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Report Funded by U.S. Group Triggers Debate Over Arab Autonomy

The Forward, February 9, 2007

By Nathan Guttman

Washington - The fierce debate over a report calling for greater autonomy for Israel's Arab population and questioning the Jewish character of the state is spilling over to the American Jewish community.

The report, titled "Future Vision," was issued by Israel's National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Authorities. Funding came from the New Israel Fund, a Washington-based foundation and advocacy group that supports a slew of liberal causes and organizations in Israel relating to poverty, the environment, gender and ethnic equality, and religious pluralism. The document is being discussed by several American Jewish organizations that aid Arab causes in Israel.

Most of the report echoes the decades-long call by Israeli Arab leaders for equality in government investment in education, health and housing, and for ending the discrimination against Arabs living in Israel. But a major debate in Israel has erupted over the chapters dealing with symbols and laws that define Israel as a Jewish state.

"The State has to acknowledge that Israel is the homeland for both Palestinians and Jews," the document declared, referring to Arab citizens of Israel. "The relation between the Palestinians and Jews in Israel should be based on attainment of equal human and citizen rights based on international conventions and the international relative treaties and declarations."

The report suggests that Israel recognize its Arab citizens as "an indigenous national group" that would be given the chance to build its own national institutions. It also calls for a political system in which each side — the Jews and the Arabs — has the right to veto the other party's decisions.

Jewish politicians and pundits who interpreted them as a rejection of Israel as a Jewish state condemned these suggestions, specifically the assertion that "Israel is the homeland for both Palestinians and Jews."

Shimon Shamir, a member of the Or Commission, which investigated the Israeli Arab riots of October 2000, argued in an open letter published in a Nazareth-based Arabic newspaper that even among the strongest Jewish supporters of the Arab community, the report created feelings of fear. Ha'aretz columnist Ze'ev Schiff argued that in the report, Israeli Arabs are expressing their wish to divorce themselves from the State of Israel; the well-respected commentator warned that Arabs would lose "big time" if they continued down that path.

In an attempt to present the "Future Vision" plan to America's Jewish community, one of the plan's authors, Yosef Jabareen, held talks in New York and Washington last month, at the invitation of the Israel Democracy Institute.

Jabareen, who wrote the legal chapter of the document, told theForward that he stressed in his conversations in the United States that the paper is meant to create a dialogue with the Israeli Jews.

"The initial reaction of Jewish activists was a combination of concern and curiosity," Jabareen said, "and I want to hope that following my presentation, they were less troubled by it."

The main issue, according to Jabareen, was the need to understand the Arab paper as an attempt to strengthen Israeli democracy in a way that will benefit all parts of the Israeli society.

"I want to hope that the ongoing discussion on the 'Future Vision' will ultimately increase the willingness of American Jews to take on the issues of equality for Arabs in Israel, rather than deterring them," he said.

Jabareen also said that, with funding from the New Israel Fund, he is establishing an independent center in Nazareth, the Arab Center for Law and Policy, to further address the areas of inequality outlined in the report.

Officials at the New Israel Fund say that they were surprised by the report's findings. "We did not assume that this would be the outcome," said Larry Garber, the NIF's executive director. Garber stressed that his organization's grant-making process is guided by a commitment to Israel being a Jewish and Democratic state.

"We did not know where the conclusions [of the report] will lead to," Garber told the Forward. "Our starting positions are different than the conclusions they arrived at."

According to Garber, the NIF would rather have seen the report focus on daily issues that can be dealt with in a way that promotes equality than on "historical and philosophical questions."

Despite any criticisms that it may have, the organization did not try to disassociate itself from the report.

In a lengthy discussion held during the group's semiannual board meeting last week in Washington, NIF leaders decided to try to embrace the "Future Vision" report as an opening point for a dialogue between Jews and Arabs in Israel about the Arab minority.

While highlighting the fact that most Israeli Jews view maintaining the Jewish character of the state as essential for any discussion, the NIF is willing to accept the report as an opening position of the Arab side.

The NIF decided to wait for the other documents on the issue to be published and see if a "constructive dialogue" can emerge from this project, Garber said. "If not," he added, "then we will step away."

The report and the debate that it triggered come as the American Jewish community has been taking serious steps concerning Israel's Arab population. After decades in which mainstream Jewish groups focused only on Jewish Israelis, the past year has seen a flurry of activity on issues relating to the Arab minority. An interagency task force on Israeli Arabs was formed, representing 70 Jewish groups, including the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations. The task force is dedicated to educating the American Jewish public about the 20% of Israelis who are Arabs and to advancing civic equality in Israel.

