



# The Wisconsin Plan in East Jerusalem: “From Welfare to Work,” Review and Analysis of the Plan in Light of those Affected by it, and the Social, Economical and Political Reality for East Jerusalem

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the experience of the Jerusalemite participants in the Wisconsin plan, and its impact on them as individuals and family members, and on the Jerusalemite society from an economic and social perspective. The paper also relies on field information that stems from the practical experience of the Community Action Center, based on its role in advocating the marginalized groups and empowering them for knowledge and skills that strengthen and support them in dealing with this plan, including other services provided by the official Israeli authorities to the Jerusalemite community.

## Keywords

East Jerusalem, Palestine, Wisconsin Plan, welfare, workfare

## 1. General Background, Wisconsin Plan in East Jerusalem

The Wisconsin Plan is a plan that involves transferring the responsibility of governmental services that are offered to the groups that are unable to work to the private sector, which Israel imported from the United States after it was applied in various European countries.

However, the literature has indicated its failure to achieve its goals, in addition, professors of economy and sociology warned that applying the plan in Israel would be disastrous for many of the targeted groups. In particular, the plan would prove negative towards those vulnerable and marginalized groups, and especially the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem.

In June of 2005 the Israeli government began implementing what is known internationally as the Wisconsin Plan. The plan would be a trial program for two years in four areas, those places are Hadera and Ashkelon, Nazareth, and both East and West Jerusalem. The program targeted 18,000 associates (male and female) in an undeclared accord between the Israeli government and European companies. Those in charge of the program have in place working associates to implement the program. In East Jerusalem the A4E Company undertook the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the program "from welfare to work," and the local implementer is a company called "Ameen," which more precisely is the work center where the program is implemented in East Jerusalem.

### 1.1 *Program Goal*

The stated goal of the program by the Israeli Government and the executing companies is to encourage the groups that depend on a guaranteed income (which is the bare minimum) to find work instead of a guaranteed income. This is considered an important change in the social service system that is built on the welfare state, from which responsibility for the marginalized groups and those unable to work is transferred from the official parties to the private sector. The private sector in turn seeks to increase profit by reducing the welfare expenses and reducing the budgets paid from the official parties. This social policy, from an international welfare state perspective, is categorized under what is called privatization of governmental services, which is considered a transfer of responsibilities and privileges of the official authorities to the private and for-profit sector. In its role, it protects the rights of marginalized groups while not adhering to any shareholders.

### 1.2 *How the Program Works*

The executing company obligates that the "Action Center," which is known in East Jerusalem as the "Ameen" company, mandates those who receive income security and who have been selected to participate in the program to be present daily at the "work station" so that the participants are put in a position in which they are supervised and monitored up to 30-40 hours weekly by Ameen company.

This is mandated upon the participants or else they cease to receive the guaranteed income allocations and the goal of this is to prevent the presence of the participants at any other work-place. At the same time, the policy is in order to exclude them from receiving welfare services from the labor market and this is done through the following mechanism:

### 1.2.1 *Workshops*

The workshops are determined based on the individual program for each participant and they focus on discipline and how to be organized. Additionally, they teach the skills of the labor market.

Furthermore, those seeking employment are taught the right methods to search for jobs. The literature on the Wisconsin Plan suggests the organizations implementing this plan view those who are unemployed and who are participants in the plan as individuals who must be forced to become systematically ready in order to be prepared for the workforce.

### 1.2.2 *Searching for Work*

The vocational advisor (from Ameen company in East Jerusalem) accompanies the participant in the Wisconsin plan in his/her search for work, and continues to monitor his/her work adaptation, and his/her degree of cooperation with the program. In addition, the advisor follows up and prepares all the documents and recommendations that the participant needs, such as tests that are relevant to work and other matters. Furthermore, the advisor or the work objective planner work on writing a statement at the end of each month that revolves around the cooperation of the participant with the plan, and this report is sent to the Israeli National Insurance Institute, in which the report includes a decision from the vocational advisor surrounding the pay allocations to ensure income or a request to deny payment to the participant (all according to the decision of the adviser) in terms of how the participant implemented the plan. One must also keep in mind that this is done by an advisor who works with 50-60 participants at a time.

