**Strategic Plan Creating A *Mechina* (Leadership Preparatory Program) for At-Risk Youth from the Arab Community**

**Overall goal: To create a space for the growth and development of Arab youth in Israeli society post-high school**

The purpose of this document is to set out the infrastructure for establishing an Arab-Israeli *mechina* (leadership preparatory program). The idea for creating such a *mechina* had already arisen prior to the Jewish-Arab crisis of May 2021 following Israel’s military operation in Gaza. However, this crisis served as a wakeup call regarding the urgent need for a post-high school *mechina* for Arab youth.

The Arab community in Israel, comprising approximately 21.1% of the population,[[1]](#footnote-1) is complex in many respects—including nationally, economically, socially, and in terms of identity. Given the conflict-ridden history of the development of the State of Israel, and changes now taking place in Israeli society, this community now faces a reality of understandable failures in relation to the State. Its lack of a sense of belonging, identity, legitimacy, and security has provided a fertile ground for the problems that have we have witnessed in recent years. Young Israeli Arabs especially (aged 18–35), suffering from long-term unemployment, are experiencing a crisis. Israel is witnessing a growth in extremism in the mindsets and behavior of young Arabs, both in relation to traditional Arab society and to Jewish-Israeli society. Remaining economically inactive without developing a meaningful structure in their lives has left young Arab Israelis facing limitations, alienation, and difficulties integrating into Israeli society. The immediate post-high school years, from ages 18–20, are critical in shaping identity, and self- and social-perceptions, as well as for developing a positive outlook toward the future. This period is a major turning point in life, when an individual takes stock and asks questions about how he or she wants to shape their life.

Before going into more detail regarding our plans for the *mechina*, we would like to briefly provide some relevant background regarding our overall goal in establishing such a program. The main studies examining key indicators in relation to the Arab community in Israel were carried out by Prof. Sammy Smooha (2015) whose in-depth study into the Arab community in Israel from 1976 through the present day examined Arab and Jewish attitudes toward issues of nationality, citizenship, coexistence, and identity. According to Smooha, the dominant themes in Israeli discourse involve extremism, whereby Israeli Arabs have extreme positions with respect to Israel and identify with Palestinian society. On the other hand, Smooha argues that while the perceptions of Arab citizens of Israel have worsened, this deterioration arises from civic issues of socioeconomic inequality and inequalities within the Israeli democratic framework. Similarly, Arab-Israeli reactions to key issues in recent years, such as the Palestinian issue and the problem of violence within Arab society, have come from a position of feeling part of Israeli society and wanting to enjoy full equality of rights (Smooha, 2015, pp. 276–280).

**We seek to establish a *mechina* where we can address this complex reality**. The *mechina* and which will be connected to the reality and discourse of Israeli society today. We intend to bring a unifying narrative according to which coexistence[[2]](#footnote-2) is not a mere aspiration, but rather involves the ideal of creating of a shared life alongside each other. In addition, in terms of empowerment, we will engage with students to examine the personal, communal, and national past to shape an identity and a conscious self that is relevant to a shared life in Israel. Students will undergo empowerment sessions, tour days, and a tour of the country that will bring them into close contact with different cultures and identities, all serving as a basis for creating a healthy civil society.

Many studies have examined the immediate post-high school years and the main impact of this period on integration into the labor force. In a study of youth in OECD countries, Carcillo et al. (2015) found a direct relationship between integration into the labor force during these years and future ability to develop professionally and economically. Furthermore, other studies have shown that those who experience periods of unemployment at a young age may also face unemployment later in life (Gregg & Tominey, 2005) or have a low income (Mroz & Savage, 2006). A major phenomenon that has been extensively studied in relation to young Arabs is that of economic inactivity (Not in Employment, Education, or Training, or NEET). This phenomenon is manifested in terms of a lack of participation in the labor market, professional training, or studies, with significant consequences. In Israel, 40% of young Arabs aged 18–22 are considered NEETs compared with 28% of the general population, including Jews (Ackerstein & Dahan, 2011). This figure is part of the context in which nearly half of Arab families in Israel are living below the poverty line[[3]](#footnote-3) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Consequently, there is a considerable need for young Arabs to find employment.