A sign of the American Jewish interest in Israel's Arab population was also seen last summer, as a portion of the funds raised by Jewish charitable federations for the Israel Emergency Campaign was directed toward Arab towns and villages hit by Hezbollah rockets during the war.

So far, members of the task force, which is committed to the idea of Israel being a Jewish and democratic state, have discussed the report but have not taken a stand on it. At least for now, they prefer to follow the debate as it unfolds in Israel rather than stake out a position on the report.

"I don't agree with parts of it," said Rabbi Brian Lurie of San Francisco, co-chair of the task force, who said he was speaking only on his own behalf. "But the fact that the Israeli Arab community is coming of age, and seeking an open discussion, is a healthy development."

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Rattling the Cage: Saturday at the Zoo

Jerusalem Post, September 20, 2006

By Larry Derfner

I suppose Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer fans should be congratulated for their restraint; they didn't start making monkey sounds - chanting "hoo-hoo-hoo" as loud as they could - at the black players on the opposing team until one of them scored a goal.

It's quite a sensation to hear "hoo-hoo-hoo" every time a black player touches the ball when you're watching a soccer game in a big stadium in Tel Aviv. That was the scene at Bloomfield Stadium on the Saturday before last during the game between Maccabi Tel Aviv and Hapoel Kfar Saba.

None of the chanters were sitting next to me and my two sons, although I could hear some of them a few rows back. In the next section, Section 10, where the hard-core Maccabi fans sit, the "hoo-hoo-hoo" made a tremendous din.

Observers in the stands for the New Israel Fund's "Kick Racism out of Football" project put the number of chanters at 2,000. It was probably more like a few hundred in the overall crowd of 2,000 in Section 10. But since none of the fans was seen or heard protesting, it did seem like all 2,000 of them were chanting "hoo-hoo-hoo" at Hapoel's black players and, in effect, they were.

Bloomfield wasn't the only stadium where you could have heard monkey chants that day. According to NIF's observers, fans of Hapoel Tel Aviv, Beitar Jerusalem and Maccabi Netanya also did it to opposing black players. All but one of the targets were foreign players, usually from Africa.

The exception was Hapoel Tel Aviv's Baruch Dego, probably the best-known Ethiopian Jewish immigrant in Israel, who was subjected to the taunt by the fans of Betar Jerusalem.

There was one bright spot on the anti-racism front that Saturday; some of the Hapoel Tel Aviv fans tried to shut up the monkey chanters in their midst. That takes an awful lot of guts. It can mean standing up to a mob.

We all know the common excuse for Israeli racism against Arabs - it's not really racism, you see, it's just the unfortunate but finally understandable reaction of people who have been provoked by a history of Arab terror, Arab war and Arab hatred.

But what is the excuse for the eruptions of "hoo-hoo-hoo" from the stands at Israeli soccer games? What did people in Ghana do to Israel? What did Ethiopian Jewry do?

The monkey chants have been going on in Israel for 15 years, ever since the first black player, Cyril McEnackey of Cameroon, came into the league. It's become common, part of the game.

None of the sports pages in the newspapers mentioned the taunting at the game I saw. In fact, *Yediot Aharonot* ran a full-page feature on two of Hapoel Kfar Saba's Ghanaian players - and the jungle noises they'd just endured weren't even mentioned.

So maybe Israeli racism against Arabs can't be explained away by Arab hostility alone. Maybe Israeli racism against Arabs is, at least in part, an outgrowth of Israeli racism in general. Personally, I don't think there's any maybe about it.

To put things in proportion, though, soccer racism - including anti-Semitism - is much worse in European countries, such as Spain, Hungary, Romania and Italy, than it is in Israel. It used to be murderous in Britain until lawmakers and police started cracking down on racist expressions at the games; underneath the surface, of course, the sentiments of British soccer hooligans haven't changed.

I've never thought Israel was unusually racist in comparison with other countries. But I do think Israel is unusually hypocritical about racism, and may even be the world leader in hypocrisy about racism, because our national identity is based on Jewish victimhood of a form of racism - anti-Semitism - and we never stop lecturing the world about it.

Let's be honest: The next time Kofi Annan comes to Israel, would anybody advise Ehud Olmert to take him to a Betar Jerusalem soccer game?