### 1.2.3 *Voluntary Work*

If the career goals planner cannot find an appropriate job for the participant, he/she will be sent to do voluntary work at a non-profit community foundation. And volunteering here is not optional, but mandatory. The maximum duration of this voluntary work (mandatory) is four months.

Further, the participants are sent to take any available job, such as picking mushrooms or caring for public parks, or cleaning in hospitals or beaches, and other jobs that rely on physical skills. This, as explained by the executing companies, occurs so that the participants become accustomed to discipline and used to regular work habits, even if their participation is mandatory in return for a guaranteed income.

This is what the worksheet introduced by the Alternative Information Center made clear, and viewed it as being unlawful to the rules that it follows, which work to guarantee a job for the participants that is suitable to their

needs, and in return workers get a minimum desired income. And, despite the fact that the economically marginalized groups in the Wisconsin plan received a guaranteed income for a period no less than three years, and this means that they are a group that is unable to work and the guaranteed income represents the least minimum income required to live in dignity.

## **2. Wisconsin Plan from the Point of View of Palestinian Jerusalemite Participants**

In order to better understand this program, its main intentions, and its objectives, and its effects on the economically marginalized groups of the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem, the Community Action Center has in addition to providing advocacy and human rights services and professional support for the participants in the program, established through cooperation with various institutes that work in this field in West Jerusalem, Beersheba, and Nazareth and researchers interested in this topic in order to identify the reality of the Wisconsin plan and the experience of the advocacy institutes who support the participants and how to deal with them.

Furthermore, a crew from the Community Action Center, through a program for individual and civil advocacy and mass and consulting rights, implemented a field study of the participants in the Wisconsin Plan from East Jerusalem and its suburbs. A study was also done for a sample of participants in the plan with the goal of clarifying the program, its goals, its influence on the marginalized groups in East Jerusalem, in order to encourage the participation of civil society, organizations, and to study the opportunities and necessary steps in order to protect and assist the marginalized groups and help ensure their existence and their right to live with integrity in their country, and that of their ancestors. The following is a summary of the study.

### *2.1 The Study Sample*

A random sample was selected from reviewers and participants in the Wisconsin Plan from residents of the Old City and its suburbs in East Jerusalem, and those who had forced duty in West Jerusalem, and who went to the Community Action Center to request assistance and advocacy help to deal with what problems and difficulties they faced in implementing the Wisconsin Plan.

### *2.2 Presentation and Analysis of the Results*

The plan has targeted the more vulnerable groups, of which the first were of women (61% of sample), and the results also imply that these groups were

targeted at a time in which poverty had grown. Additionally, the number of families that depend on the income security rose during the period (1985-2001) by five times the average population growth, and this was before the Second Intifada and the completion of the Apartheid Wall, which saw further rises in poverty.

Moreover, studies show that the plan targets the more impoverished groups and the families whose income is solely dependent upon one person, whereas for most instances that breadwinner is the female.

Additionally; a worksheet published by the Alternative Information Center showed how Ameen's workshops started by blaming the victim and holding responsible the poor for their own poverty. Focus is concentrated on this issue during the workshops. Furthermore, these workshops clarify the fact that these participants are unable to find jobs because of their laziness and unwillingness to go out and seek employment and don't want to work. To this end, the plan pushes the participants towards suffering in order to receive the bare minimum wage for their lives and forces them to work while denying them dignity.

The Wisconsin Plan impels mothers to leave their children home unattended, in spite of the fact that the Jerusalem children who are under the poverty line represent 76.3 percent of what population. This is all as a result of a social, service and political policy directed towards the Jerusalemite Community, with the goal of marginalizing these groups of people. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that jobs and opportunities are nonexistent, while also denying social services to all the entire area of East Jerusalem. Yet despite all of this, the responsible authority accuses the marginalized groups of wanting to obtain money without work.