Numerous studies (e.g. Miari, Nabwani & Khattab, 2011; Yeshiv & Kassir, 2013) have found a number of barriers to employment for Arabs in Israel—in particular, discrimination, living in the geographical periphery, poor accessibility of Arab towns and villages to employment centers, and a lack of childcare facilities for families with young children (which prevents women from entering the labor market). These and many other barriers hinder the integration of Arabs into the Israeli labor market at the crucial milestone of their immediate post-high school years.

**In light of the above, we intend to establish a *mechina* that will provide solutions to these issues through three tracks: (a) individual/group empowerment; (b) vocational training; (c) meaningful social involvement in the twelfth grade and full civilian national service in the following year**. In the second year of the *mechina*, we plan to connect participants with mentors from civil society. Furthermore, we intend to identify participants’ areas of interest and connect them to job placements that will be meaningful for them. We aim to support participants for five years after completion of the *mechina* via an alumni coordinator who will monitor and develop alumni relations, and provide assistance and information where required, to help alumni transition from high school through starting a family and entering the labor market.

The intended participants of the *mechina* are those defined as at-risk youth from the Arab community in Israel. The proposed *mechina* program is designed to address their unique needs, with the understanding that, given all the phenomena described above, their situation is more severe that those of other adolescents. Following high school, members of this group often lack a clear sense of future direction that can help them create a better adult life. Access to civilian national service and vocational training, as well as personal and group support from the *mechina* and dedicated mentors, will provide a comprehensive response to their unique needs.

A study of high school graduates conducted by the Shamir Research Institute and the Derech Kfar Education Institute (2021), examined graduates from the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School (in northern Israel) who had completed their studies in the three preceding years (2018–2020). The findings were consistent with the data presented above – 35% of graduates were not employed. Furthermore, in response to questions about job satisfaction, 83% responded that they were somewhat dissatisfied.

In addition to these complexities, there is also a disparity between post-high school frameworks that are relevant and accessible to Jewish Israelis, and those for Arab high school graduates. Mandatory military and civil national service help prepare Jewish youth for entry into the Israeli labor market as well as develop independence, adaptability, belonging, and a social support network. Young Arab Israelis rarely have access to these frameworks, and as a result, their ability to integrate into the labor market is reduced. This is exacerbated by the fact that higher wage sectors of the labor market are dominated by the Jewish population (Khattab & Miari, 2013). A committee led by Prof. Zvi Eckstein (2020) which examined the issue of employment ahead of the year 2030, recommended “the creation of pathways [for Arab youth] that would help them transition between high school and the world of work, and that would have a role similar to that of military service in Jewish society in terms of personal development.”

We would like to establish a *mechina* for at-risk Arab youth that will constitute a parallel post-high school pathway to that available to Jewish youth, and tha will address the challenges faced by the Arab community in Israel. The program will advance individual development, reinforce students’ sense of self-efficacy, help them establish a social support network, and reduce disparities with respect to Jewish society, such as in Hebrew literacy and access to knowledge and relevant guidance. The civilian national service opportunities in which students can take part during the second year of the proposed *mechina* program will be affiliated with mainstream civilian national service organizations, fulfill existing statutory civilian service requirements, and facilitate integration into the labor market. Moreover, as discussed above, students will be supported by personal, vocational, and social mentors, as well as by the staff of the *mechina*, who will be responsible adults who can act as an important source of support for mentees during times of crisis.

Today, there are three main clusters of factors that prevent the integration of Arabs into Israel’s labor market: (a) structural-ethnic; (b) spatial; (c) personal and sociodemographic.