There's one thing about Israeli soccer racism that never gets mentioned publicly, but I think everyone who follows Israeli soccer knows it: The fans chanting abuse at blacks and Arabs are almost always rough, uneducated Mizrahim. They, along with Russian immigrants, are the demographic group that produces most of the pure, primitive racism - the kind that doesn't stop at Arabs by any means - that's found in this country.

I'm not saying all uneducated Mizrahim and all Russian immigrants are racists, but I'm saying that Israelis who show open contempt not only for Arabs, but for blacks and other non-whites as well tend to be uneducated Mizrahim or Russian immigrants.

At Israeli soccer games, the chants of "hoo-hoo-hoo" at black players, along with the whole repertoire of abuse directed at Arab players, is heard almost exclusively from Mizrahi punks and brawlers.

The monkey chanting has actually gone down over the last 15 years, but the taunting of Arab players is getting worse, said Itzik Shanan, who started the soccer racism project for the NIF a few years ago. Something I missed at the game I took my sons to, but which was written up by NIF observers, was the 50 or so Maccabi Tel Aviv fans who were singing songs of praise to Baruch Goldstein.

Since July of last year the law says Israelis convicted of creating racist spectacles can be jailed for up to a year. Shanan says police have made several such arrests at soccer games, but I didn't see them budge at Bloomfield. The fans in Section 10 were completely free to act like animals in the jungle, literally.

"Why are they making that noise?" my seven-year-old asked me. "Shhh, tell him after we get home," my 11-year-old, the soccer player in the family, whispered.

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Grim Face in the Mirror

The Jerusalem Report, November 28, 2005

By Ina Friedman

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Smack in the Israeli heartland, the mixed Jewish-Arab city of Lod is decaying under the weight of crime, malfeasance and relentless neglect. Government promises of a massive rescue have given the skeptical residents some hope, but they're still waiting to see results.

As we drive slowly and gingerly over a narrow, deeply rutted road in one of the Arab neighborhoods of Lod, the car tailgating us honks so insistently that I pull over to let it pass. Instead, it stops beside us and the dour-faced man in the passenger seat rolls down his window to bark: "Who are you and what are you doing here?" Normally I would balk at such a proprietary question asked in a public place. But our guide intervenes before I can blunder.

"It's the police," Arafat Ismail warns softly, lest I mistake the plainclothesmen in an unmarked car for simply nosy Israelis. So we politely identify ourselves as journalists and are reciprocated by the driver with "Have a nice day," as the car moves on. What would have happened, I muse aloud, if we'd identified ourselves as plain folk on our way to visit friends? "They would have stopped us," Ismail explains as we pass the remains of a roadblock once used for that purpose, "demanded our identity cards, and interrogated us about who and why."

Though briefly unsettling, that experience was evidence of one of the more encouraging efforts going on in Lod: a massive and extended police crackdown - actually run like a military operation - on the notoriously facile drug-dealing operations that flourished in the city's rundown Arab sections. Before the campaign began last winter, one could simply arrive by cab, anonymously extend some cash through a chink in any number of walls - colorfully dubbed ATMs - and receive a dose of heroin or other street drug from an equally anonymous hand. Now the dealers have moved on, but these neighborhoods are still closely policed to ensure they don't return.

Unfortunately, though, that signal display of civic determination is about the only good that's happened in Lod in the better part of a decade. In fact, this city of 54,000 Jews and 20,000 Arabs, lying about halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, has become something of an emblem, a place overlooked by the nation's leaders and sorely failed by a succession of municipal governments marked by inept management, corruption and sheer bad luck.

Last year, for example, Lod's municipal services literally collapsed due to a financial crisis so profound that the city could not pay its employees. Many other cities suffered from the same financial crunch, precipitated by a drastic cutback in the Treasury's allocations to local governments. But in Lod the upshot was catastrophic. Garbage collection and the busing of schoolchildren were disrupted. At times the city's water supply was cut off. The welfare department, which ministers to almost a third of Lod's 20,000 families, disintegrated because its staff simply quit. Other municipal workers, deprived of their wages for months on end, held raucous demonstrations - even blocking the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway - in a desperate bid to get the nation's attention.

Today, after committing itself to a recovery program that entailed the dismissal of 250 workers and assurances of rigorous budgetary management, the city is getting back on its feet. "All services have been restored, the city is cleaner, even the welfare department has been reconstituted and is back on the



job," says municipal spokesman Yoram Ben Arouch. Yet all this has only brought Lod back to the parlous state it was in before the crisis hit.

