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PM Olmert's Speech at the PM's Conference for the Minority Sector

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10/07/2008

Good evening everyone,
 My Colleagues, Ministers of the Israel Government,
 Minister Ghaleb Majadle,
 Minister Meir Sheetrit,
 Minister Yuli Tamir,
 Director General of the Prime Minister's Office,
 Raanan Dinur,
 President of the Israel Democracy Institute, Arik Carmon,
 Professor Manuel Trajtenberg,
 Udi Farber, who organized this Conference,
 Dov Lautman,



Photo by GPO

I can tell you, my colleagues, mayors – Shawki Hatib and Sheikh Hashem Abed el Rahman and Hames Jarisi,

And to all the other important guests who are here tonight, Arabs and Jews,

I am debating a bit – Raanan asked me, "What will you do? Will you give the speech you prepared or will you say what you have to say from the heart?" I will say the things I prepared, but I think I will add to those remarks a bit, and I will try not to take up too much of your time, but this subject is important to me. As is my wont, I also wrote down every word said here in the hours I have been present so that I can re-read and refer to things said and place them into the framework of the process we wish to create.

I asked to convene this distinguished forum here today because I am troubled. A year ago, I participated in a seminar held by the Israel Democracy Institute, and for an entire day, I listened to what Jewish and Arab Israelis who were worried about the situation had to say. That seminar strengthened my feeling that despite the 60 years the State has existed, we have still not achieved the appropriate relationship between the State and its Arab citizens.

On the eve of the establishment of the State, while war was being waged, the founders of Israel called on "the Arab public, residents of the State of Israel, to maintain the peace and participate in the building of the country, on a foundation of full and equal citizenship". There were two foundations for this call – recognition of the different identity of Arabs in Israel, together with the recognition that in the Jewish state, citizenship could also contain this difference. There is an explanation for why, in the 60 years that have passed, these things have yet to be realized, not only because of a discriminatory policy on the part of the Government. However, the important thing is that we are ready for them to be realized now.

I reiterate the main points I made last years, which reflect my beliefs regarding the position of the Arab citizens of this country:

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- The question of the position of Israeli Arabs is fundamentally a civilian question. Israeli Arabs are not a strategic threat, and I do not see them as such.
- In the State of Israel, as Shawki mentioned, there is discrimination against the Arab population. A great measure of it is not intentional, but is still greatly influential. The Israeli public must be educated that Israeli Arabs are citizens with equal rights, in the full sense of the word.
- We need a process which will lead us to a different place. Indeed, the responsibility is, first and foremost, that of the Government of Israel and its institutions. Therefore, I would like to add today – any social change cannot just be the responsibility of the government. Arab society, as well as the Jewish majority, play a substantial role in creating change.

Further to statements made last year, I instructed the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office to ensure that the central government offices, through dialogue with the Arab public, develop broad and comprehensive plans on those subjects at the center of today's discussion: the economy, education and local government. I very much hope that you felt the beginning of this spirit.

We speak a great deal about the policy of equality and integration, in that order – equality and integration. I would like to propose tonight that we rethink the order of these concepts. It should be said bluntly: the attempt to develop the Arab sector in the economic sphere, separate from the wider Israeli economy – is not bearing fruit. The cornerstone of any new policy must be a change in the existing order, i.e. a policy of integration and equality. This policy will allow for an equal opportunity, will transform the Arab sub-economy into part of the broader Israeli economy and will accelerate Arab integration into the entire economy of the country – one country, one economy.

Indeed, every social group in Israel, Jewish and Arab alike, wants to preserve its character and its identity. Every group wants its sons and daughters to be educated in accordance with its heritage, culture and language. There exists both a need and an obligation to preserve this social order. At the same time, there is a genuine need to discuss integration, certainly as a means of advancing equality. There is a need for shared building. Government policy must strive for integration and equality, and it must be done in full partnership. A constitutional arrangement, such as that being formulated in the Knesset – however it becomes realized – will have to include in its obligations the right of any individual or group to preserve their heritage, religion and language.