The Wisconsin plan asserts its desire in terms of increasing the participation of the Palestinian women in the labor market and increasing her chances in the work force. But a study by the Alternative Information Center concludes that the desire to increase the contribution of women in the labor market are mandatory, and applied in an aggressive fashion and one that is inhumane.

The plan doesn't care about the role of women in the Arab family and the importance of her role in raising children and looking after her home. The plan also ignores the family balance that is built upon this basis in the Arab family, which requires the right mechanisms in order to create change. These mechanisms must be built upon true involvement, as the Alternative Information Center studies shows that there is low appreciation for Palestinian women from those responsible in the community workplace in which women volunteer.

The nature of work presented for women participants in this plan reflects the point of view of the people responsible for this plan who view the ability of the Palestinian women as being unfit for the workplace. Additionally; they view that women's work is limited to craftwork, like agriculture or janitorial work, which

is against what the plan really claims it seeks, which is to improve the place of Palestinian women in the workforce. The plan instead places the women with those connected within the workplace in a careless fashion, which is unacceptable and humiliating. The nature of the Wisconsin Plan shows the plan as being negative for the role of women, and it doesn't respect the vision of the Arab family towards what they view as being best for the work that women can accomplish. Additionally, these jobs are done in a mixed environment, which is against the values of Arab culture, and is also against all religious teachings of Palestinian Arab culture.

### 2.3 *Age Categories of the Participants in the Wisconsin Plan*

Random sample studies that were completed by the Community Action Center show that the distribution of age is as follows:

- 9.33% of the age group are less than forty years old.
- 17.33% are between the age of 41 and 50 years old.
- 41.33% between the age of 51-60 years old.
- 32% are from the age group between 61-67 years old.

This percentage shows that the majority (73 percent) from the targeted group are senior citizens. This corresponds with what the Alternative Information Center referred to in regards to targeting the elderly in this plan, especially older women.

Despite the fact that the advisor in the workplace is not qualified to assess the health condition or social stance of the participants, he still has the power to take action in regards to the health condition or social stance of the participants. Research from the Alternative Information Center shows that if the professional advisor wanted to show the report to the company doctor (of Ameen Company), it is often that he decides, and the report is based on the documents presented, and not a direct care and/or connection with the patient. The study also shows that in most cases the doctor from Ameen Company refuses to accept medical documents.

This plan marginalizes the place of the elderly in the Arab society, and also degrades the role of women, as we stated before. It also ignores the importance of age in the Arab society and the important respect and value of the elderly. As known in Palestinian society, if a woman is 45 and above, she has completed her role in raising her children, and is mostly then respected and treated with dignity from those around her. It is not acceptable for her to work; instead her children are those who assist her in the required duties. Alternatively, the

Wisconsin Plan forces women to leave their traditional environments, and to go over to the workplace, which they have not experienced before, and these women are asked to do tasks that aren't suitable for their culture or their place in society.

Additionally; these women are forced to work in jobs that degrade them in society, like agriculture and cleaning, which many participants, male and female, consider very humiliating to them. Furthermore; participants expressed how this plan puts them in an awkward position, that they either stay poor or accept the program, which in return brings shame to them and their family. Many of the participants who head to the Community Action Center decided to maintain their pride and the integrity of their family and decided, therefore, to withdraw from the program, meaning this would prevent them from receiving their bare minimum income, and would result in them remaining poor and hungry. The percentage of those who withdrew from the program, based on a study from the Community Action Center, reached 66 percent.

In regards to the nature of the workshops, studies from the Alternative Information Center show that the participants view the workshops as poorly organized, lacking value, and do not equip the participants with the skills needed to find jobs, which makes it harder for them. These workshops also give a feeling to the participants that they are in a prison or in an academic institute/institution while constantly being monitored.

The studies also mention that the workshops were designed in order to place the participants under the control of the Ameen Company for a period of 30-40 hours each week. The participants are also asked to be there on time and are dealt with firmly. If the participants refuse to adhere to the rules they lose the guaranteed income.