*Structural-ethnic factors*: Studies have shown that ethnic factors play a significant role in political marginalization, which in many cases gives rise to discrimination in the allocation of resources for economic development, as well as in job recruitment. Linguistic and cultural disparities also present a significant barrier both on the part of the minority population, who sometimes fear leaving their ethnic enclaves, and on the part of employers, who in many cases prefer to recruit employees from the majority population (Bynner & Persons, 2002; Neumark, 2002; Coles et al., 2010). Although Arabs form approximately 20% of the Israeli population, they comprise only 13.1% of the civilian workforce (Yeshiv & Kasir, 2013). Generally, a group that is not sufficiently able to acquire skills, competencies, membership of social networks, or fluency in the dominant state language may also have difficulties with integrating into the labor market (Zeira, Benvenisti, & Rafaeli, 2012).

*Spatial factors:* Living on the geographical periphery of Israel, where employment opportunities are far more limited, is also a risk factor for economic inactivity and socio-geographic segregation. Most employment opportunities are in areas where the dominant majority population live. As a result, geographical proximity to the majority population increases the chances of being employed, whereas segregation in more remote ethnic enclaves reinforces the likelihood of economic inactivity (Schnell & Sofer, 2006; Jamal, 2011). The vast majority of the Arab population of Israel lives in villages in the north of the country and in the Triangle region (a cluster of Arab towns and villages in the eastern Sharon plain among the Samarian foothills) (Rekhess and Rudnicki, 2009). This is a geographic periphery that also often suffers from a lack of public transportation, and as a result, residents suffer from a lack of access to centers of employment. Moreover, most Arabs work in or near their towns or villages of residence (Yeshiv & Kasir, 2013).

*Personal and sociodemographic factors:* These factors refer first and foremost to personal characteristics. In this context, a link has been found between gender, family status, and level of education and economic inactivity. For example, a young woman’s chances of becoming economically inactive post-high school are higher than those of her male peers (Carcillo et al., 2015). Regarding education, a recent study in OECD countries indicated a strong positive relationship between low levels of education and NEET status: 85% of NEETs reported that they did not have a high school diploma, about half of NEETs were under 25, and 16% of these were high school graduates. It was also found that parents (3% of NEETs) and those dealing with health issues (5% of NEETs) were more common among the NEET population than among the general youth population (Carcillo et al., 2015).

**We wish to establish a *mechina* program that will directly address these three barriers**. In terms of structural-ethnic barriers, around half of the *mechina* program will consist of learning and support in bridging linguistic and literacy gaps, both in the participants’ native Arabic language and in Hebrew. In terms of geographic factors, we are keen to “change the area code” of the participants, and take them out of their familiar environments and expose them to the diversity within Israeli society. Professional training will take place at ORT Kiryat Bialik College, where students will encounter groups from other sectors of society. In terms of vocational training, we will focus on professions that will give students the tools they need to integrate into the labor market. Indeed, employment integration will form the basis of the *mechina’s* key success indicators, as this is a crucial issue in the face of the forces that shape and influence the lives of the students, and which pull them in other, less productive, directions.

At the end of the first year, participants will take part in a field trip around the country, during which they will be able to encounter the various narratives within Israeli society. The trip will emphasize that it is possible for contrasting narratives to coexist in partnership in Israeli society. In terms of personal and sociodemographic factors, we are keen to address the reality that our students experience, including gender issues and the importance of delaying marriage so that students can develop the personal abilities, maturity, and vocational skills that will empower them to become independent and create a healthier society.

**Vision**

We seek to establish a *mechina* for young Arab men and women, to educate them as complete individuals, while providing appropriate responses for at-risk youth in their formative post-high school years. Our vision is to create an effective window of opportunity for young people, during which they can succeed in shedding the worldviews and behavior patterns that have been ingrained in them for the past 18 years, and transition to another starting point for their lives.

In our view, the transformative quality of the *mechina* concept—long a norm in Jewish Israeli society—can be equally significant and relevant for Arab society. To have a long-term impact on societal health, it is important to create a suitable framework for students’ personal development, including their development of a worldview, values, and positive aspirations for the future.

We wish to develop, in partnership with *mechina* students, an integrative identity, through which they will see the world and define the direction of their lives. Identity is more than the totality of an individual’s beliefs; a healthy identity is an integrative, organized perception whose components are religion, culture, and civic and professional status, which coexist peacefully and are not mutually contradictory.