"Lod is the 'periphery' [a euphemism for Israel's neglected outlying areas] right in the heart of the country," sums up Mike Prashker, the director of Merchavim, an NGO working to enhance social cohesion in Israel. "It's 10 minutes and 50 years away from the new Ben-Gurion Airport," he continues, and in some aspects a microcosm of Israel.

Indeed, despite Lod's central location near that billion-dollar, futuristic "gateway into Israel," its older Jewish sections have the shabby look of an outlying development town, while its Arab neighborhoods, at their worst, resemble a Gaza refugee camp. That's certainly not the whole picture. The city does boast, mainly on its perimeter, a number of spiffy new neighborhoods - with upbeat names like Ganei Aviv ("Spring Gardens"), Ganei Ya'ar ("Forest Gardens") and Lod Hatze'irah ("Young Lod") - featuring high-rise apartment buildings and attractive private homes. It also sports a modern industrial zone, just off the main Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, filled mostly with service industries (many of which serve the airport), high-tech companies and other businesses drawn by the incentives of initially low (but slowly graduated) municipal taxes.

But the further you penetrate toward the city's core, the more dispiriting the views become. On a weekday morning, for example, we find the shopping center in the heart of town - built around an open square in development-town style - practically deserted.

"This used to be a thriving area, and now it's dead," laments the owner of a small cafe who identifies himself only as Menashe. "My clientele now are only a few loyalists, most of them older people." The young generation who used to frequent the square, "where the city once held cultural events," he says, "don't come here at all." Essentially, Menashe explains, the shops in the square fell victim to an indoor mall recently built just two blocks away. Yet a visit there is barely more heartening. The country's major clothing chains are conspicuous in their absence. Admittedly, the shoes in one shop window do look fashionable. But the goods most in abundance in the other stores tend more toward the homely.

Nevertheless, this downtown area is a giant step above Lod's desolate Old City, the remains of when Lod was a wholly Arab town before Israel's establishment in 1948, when most of its population left or was driven out by Israeli forces. Whole chunks of this historical core are now empty lots, their structures having been razed as part of a "demolition and reconstruction" process that began half a century ago. "The demolition part was carried out to erase the Arab identity of Lod," charges Busayna Dabit, national director of Mixed Cities, a citizens-empowerment program run by the public-advocacy NGO Shatil. "The rebuilding part wasn't. So the Old City has effectively become a ghost town." Even its once-popular outdoor food and clothing markets, which used to draw crowds of Jewish bargain-hunters, now stand almost forlorn.

"They've been plagued by a bitter irony," says Ismail, Mixed Cities' coordinator in Lod. "There was no violent unrest here at the start of the intifada in October 2000," when riots broke out in a number of Arab cities in the north. "But to this day, even as Jewish Israelis are returning to frequent shops and restaurants in those cities where violence did occur, the Arab commercial areas of mixed cities like Lod have failed to shake off the image of being 'unsafe' - and that's why the market here is dying."

Still, the aura of the Old City seems almost pleasant compared to the state of Lod's three main Arab neighborhoods: Pardes Snir, Harakevet and Samekh Het. Entering them is like a descent into the Third World. Sewage runs through their streets. Garbage abounds everywhere. The paved roads - where they exist, at all - are narrow and in disrepair, while sidewalks are nonexistent and street lighting is patchy. The housing here ranges from shacks to some rather stately looking homes. But the latter, too, are set in a backdrop that bespeaks disdain for its inhabitants. Across from one, for example, we see the knee-high

remains of a cement wall with thick metal rods poking out of it. "The city demolished this wall, built by a resident to protect his property, because it was constructed without a permit," Ismail relates as we see a barefoot child climbing over it. "But it didn't bother to remove the rubble, which is a public-safety hazard."

Effectively, explains Dabit, the city administration regards these neighborhoods as "unrecognized," because most of their houses have been erected without building permits. Some of them stand on land owned by the state, relegating their inhabitants to the status of squatters. Others are on private property zoned only for agricultural use (making residential construction on it equally illegal). For the same reason, many of these houses are hooked up in only "piratical" fashion to the city's sewage and water systems, which has prompted instances of "collective punishment." Because many residents of the Samekh Het neighborhood have defaulted on their water bills, for example, the city recently threatened to cut off the supply to the entire neighborhood.