Many of the participants indicated that during many instances when they went to the Community Action Center they were humiliated, screamed at, and forced outside into the hallway from the workshop room, exactly in the same fashion as some teachers do to elementary students by removing them from the classroom as a form of punishment. One of the participants in the plan, and a beneficiary of the Community Action Center, who is an older lady, indicated she was removed from the classroom, and was asked to remain outside in the hallway until the end of working hours. The lady also tried to apologize to the supervisor from Ameen Company in order to return to her classroom, but to no avail, and this gave her a feeling of intense humiliation, and she was in a very emotional state while communicating her experience.

Overall, 75 percent of the participants, in the random sample said the voluntary work was not suitable for them because of their age, as mentioned before in this report. Additionally; many of them/the participants are impaired, and

the jobs that they are provided require too much physical work, and demand that they work 30-40 hours each week. This clarifies the reason why many participants complain, and their unwillingness to accept the plan; and instead, there is a high rate of withdrawal by the participants from the plan. This voluntary work is done in social non-profit institutions, and the participants must complete it so as to receive their basic rights of income allocations; thus, despite the fact that this group is unable to work, they are forced to do so in return for allocations that do not cover the minimum income and does not save them from poverty.

This policy also means that the guaranteed income allocations are no more a guaranteed right, but is based on the condition that the participant must work any job presented to him/her, regardless of age or well-being. This part of the Wisconsin Plan is contrary to the current laws, and considered illegal in regards to the rules that it adheres to, which protect the right of the marginalized groups and also protect the rights of employees.

What was considered as voluntary work is in fact mandatory work that the participants, who are unqualified, are forced to complete, and it is also required that they receive the blessings from the work owner at the location of their employment. In this field, the study of the Alternative Information Center makes it clear that the voluntary work is a form of punishment, in which the participants are punished for being poor and unemployed. Their punishment is carried out by putting them through hard labor that they did not choose but was forced upon them, and they receive in return lower than half of the minimum income that is allowed.

The sample study of the participants also shows that the voluntary work is not in accordance with the social and cultural environment of the Arab-Palestinian community. The study further elaborates that the voluntary work is not in accordance with the religious understandings, in which some of the female volunteers were asked to abandon their religiously accepted clothing in order to complete the required voluntary work asked of them.

In dependence on the experience of the Community Action Center with those affected by the Wisconsin Plan, a few participants stated that they do not know anything about the personnel program, which is put in place by Ameen Company in order to incorporate it with their work. The personnel program shows the relationship between the participant and the Ameen Company, and this means that the participants are not informed of their rights and how to deal with the Wisconsin Plan in order to protect their rights; but instead, their lack of knowledge about the plan leads to an increase in participant dropouts from the plan, which in return means a bigger profit to the private company.



More than half of those in the study sample stated that they didn't come forward with any objections, despite their desires in wanting to object. This is due to the fact that their past experience illustrated that their objections weren't addressed, and they were also in fear that certain punitive procedures would be taken against them from the employers in the program if they objected.

### **3. Conclusion**

The goal of this plan is to provide government budgets allocated to help vulnerable groups, and this is done through the development of a mechanism to deal with them based on blaming the victim, and accusing them of laziness and unwillingness to work. The plan does not view the official services from a responsible angle in order to ensure social insurance for needy groups. The plan furthermore does not recognize the right of the individuals who pay taxes who should receive their insurance when they are in need of it. This plan leads participants to suffer in order to receive a minimal income and forces them to work in exchange for less than half the minimum acceptable wage.

Available statistics indicate that the plan specifically targets Palestinians, and works on placing them in the labor market as part of a marginalized work force, working jobs such as cleaning, agriculture, and service businesses that require physical effort. The plan does not look after the participants by not changing the Israeli racism policy or opening the workplace in front of them, or even finding for them work opportunities and giving them mechanisms to rehabilitate and develop their skills.

It may be that one of the political goals of the plan is the establishment of a work force of Jerusalemites in place of workers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and this is done by flooding the Israeli market with workers who are not skilled in the fields of agriculture, construction, industry, and public services with salaries that are very low, so that there is no place left for workers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to enter Israel for work.

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