This Conference is grounded in joint discussions. The goal is not headlines, but rather deeds carried out over the past year. The plan presented today by the Ministry of the Interior was born in a conference initiated by Minister of the Interior, Mr. Meir Sheerit, during which, for the first time, the head of the Committee of Heads of Arab Authorities was appointed a member. The education plan was shaped by four joint committees of the Government and the Committee of Heads of Authorities, which were appointed by the Minister of Education. You heard both these facts from the Ministers; I was updated by them during the implementation stage and tried to assist their move and provide backup to both of them on their decisions. The Committees together analyzed the difficulties and failures of education in the Arab sector. In the economic sphere, the Advisory Council to the Authority for Economic Development is taking shape, and is comprised of Arab and Jewish economic leaders. It goes without saying that the head of the Authority in fact assisted in its establishment and handling with great vigor, and he is one of the most beloved people I know in the State of Israel. I believe he is one of the only people who receive equal support in both the Arab and Jewish publics, and I speak of Dovik Lautman. Well done Dovik.

This principle also applies to the most sensitive issues in Israel and of Arab society. We removed the discussion regarding ownership claims of Negev Bedouins from solely the Government and appointed a public committee, headed by Justice Goldberg, to formulate recommendations for Government Resolutions, and if necessary, legislation. This committee was also initiated by Meir Sheetrit when he served as Minister of Housing, in charge of the Israel Lands Authority. It was not an easy battle, but I am pleased that he allowed me to provide my full backing for this initiative, and we had to pound the table to get it approved in the Government. Two committee members are senior figures in the Negev Bedouin society. This is the first time the Negev Bedouins are not extraneous spectators on the sidelines during the decision-making process regarding issues they view as crucial and the most sensitive. The question is not whether all their claims are just. By the way, I am willing to say honestly that there are ownership claims by Bedouins which are baseless. But that is not the question – the question is how we create a process through which a large portion of the population feels that it is a partner to the decision-making process, even if at the end of the process, they will not always be prepared to accept or agree with everything implied in it. However, they respect the process.

According to the proposed legislation currently taking shape, under the leadership of MK Nadia Hillo, and in coordination with the Government, the Authority for Economic Development will include both Arab and Jewish employees, and can compel government bodies to consult it and include its representatives in any planning process related to the Arab sector which occur as a result of Government Resolutions.

There is also development in the area of proper representation for Arab employees in governmental mechanisms. These are talented young people, new to the Civil Service, and we are very impressed with their work. Aiman Saif, who is the driving force behind the establishment of the Authority for Economic Development, is certainly a prominent example. As for the numbers – a change in the trend is already clear, and by 2012, 10% of public servants will be Arab. By the way, I am less concerned about the absolute numbers, because the initial, talented employees who have begun working are paving the way for others.

I listened closely to the reports from the discussion groups. I do not believe I need to add to the statements made by the Ministers of Education and Interior, nor to the very significant statements made by Minister Majadle. I wish to clarify one point – we intend action. The gatherings which a Prime Minister attends for 15 minutes to make a speech, wave to the audience, say hello, smile, get his picture taken and leave are not in accordance with the standard we set for the work. We did not foresee this during the year, and we do not foresee it during the next year ahead of the new year, ahead of the second Conference and the coming Conferences.

I am impressed that the economic session reflected what we sensed – that there is socio-economic potential in the integration of the manpower and capability of the Arab sector in the wider Israeli economy. The private sector is there already. The Government is getting close, even if the rate is too slow. The Accountant General spoke of the investment fund, and this month a permanent head of the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab Sector will be appointed.

Among the Authority's accomplishments thus far, the plan developed in conjunction with the government ministries and parties in civilian society regarding the employment of Arab women should be emphasized. We view Arab women, as well as ultra-orthodox men, as a target population which must be integrated into the labor market, in order to relieve the household economy and raise many

families above the poverty line. The inclusion of additional men and women from the Arab sector to the civilian labor force, in order to reach the average rate of the total number of employees in the State of Israel will lead to an additional NIS 60 billion in the national product. An additional NIS 60 billion in the national product is approximately a 10% increase in the national product, if I am not mistaken. The national product of the State of Israel last year was slightly more than NIS 600 billion – an additional NIS 60 billion. If we increase the employment rate of the Arab and ultra-orthodox populations to match the average rate of participation in the labor force in the State of Israel, it will add NIS 60 billion to the national product. Anyone who speaks of an improvement in quality of life, an improvement in the standard of living, must understand that this is the key. We can speak in slogans, but in the end it is a question of whether or not we are successful in creating a process which will lead to a change in employment patterns, along with the other things of which we spoke and alongside a strengthening of local government and the education system. We are talking about a plan and about deeds; we are not speaking in slogans.