The root of the problem, says Dabit, is that the municipality never created a master plan zoning these neighborhoods, which is a prerequisite for issuing building permits and running a rational system of services. The result is a Catch-22 situation.

"When it comes to housing, Lod's Arabs have been left to their own devices," says Ismail. "On the one hand, because their neighborhoods have not been zoned for residential purposes, the city does not issue building permits. On the other, when people build without permits, even on their own property, their homes are threatened with demolition, sometimes at their own expense." But while they are treated as "construction criminals," Ismail laments, they're offered no viable alternative. With the exception of a single, small neighborhood called Neveh Shalom ("Oasis of Peace"), built some five years ago by the Housing Ministry, no one has seen to the creation of new, affordable housing for Lod's Arabs.

Municipal spokesman Ben Arouch confirms that the city is currently short 1,600 housing units to properly accommodate its Arab community - a figure forecast to grow, through the population's natural increase, to 4,500 units by 2020. A plan to build 3,000 new units is being readied, he says. Another exists for refurbishing the infrastructure of existing Arab neighborhoods. "But it will cost about 50 million shekels [\$11 million] to effect the minimum rehabilitation of these areas," he reports. And even that latter project is paralyzed by a clash of interests.

Due to the extent of illegal construction in Arab neighborhoods, the city has conceded that the notion of mass demolition is simply unreasonable. So it has drawn up a kind of amnesty plan to unilaterally legalize the houses in Pardes Snir (which is home to some 3,000 residents) and overhaul the neighborhood's infrastructure, while swiftly cracking down on any new unauthorized construction. (Even now, lots on which buildings have been demolished are covered with huge boulders to prevent any attempt to build again.)

The rub is that executing the plan has been conditioned - by the District Planning Commission, over the objections of City Hall - upon the construction of a 10-foot-high, mile-long concrete wall between Pardes Snir and the neighboring Moshav Nir Zvi, which instigated the idea and succeeded in getting the condition approved by the planning authorities. Part of this wall has already been built, with funds from the Housing and Transportation ministries. But construction was halted by the Supreme Court, pending its ruling on a petition by residents of Pardes Snir challenging the legality of using state funds to erect a wall they liken to those built around Jewish ghettos in Europe. And meanwhile, Ben Arouch explains, because of the legal tangle the municipality cannot proceed with the program to legalize and rehabilitate the neighborhood.

There's a long history of reasons for Lod's seemingly intractable ills. It was an Arab town before the establishment of Israel, but upon being conquered by Israeli forces in the War of Independence, says Dabit, all but 1,000 of its population of 40,000 people left or were driven out. The city was then gradually repopulated in two ways. New immigrants from North Africa, Romania, Poland, India and Georgia (in the

Caucasus) channeled there in the 1950s were joined four decades later by newcomers from the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Ethiopia. The remaining Arab population was bolstered first by refugees from nearby villages destroyed during the 1948 war; then by Bedouin resettled there by the state in return for relinquishing their claims to own land in the Negev; and most recently (again at the government's initiative) by Palestinians who collaborated with Israel during the two intifadas.

Lod therefore had the demographic makings of a typical Israeli development town (many of which were populated with immigrants brought straight from the boat or plane) spiced with the atypical addition of a socially fractured and economically deprived Arab population.

"As has often happened in Israel," Prashker observes, "the state concentrated a number of weaker populations in one place, imposed a heavy absorption and welfare burden on an already weak municipal government, and asked them all to 'manage' somehow."

Today Lod's veteran Jewish population and its progeny, who provided the city with what Ben Arouch calls a "strong sense of community," are outnumbered by the combination of new immigrants (33 percent, mostly from the FSU) and Arab Israelis (27 percent). On top of that, almost 50 percent of the city's residents are below the age of 18 (37 percent) or over the age of 65 (12 percent). Although the unemployment rate, at 8.5 percent, is below the national average, Lod's citizens are overwhelmingly low-income earners - who work within the city itself - and about a third of its families receive welfare allotments from the state.

The shift in the city's demographic ratio occurred in no small part because many members of the established Jewish population chose to "manage" by moving out to new bedroom communities, like Shoham and Modi'in, built nearby. "At first apartments in Modi'in sold for the same prices as in Lod," explains Ben Arouch, "and they drew a lot of people away." Today, he attests, there's something of a backflow of young people who miss a connection with their roots. But even though real-estate prices in the satellite towns have doubled over the years, they remain a magnet for Lod's upwardly mobile crowd.

