the Director of the Community and Youth Department for the Arab community at the Ministry of Education.



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The session delved into the ramifications and effects of the "Gefen Reform Plan" on the Arab education system. Gefen, an approved reform plan on August 1, 2021, seeks to introduce administrative flexibility within the education system. The participants engaged in discussions from various viewpoints, underscoring the plan's significance, challenges, and potential opportunities. It was emphasized that Arab local authorities require a profound understanding and increased familiarity with Gefen to evaluate its efficacy within the Arab education system, especially in terms of optimizing education budgets.



Throughout the discussion, particular attention was given to the pivotal role played by Injaz Center, the National Committee for Heads of Arab Local Councils, and the Education Committee, a subsidiary of the National Committee. The significance of incorporating professional and educational institutions from the Arab community into the ministry's list of providers, without imposing any conditions that undermine the unique characteristics of the Arab community, was highlighted. This approach aims to ensure the provision of high-quality educational services to students involved in educational programs. Furthermore, it was announced that 25 youth centers would be established in Arab towns in the upcoming months as part of the Non-Curricular Education Program within the 550 economic plan.

Third Session: Navigating Budget Challenges and Capitalizing on Opportunities: Gap Reduction Fund and Development Budgets

The session began with a presentation by Mr. Ronen Peretz, the Director-General of the Ministry of Interior, regarding Decisions 550 and 1279. During his speech, he declared that the Arab local authorities would maintain control over tenders and contracts, without transferring the responsibility to external entities. This announcement holds great significance, particularly in light of the policy paper presented by Injaz Center, Adalah, and the National Committee for Heads of Local Councils. The paper highlighted the detrimental impact of transferring tendering powers to external entities, emphasizing the economic weakening of Arab local authorities and the obstruction of essential services.

A panel discussion followed, facilitated by Mr. Ala'a Ghanem, an economic advisor and consultant at Injaz Center. Panelists included Mr. Edgar Dakwar, head of Fassuta Local Council; Mr. Tomer Biton, Director of Local Governance Administration at the Ministry of Interior; Mr. Ziad Abu Ghneim, advisor to the National Committee for Heads of Local Authorities; and Mrs. Salima Suleiman, head of the Local Authorities Department at the Economic Development Authority for the Arab community. They discussed challenges and opportunities related to budget distribution, particularly through the Gap Reduction Fund and development budgets. Participants highlighted discriminatory criteria affecting allocations for disadvantaged local authorities and urged the Ministry of Interior to explore recommendations for revising the grant distribution system. Preserving and prioritizing development budgets was emphasized, as well as investing in infrastructure development to improve the quality of life in Arab towns.