I wish to speak about the Ministry of the Interior, and I say this with respect, even out of my experience as someone who, for many years, served as a mayor and can compare the administration of a governmental system today in relation to the reality with which I had to deal as mayor. The Ministry of the Interior has succeeded in achieving equality in the actualization of balance grants between the Jewish and Arab sectors. From now on, any addition will be distributed on an equitable basis, in accordance with the criteria of which Minister Sheeirit spoke. Gentlemen, this is the beginning of an historic revolution. It is true that it did not come without demands and it should be said – and the Minister did say – without attempting to cover up the weaknesses.

Yesterday at my home, I heard Sheikh Hasham Abed el Rahmo, Mayor of Umm el-Fahum, say incisive things which are also true. In a genuine dialogue in which things are said, one does not attempt to cover things up. It should be said, and Minister Sheeirit said so when he spoke of the Arab authorities, some of which suffer from administrative failures, which are the primary cause of their distress and not just a result of discrimination. As I said, I do not deny nor do I cover up – there was discrimination for many years. We must make a supreme effort to ensure that the administration of these communities will be in the hands of deserving elected officials, not in the hands of appointed committees. This is a serious problem among Arab local authorities, but I would say that this is an indication of a type of soul searching that is needed from the entire Arab public and its leadership – not only its elected leadership, but also its economic, social and cultural leadership.

I am pleased about the beginning of the process to establish an Arab town in the Galilee, and I will do everything in my power so that this move is advanced with the necessary speed, as is the Minister of the Interior.

I would like to add something about education – something should be said about 'big money' and 'small money'. Usually one counts how much money has been allocated for programs designated for Arabs. However, it should be remembered that 'big' government money is always in the comprehensive programs, and not in designated programs. The Minister of Education's decision to introduce affirmative action in comprehensive government programs for the benefit of the Arab population is what will make the difference. The fact is that the "New Horizon" program is a comprehensive one for the general public in the State of Israel, for every school, but special consideration is given to education in the Arab sector, and this can already be seen and will become clearer in the advancement of education in the Arab sector.

By the way, I am not one of those who believe in the superficial fashion of beating their chests in agony over the destruction of the education system until one cannot help but feel sorry for them – it is baseless. The education system in the State of Israel has made impressive accomplishments in many fields. There are also great failures – we are the first to recognize this. The fact is that the Minister of Education, Yuli Tamir, arrived at the Ministry of Education with great determination to implement a comprehensive and thorough reform, out of a clear understanding that there are entire sectors or entire fields or different regions of the education system which are in serious condition. This includes peripheral areas in the north and south. I am familiar with educational institutions there which deserve praise, which glorify the State of Israel, also in the Arab sector, also in the Druze sector, also in the religious-Jewish sector, also in the secular sector – wonderful schools with amazing teachers. I know what the “New Horizon” program does in both the Arab and the Jewish sectors; I saw it. We do not need to wait years – the changes are occurring quite rapidly. The community feels it; the parents feel it; the teachers feel it; the students feel it; the administration feels it. It creates a new dynamic of communal life, not only other schools.

The Government investment in such national programs which place a special emphasis on the Arab population is the key to change; the Minister of Education is operating under this assumption; we are operating under this assumption by building new classrooms. I know we often say this, and you were polite enough to say, or rather not to say, that dedicating 40% of the classrooms we are building now, in the framework of the 8,000 classrooms, to the Arab sector still does not solve all the problems, primarily when it comes to nursery schools. We are studying this problem, and it is significantly improving. It certainly points to a trend which is not coincidental, but rather the result of a decision. One does not build 40% of all classrooms we are building over the next five years for the Arab sector if there has not been a decision to do so, out of recognition of the fact that a gap exists which can no longer be ignored.

We will examine the other gaps and have already begun preparing the plan for the next five years. Eventually, we hope to reduce the number of students per classroom, even though I say to you here – and it is true about every school in all strata of the population – I believe we have slightly exaggerated the importance of overcrowding in the classrooms as a factor which can lead to the greatest change in the education system. I am not certain this is true. I am very much in favor of the “New Horizon” plan, and I understand that the principal of a school was here today and presented the achievements in this field – that groups of children will be treated; that teachers will dedicate private study hours to special groups based on early diagnosis of weaknesses or of achievement, so that teachers will spend more time at school and have more time to spend with their students, not only in a formal learning environment of transferring information in the framework of a class, but also in many other situations which are essential for creating a different learning dynamic. When this is done, we will not have to wait for years in order to see the change – this change is evident quite quickly. One of the more difficult problems we face with regard to classrooms, and I direct this to my friends from the Arab local authorities, is availability of land. It is not simple. I am familiar with it from East Jerusalem, and I believe it exists also in a significant proportion of the Arab communities in which the fact that the lands administered by the community is scarce, which creates a great difficulty in the ability to locate places which will allow the State to invest what it is willing to invest in establishing new schools. This is part of the problem we must face; and we will face it. I am simply saying that not everything is part of a clear equation of discrimination and negative results. Sometimes it is also the result of circumstances which must be resolved, only the resolution is not one of pressing a button.