To offset the population drain, the city has been trying to recruit a "strong population" - veteran and native-born Jewish Israelis - to the city. The most prominent example of this effort is the construction of Kiryat Eliashiv, a new neighborhood in the center of town, specifically for modern-Orthodox Israelis who see the reinforcement of the city's Jewish population as a "Zionist mission." The municipality has also been holding talks with evacuees from Gush Katif in a bid to have them join in this enterprise. But Arouch is the first to admit that wooing anyone but idealists to Lod is an uphill battle because of its image as a place wracked by crime, corruption and political instability.

The most notorious scandal attached to Lod dates to the late 1990s and culminated in an indictment against building contractor and Likud kingmaker David Appel, who had built the city's Ganei Aviv neighborhood. Eager to repeat that economic coup, Appel purchased land from Moshav Ginaton, neighboring Lod. But because it was zoned for agricultural use only, and the Israel Lands Authority was opposed to changing that status, he bribed, according to the indictment, then-mayoral candidate (now Mayor) Benny Regev and then-infrastructure minister (now Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon to use their influence with the ILA to get the tract rezoned for residential purposes and annexed to Lod. Neither of those two changes occurred, and the prosecution subsequently dropped the charge against Appel for allegedly bribing Sharon. But the indictment for allegedly bribing Regev stands, and the prosecution has announced its intention to charge the mayor with accepting the graft.

The city's reputation for feeble governance was already flourishing before these scandals reached the headlines. "The administration was more or less stable here until 1998, when mayor Maxim Levy left to serve in the Knesset," Ben Arouch relates. "But thereafter the mayor's post changed hands six times, at a rapid pace."

In 2000, for example, on the advice of a committee of inquiry into the state of affairs in Lod, then-interior minister Natan Sharansky exercised his powers to oust mayor Pinhas Idan and his city council and appoint a committee of officials to govern in their stead. Rather than get a grip on the city's expenditures, however, the committee appointed a slew of superfluous high-level officials, paid inflated salaries and perks - leaving the city 175 million shekels (\$37 million) in debt. The deficit was inherited by Levy, a popular figure whose return to the mayor's office in 2002 injected a sense of optimism into Lod. But Levy died of a heart attack five months later, passing the financial mess to his successor, Regev. Then came the Treasury's drastic cutback in allocations to local governments, casting the city into a tailspin. Interestingly, Lod was allowed to crash despite a July 2002 cabinet decision to make the rescue of the city a national priority. Sharon threw his prime ministerial prestige behind a much-touted development plan, which envisioned new neighborhoods to boost the Jewish population, new housing and improved services for the Arab residents, improving roads, extending the industrial zone, even developing tourism projects. To demonstrate his personal commitment to the plan, the prime minister visited the city no fewer than six times - once with a bevy of senior officials in tow. The Interior Ministry also appointed a committee to consider restoring Ben-Gurion Airport to Lod's municipal jurisdiction, which would beef up the city's coffers through the payment of municipal property taxes alone.

Asked what this plan has actually yielded over the past three years, Regev's chief of staff, Ma'or Aberjil, chooses to focus on the "tens of millions of shekels invested in after-school enrichment programs" and the sprucing up of Remat, one of the older Jewish sections. "Overall, the city has no cause for complaint," he says, "though it's true that various projects are being held up by red tape." Given this dreary picture, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Lod - to which both its Jews and Arabs readily attest - is the lack of overt hostility between its varied communities in their conduct of daily life.

"Lod is a much more optimistic place than many people give it credit for," says Prashker. "You have these culturally disparate groups living in close proximity - Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, veterans, new immigrants, and all of them socio-economically 'challenged' - yet somehow the place works." Belying expectations that their differences would breed sharp friction, he adds, "people find ways to accommodate each other. And I believe that's because they actually feel more comfortable with diversity than do people in the country's ostensible bastions of liberalism."

This is not to say that the city is free of prejudice. Most of its neighborhoods remain "segregated," for example, both because people understandably choose to live among their "own kind" and because neighborhood or building screening committees ensure that venturesome "outsiders" are kept out. Although the legality of this practice is dubious, when it was employed against Arabs in the mostly Russian-speaking Ganei Aviv neighborhood, says Dabit, it was not challenged in court. And Ben Arouch stresses that these blocking maneuvers are usually informal. "Arabs who have inquired about buying apartments in Jewish areas were signaled by residents' committees that they were not wanted, and they retreated." This is definitely not a policy endorsed by the city, he insists, adding, "Arabs have built homes in some of our most prestigious neighborhoods." But Dabit, while not contesting this, says that these inroads are the exception to the rule.

