

February 18, 2010

Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister of Israel
Prime Minister's Office
1 Kaplan Street
Jerusalem

RE: Online Government Services in the Arabic Language

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

The 21st of February 2010, marks "International Mother Language Day" celebrated since 1999, when UNESCO announced that:

"Each person is entitled to lingual and cultural equality; the mother language is the means which enables a person to take an active part in the society in which he/she lives."

The Israeli Government decided on the June 6th, 2003 that:

"Government websites will include information in Hebrew, Arabic and other relevant languages, beginning in the fiscal year 2004".

It was decided that a team headed by the director of the Government Advertising Bureau together with representative of the "eGovernment" project at the Ministry of Finance and representatives of the various ministries will define the criteria for each government ministry with regards to presenting the information in Arabic.

This decision was made following the State Comptroller Report for the year 2002, which reviewed 18 websites of government ministries and agencies and stated that:

"Arabic is the language of the largest minority in Israel and has a special standing. The assessment showed that most government websites including the main government portal, neither present information, nor provide services in the Arabic language..."

The State Comptroller continued and ruled that:

"In order to ensure equality, provide appropriate services and improve access to governmental agencies for the Arab sector as well, the authorities must at the very least include in their websites a translation into Arabic of vital information and information about how to use governmental services available online". (53b, 2002, pg 221, in Hebrew)

The Ministry of Finance's "eGovernment" report which was published in 2006, states (pg 68, in Hebrew): **"Arabic is an official language. It is recommended that websites and information in this language will be gradually developed"**.

The following guidelines were defined to advance this subject:

- The homepage of each government website should be translated into Arabic and marked with a clear link, wherever possible.
- The homepage in Arabic should include links to information pages in Arabic and Hebrew. Names and types of services offered by the website should be translated into Arabic and wherever possible their content will be translated as well.
- Names of the forms should be translated into Arabic; a summary of the information about the ministry as well as its organizational structure, contact information and directions should be translated into Arabic; access details to the Ministry's offices and branches will be translated wherever possible; subjects of the links should be translated and the links to the relevant pages in Arabic should be updated .

In light of the importance of the subject, the legal foundation and the extensive work already invested in identifying the flaws and the required steps for their solution, we decided to conduct an investigation into the current situation.

Unfortunately, we discovered that not much has changed in accessibility to government websites in Arabic and that most of government ministries show a disrespectful attitude towards the Arabic language, and through this, to the needs of its speakers – over a million citizens of the State.

Below are our findings:

The following websites contain available and updated information in Arabic:

- The Prime Minister's Office
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Pensioners Affairs
- Ministry of Environmental Protection
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The following ministries' websites offer partial information in Arabic; extent and quality varies as detailed below:

- Ministry of Public Security – has a tab for an Arabic website, but it is inoperative.
- Ministry of Construction and Housing – has an Arabic website, but information is partial and not regularly updated.
- Ministry of Education – has an Arabic website, but information is partial and not regularly updated.
- Ministry of Science and Technology – has one page in Arabic with no links.
- Ministry of Development of the Negev and Galilee – has one page in Arabic ("About the Ministry").
- Ministry of Transport – has one page in Arabic.
- Ministry of Tourism – about half of the website is translated into Arabic but with many errors.
- Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor – has one page in Arabic.
- Ministry of Culture and Sport – has one page in Arabic.

The following ministries' websites do not include a single word of Arabic:

- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of the Interior
- Ministry of Welfare and Social Services
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Religious Services
- Ministry of Communications
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Ministry of Immigrant Absorption
- Ministry of National Infrastructures

We see the situation as grievous as the ministries whose services are most often required by Arab citizens, offer no services or very partial services in Arabic, among them the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Construction and Housing. This is also the case with the Ministry of Development of the Negev and Galilee, remembering that half of the Galilee residents are Arab citizens.

In addition, the Minister of Minority Affairs in the Prime Minister's Office (a new position) doesn't yet have a website in Hebrew, and therefore neither in Arabic.

The meaning of this distressing picture revealed from these findings is that over one million citizens don't receive basic government services in their mother tongue, which is as known, an official language in the State of Israel.

This situation is exceptionally significant considering the larger picture of ongoing and even deepening exclusion of Arab society from the general Israeli society. Among others, it relates to the under-representation of Arab citizens in the government and public services; lack of inclusion in the economy (subject to which you attach great importance) and increased expressions of racism and de-legitimization against Arab citizens, also among few of our leaders.

In addition to this, governmental services are barely available in Arabic, neither face to face, nor in writing or online.

In honor of the International Mother Language Day, we call on you to instruct those responsible for this issue, especially the Minister in charge of the "eGovernment" project, MK Michael Eitan, to act without delay for a fundamental change to the current situation.

Solving this problem is not only part of the government's obligation to uphold the law and carry out its own decisions, but also a step towards building trust with the Arab citizens and strengthening their feeling that they and their language are a valued, integral part of Israeli society.

Sincerely,

Amnon Beer-Sulitzeanu

Mohammad Darawshe

Co-directors

Copied to:

State Comptroller, Justice (ret.) Micha Lindenstrauss

Minister of Improvement of Government Services, in charge of eGovernment project, MK Michael Eitan

Minister of Minority Affairs, MK Professor Avishay Braverman

Members of The Abraham Fund Initiatives Board