There are those who believe that being the first Arab minister in the State of Israel is a matter of honor or of domination or perhaps at the pleasure of the government. My impression is that by agreeing to serve as a Government minister, Minister Majadle took upon himself a supreme responsibility, also from an historic standpoint. If I may – I believe that Ghaleb is a brave man, and I respect him from the bottom of my heart.

Believe me, it is not easy sitting in a Government in which you are the only Arab, when you take into account a great number of situations which are an inseparable part of the agenda at Government meetings in the State of Israel. It is not easy and it is not simple. Sometimes it is much easier sitting outside and criticizing. Sometimes it is much more difficult sitting inside and being a partner to the collective decisions of a Government which can at times give one spasms. I appreciate Ghaleb's ability to express what he believes in as well as be a partner in the Government's collective responsibility of which he is an inseparable part. In any event, I am proud that my Government is the first in which an Arab minister serves in the 60 years of the State of Israel's existence.

There are great many more issues. I am beginning to feel that the hour is growing late. I wish to say two or three more things, and thus will conclude my remarks. I am leaving this gathering after several long hours of listening closely to what was said. Usually in such gatherings there is a risk that one moves too quickly towards a kind of distribution and creation of a barrier, in which one explains to the opposite side that they are incorrect on many different issues or how wrong they are or how responsible they are. And they explain to you and you leave with the feeling that they unloaded all they had built up inside, and then one asks what happens next. I believe we share responsibility. I recognize that the supreme responsibility belongs to the Government – the Government must lead; the Government must define; the Government must determine an order of priorities; the Government must allocate resources; the Government must formulate practical plans; and the Government must be responsible for their implementation. We need your active partnership, and we very much need your willingness to take responsibility on yourselves not as observers and not as those who criticize from a distance, but rather as partners to the State of Israel – as an inseparable part of this country because you are an inseparable part of this country and you always will be.

Against the backdrop of the things I said, I would like to add that, in my opinion, the disagreements regarding the Civilian Service are superfluous and regrettable. The Civilian Service is the right thing. It is right for us as a country; it is right for the Arab population; and it is right for Arab youngsters. I speak, first and foremost, of civilian service which includes serving the community in which one lives. Why can't an Arab youngster volunteer for a year or two of civilian service in the community in which they live? Why must it be turned into something else? This is something I hope you will continue to discuss amongst yourselves as well, and that you continue to argue about it, because I believe, in the end, I will be able to convince you that because of the path the Government has outlined and the world view it represents and the spirit it projects, you must change your attitude towards this issue of civilian service as a kind of turning point which is essential to creating a different infrastructure of understanding which we so desire.

Last evening, I held a discussion in my home, with the participation of the Minister, cultural, scientific and spiritual leaders, and the heads of local authorities who are sitting here with us today as well. A considerable portion of the discussion dealt with the question of whether dialogue between the sectors is possible. From today's panel regarding mutual images, in which I participated, I learned that we speak a great deal about practical fields, and this is important, and I said that in

the end we will examine these as well, but I believe we must also deal seriously and practically an effort to lead to a change in prejudices, which will lead to a change in intolerance, which will in turn erase from the public discourse expressions of racism and help teach the entire Israeli society a feeling of both equality and partnership.

I wish to thank all those who were partners in creating this framework, which will continue – to the heads of Arab local authorities, especially Shawki Hatib; the Arab members of academia who took part today; to the Israeli Democracy Institute, which is a leader and shaped the agenda, and which provides sponsorship and invests endless efforts and many resources and persists, as part of its world view, to implement this process, and especially to its head, Prof. Arik Carmon – well done, Arik. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your investment and that of your staff, and for the spirit of the Institute, which presents this issue as well as other, important issues on the public agenda.

I wish to thank the staff of the Prime Minister's Office – Raanan, and especially Udi Braver, who handled all the details. To all the teams; the Haifa municipality; all employees of the various government ministries who were a partner to this enterprise; to all of you and to all the participants who came and spent so many hours here today – thank you.

I believe that today we wrote a significant chapter, which may serve as an historic turning point in the relations between Jews and Arabs and in the status of Arabs as an inseparable part of the State of Israel.

Thank you.

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