We are eager for parents and families to take part in the process, and to be a significant focal point for our ability to enact successful behavioral and mental transformation through the *mechina*.

We estimate that establishing the *mechina* will take five years. During this time, the two years of the *mechina* program will take shape, as detailed below: the twelfth grade *mechina* year, and the thirteenth-grade program, where students will take part in three main channels: (a) social-personal empowerment; (b) contributing to the community; and (c) vocational training. Following this, the five-year *mechina* alumni support network will be formed: the support, mentoring, and assistance for *mechina* alumni that will run until age 25. In parallel, we will work to establish a *mechina* with a physical site and full weekly activities by the end of the first five years—with support and cooperation from various bodies, including government, local authorities, civilian, and other partners.

**Characteristics of *Mechina* graduates:** *Mechina* graduates will be responsible adults with a conscious self-identity, who are connected to their past while being able to imagine and create a positive, significant future for themselves. They will be contributing citizens who are able to reconcile the contradictions within Arab society and in Israeli civil society in general. They will have a sustainable approach to the world of work and be part of functioning families.

**Strategic Initiatives**

The establishment of the *mechina* in Acre is led by four staff members from the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School. Iyyad Saleh (the school principal), Samah Samali, Hamis Jamassi, and Ashara Issa, in partnership with ORT Israel and with ideological support from the Derech Kfar Educational Institute. The *mechina* will start out as a pilot program with the twelfth grade of Hebrew year 5782 (September 2021-September 2022) at the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School with the aim of expanding the program to additional schools for at-risk Arab youth.

Partners currently involved in establishing the *mechina* infrastructure:

1. Ort Israel provides a structural, organizational, and budgetary support framework. We also have links to Ort Kiryat Bialik College as a center for vocational training and enabling socioeconomic mobility.
2. Heznek L’Atid (“Sprint to the Future,” an NGO working to increase the social mobility of communities from Israel’s socio-geographic peripheries)—in particular its Heznek L’Taasiyya (“Sprint to Industry”) project—as a supporting body for vocational and social development.
3. Derech Kfar (“Village Way”) Educational Institute, an NGO established to provide education solutions for immigrants and at-risk youth in Israel. Derech Kfar is an ideological partner and is supporting the establishment of the *mechina* by helping developing strategy and a multi-year syllabus reflecting its concept of education. Derech Kfar is a pioneer in establishing pre-military service *mechina* programs for at-risk youth. It currently runs three programs and three *mechina* preparatory programs for at-risk youth—the Yemin Orde youth village for boys, the Israeli leadership preparatory program for young women, and the Nitzotz (“Spark”) *mechina* in Hatzor HaGlilit in northern Israel.
4. The State of Israel: At a later stage, the *mechina* will join the state’s approved framework in a regulatory category alongside the pre-military service and Nitzotz *mechinas*, etc.

**Steps for Establishing the *Mechina***

1. Developing the *mechina*—Currently, this being run on a voluntary basis by the staff of the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School, with support from a facilitator from the Derech Kfar Education Institute (Itzik Ben Shalom). We are using the *mechina’s* in-house staff and existing resources to create the components described in this vision document for the current year (Hebrew year 5782—September 2021–September 2022).
2. The *mechina* site—Sessions will take place at the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School. If we receive funding to develop the *mechina*, we will recruit and train two staff members according to the job specification requirements for two main channels: (1) individual and group support/guidance for the program; (2) guidance/support for the vocational and volunteering components of the program. These staff members will become partners in developing the program, and will enable the *mechina’s* leaders to continue with all the tasks required to establish the *mechina*—including steering processes, connecting with partners, developing content, and leading the first years of the *mechina* program.
3. Staff training—The leadership team and team members who will be recruited will undergo ongoing joint training led by a facilitator from the Derech Kfar Institute (Yitzhak Ben Shalom) and other facilitators from the same Institute on relevant issues. The training will focus on connecting to the purpose and vision of the *mechina*, creating a methodology to develop human capital in the *mechina*, building a syllabus and an annual Gantt chart, and creating content to develop a shared language and values for the *mechina* in relation to issues raised with the participants and in the empowerment and personal development days.
4. *Mechina* participants—The *mechina* will comprise 12th grade students from the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School, with the aim of duplicating the structure and content of the project for additional programs in other places by building partnerships.