Also at play is the phenomenon - certainly not particular to Lod - of "white flight," propelled by fears of a sharp drop in property values when citizens perceived as undesirable begin to penetrate a neighborhood. For example, Ismail reports that when Arabs began moving into Ramat Eshkol, a run-down Jewish area near the Old City, "the Jews began moving out, leaving only Russian-speaking and Ethiopian immigrants who could not afford to buy elsewhere."

Because Regev cannot afford to ignore this fact of life - especially given the exodus of Jewish residents from the city at large - he has been promoting a policy of separate-but-equal housing for the two communities. "Actually, the mayor is in favor of an affirmative-action approach to the city's Arabs," says Ben Arouch, "but that takes both a lot of money and a lot of courage." When Regev ran on merely an "equality" platform in 1998, he adds pointedly, his opponent responded with the slogan: "Regev is good

for the Arabs" (a play on former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 1996 campaign slogan, "Bibi is good for the Jews"). Regev lost that election.

Now the mayor's thinking, as Ben Arouch articulates it, is that raising the standard of housing and services for Lod's Arabs will render them happy to remain in their own precincts. "It's an approach to coexistence that says: 'Let's live alongside, not among, one another,'" he elaborates, "which is at any rate the norm in Israel's mixed cities."

To test this theory, we visit Neveh Shalom, a neighborhood of modest four-room, two-story, semi-attached units built by the Housing Ministry for Arab families interested in upgrading their housing. Ismail sarcastically calls it the "showcase" of the government's efforts to address the wretched conditions in Lod's Arab neighborhoods. "Beyond building matchbox houses, no one bothered to plant grass or trees or build a playground," he laments. "The sewage is hooked up to the old, decrepit network of Pardes Snir. The only store is a tiny grocery - and the area is not served by public transportation, so people can't get downtown to shop."

Approached in front of his home and asked how it feels to live in Neveh Shalom, Salem Abu Sirhan, a 31-year-old father of three, smiles solicitously and replies, "Great!" But as we continue talking, he ticks off a litany of absent services. "There's no place for kids to play, the streets are cleaned only erratically, and no one comes to replaced burned-out bulbs in the lampposts," he says. "What's lacking here?" Abu Sirhan sums up. "Yahas - any sign of caring attention from the city."

Down the street by the small, fenced schoolyard, which boasts a basketball net, 10-year-old Abdallah answers the same question by repeatedly expressing his desire for a place to play soccer, however makeshift. "The Jews have this," he says in a tone of indignation. But when he and his friends trek across a large field to reach Ganei Aviv and play soccer there, "the police drive us out," he complains, "because they think we've come to steal. We are not thieves!"

City Hall is hardly oblivious to the deep disgruntlement among Lod's citizens, Arab and Jewish alike. "When you talk to people here, they won't be upbeat," Ben Arouch warns wearily. "They're angry because we've just experienced two very tough years, and even the municipality's recovery program has not yet generated a sense of confidence." It's also clear that there's no silver bullet for revitalizing a city so long mired in hardship. Certainly the municipality cannot accomplish this alone, Ben Arouch argues, and only visible signs of the government's resolve to pursue its 2002 rehabilitation plan will ease the population's mood of gloom and doom.

But Prashker is convinced that it's not enough for taxpayers to merely follow the Israeli pattern of grouching about the inadequacies and failings of their government, local or national. "The magnitude of change needed in Lod requires the active engagement of its residents," he says, "honest, empowered citizens who are committed to improving the lives of their communities." Building institutions of civil society to mount and sustain grassroots initiatives, he admits, is a difficult task. But Shatil's Mixed Cities is responding to the challenge by organizing neighborhood forums to advance the interests of Arab areas. Similar efforts, he suggests, are in order in their Jewish counterparts. And even that is not enough, in Prashker's eyes. Civic action on Lod's behalf, he holds, is called for well beyond the limits of this city that has become a national embarrassment.

"If we care to know who we are, as a society, we must take a look at Lod and acknowledge: This has to do with us. This is part of us. This is who we are," he elaborates. "And then we must ask ourselves: Is this the best we can do?"