***Mechina* Structure and General Syllabus**

**Twelfth grade—year one:** This will take place as a preparatory year (including in summer), when the students participating in the program (a target of 20) will continue with their scheduled studies three days each week:

1. **Personal and group empowerment (two hours per week)**—This includes developing identity, identifying skills and abilities, improving literacy and language, developing a peer group, addressing an audience, exposure to groups in Israeli society, behavior analysis, adapting to the labor market, and general knowledge as a tool for building a sense of connection to the world. **Supported by a social instructor at an individual and group level.**
2. **Social involvement—“*Tikkun Olam*” (“Repairing the World”) (four hours per week)—**The *mechina* students will volunteer in organizations that they will choose together. The goal of this channel is to prepare them for civilian service in Year 3 and to serve as an additional team-building tool and to drive their transformation from a consumer mentality to productive thinking, and from survival to leadership. **Supported by a social** **instructor on an individual and group level.**
3. **Vocational training (7 hours per week)—**This will take place at the Bialik Ort Academic College, working with the students to define their subjects that interest and motivate them. **Supported by a professional instructor at the individual and group level, who will monitor participation and interest in the subjects studied.**
4. **Tour days—one full day per month** in accordance with the syllabus and the topics set out above. At the end of the year, there will be an Akko journey that will bring the Year 1 *mechina* graduates into contact with all the narratives in Israeli society.

**Thirteenth grade (Year 2)**

The *mechina* students will have a full schedule, combining full civilian service[[4]](#footnote-4) with participation in cooperation with relevant NGOs and integration into the workplace. This integration will involve identifying students’ personal motivations and areas of interest and connecting them with appropriate mentors from the private and public sectors. During this year, the *mechina* students will continue to be supported by both a social and a professional instructor, and will also enjoy the full support of the *mechina* staff from the Mahat Akko Ort Technology High School. The *mechina* students will undergo additional learning and development processes during this year, together with their civilian service and job placements. They will undertake an enrichment process through which they will develop key skills and abilities to help them adapt to the world of work. Creating employment opportunities for at-risk youth entails helping them examine their core motivations as well as introducing them to realistic job opportunities that were previously unattainable for them. This, as well as connecting them with key individuals who can serve as employers and mentors, can be a game changer in promoting real socio-economic mobility.

**Five years after the two-year *mechina* (years 3-8):** This will be a period of close supervision of *mechina* graduates, including provision of information and support in studies, professional placements, and scholarships. This will include: identifying alumni needs and providing them with information that will enable the overarching goal of establishing the *mechina* framework; and facilitating alumni meetings and involving alumni in supporting new *mechina* students as responsible adults. This process is based on the concept of “supporting you all the way,” and reflects the understanding that an ongoing support process is required so that the first two years of the *mechina* do not go to waste in light of other forces in students’ lives. **During this process, graduates will be supported by an alumni coordinator whose work will expand over time, and by collaborations with relevant organizations**.

**Success Indicators**

1. 90% of alumni integrated into the labor market in the five years following the two-year *mechina* program.
2. 100% of alumni reporting that the *mechina* helped to shape their self-perceptions and worldview and to integrate into the labor market.
3. The *mechina* is expanded to other communities as a tool for overcoming disparities in Arab society in the formative post-high school years.
4. State recognition for the *mechina* framework as a body that can help mediate in Arab society and contribute to a healthier society.

**Budget**

 In the draft budget provided, we are envisaging the development of the *mechina* in its first five years, when the budget is expected to grow in line with this development, i.e. the establishment of the two years of the *mechina* followed by the alumni guidance and support process. The budget is attached as a separate Excel spreadsheet.

1. 1,956,000 citizens [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Coexistence at a semantic level—maintaining existence alongside each other, not with each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compared with around 15% of Jewish families. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Including all benefits and rights of full civilian service. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)