

Israel



Compromise or conflict

After the violence in Umm al-Hiran that claimed two lives, can the state push through Beduin resettlement in the Negev?

By Ariel Ben Solomon



Beduins collect their belongings from the ruins of their demolished homes in the village of Umm al-Hiran in the southern Negev, January 18

A week after security forces clashed violently with residents of Umm al-Hiran, tensions in the unrecognized Beduin village remained high. The anger in the air was palpable as locals and visitors congregated in the mourning tent for Yaqoub Musa Abu al-Qiyan, shot dead by police during protests as bulldozers moved in to begin demolishing the ramshackle settlement.

Police say al-Qiyan purposely rammed and killed an officer, Staff Sgt.-Maj. Erez Levi. Security authorities said after the incident that al-Qiyan was a member of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement and may have been inspired by Islamic State. However, local Beduin and Arab MKs reject the police version of events, saying he lost control of his vehicle after being shot and only then crashed into the officer.

“Bibi [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] is a liar,” says Akram Abu al-Qiyan, a resident of Umm al-Hiran and nephew of the dead man. “We want an investigation into the killing.”

The clash took place on January 18 when Israeli authorities began enforcing a Supreme Court decision to evict the residents to make way for a Jewish town called Hiran.

Shacks and wreckage from the demolitions become apparent as you turn onto the bumpy, off-road dirt path leading down and into the isolated village, a 30-minute drive from Beersheba and located just east of Hura, a recognized village, where al-Qiyan was a high school teacher.

In the mourning tent, local residents in jeans, as well as a number of bearded Islamic fundamentalists dressed in Salafi traditional robes and sandals, listened to talks by various visiting Arab figures, including a Christian Orthodox priest from Jerusalem, and some Jews.

While no Arab MKs were present on the day *The Jerusalem Report* visited, they were there in full force during the demolitions. Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan has blamed Arab politicians for inciting violence and preventing a negotiated solution.

In a letter to Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit a day after the incident, Erdan called for a criminal investigation against Joint List MKs Ayman Odeh (Hadash), who was injured during the violence, Jamal Zahalka (Balad) and Haneen Zoabi (Balad).

Joint List MK Yusef Jabareen (Hadash), who also attended the protest, says the government intends to uproot Umm al-Hiran in order to establish a Jewish settlement in the same place, “so why can’t the new settlement be a combined Jewish and Arab settlement?”

“The state wants to concentrate the Negev Arab Beduin in the smallest area of land possible and treat them as enemies,” he asserts to *The Report*.

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As to the charge that the Arab MKs are creating violence through incitement, Jabareen responds, “The residents of Umm al-Hiran approached the Joint List in order to help protect their community and came to the Knesset several times.

“We stand by them not because they are Arabs, but because they are victims,” he adds.

Jabareen says the violence that occurred was initiated by the police and not the Beduin, and he blames police for the two deaths that occurred. “We will continue to demand a commission of inquiry until the truth comes out,” he says.

Umm al-Hiran was just the latest flashpoint in the ongoing and sometimes violent conflict between the state and its Beduin citizens over the sprawling unrecognized settlements scattered across the Negev desert.

The cycle of demolitions, protests and



Knesset debates, which has continued for years, intensified after the government began pushing the Praver-Begin resettlement bill, which passed its first reading in the Knesset in the summer of 2013. That bill sought a compromise by legalizing 63 percent of land claimed by the Beduin. The bill’s Arab opponents deemed it insufficient, and those on the Right saw it as too generous, preventing the plan from succeeding.

In December 2013, the government decided to suspend the plan after coming up against stiff opposition in the Knesset. Coalition MKs retracted their support after learning that the Beduin had not agreed to the plan.

The State Comptroller highlighted the Negev Beduin issue in a May 2016 report, which stated that one third of the estimated 200,000 Beduin in the Negev live in unrecognized settlements. The Beduin population is expected to double in 15 years, according to the report, which recommended that the state settle the ownership claims as quickly



Policemen stand guard outside Umm al-Hiran as bulldozers demolish dwellings in line with a court order

ployment within the Beduin community,” Arnon Peleg, the spokesman for the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, tells The Report. “However, we believe that the ‘illegal housing’ Minister Ariel is referring to is the ongoing state policy of neglect, which can only be solved by recognition of the over 30 unrecognized villages in the Negev.

“More enforcement will only hurt the trust between the Beduin community and the state, which is crucial for this new plan to succeed.”

Offer Dagan, coordinator of the Negev project for the NGO Sikkuy – the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality – tells The Report that for decades, the government policy prevented viable services for the Arab Beduin living in the unrecognized villages.

“It is time for the government ministries to invest efforts in making critical services such as education and public transportation accessible to them.”

He is calling on the government to reach a solution with the Beduin through direct negotiations with the local committees of the unrecognized villages.

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The state counters that it had sought to ward off the need to evacuate Umm al-Hiran forcibly by offering generous terms to residents, but the proposal was thwarted by radical elements in the Arab sector and NGOs that have become obstacles to any settlement that does not meet all the Beduin demands by legalizing illegal settlement.

Yair Maayan, head of the Beduin Development and Settlement Authority in the Negev, tells The Report that the state made “a very generous offer” before the police operation to dismantle Umm al-Hiran began, and that the state is committed to resettling the Beduin.

ACCORDING TO Maayan, the deal tentatively reached with the Beduin the night before the police action included a free plot of land worth 200,000 shekels in Hura for each family, and the option to buy another plot for children at a discounted price of 120,000 shekels. In addition, every family would have received compensation of 100,000 to 200,000 shekels for their illegal structures.

“Unfortunately, the night before the evacuation – after they had already agreed to a deal – the Beduin village leadership arrived at our offices and suddenly asked for 400,000 shekels compensation for each family and 1,500 shekels for each family for agriculture; an additional 15 properties for their sheep; and land to build shops and for industry.”

Maayan speculates that phone calls to the Beduin delegation received from outside parties at the last minute sparked exaggerated demands that scuttled a deal.

“At first they came to sign, and then after they started getting calls they raised their demands,” he says.

The Supreme Court had already ruled in the state’s favor to demolish the illegal settlement. “We had no obligation, but wanted to prevent the violence – to have them leave by agreement.”

Asked about involvement of Arab MKs on the side of the Beduin, Maayan says they were constantly in touch with the Beduin leaders and left-wing NGOs to work out a better deal for the Beduin vis-à-vis the government.

Regarding the state’s future plan for dealing with the issue, Maayan says, “We will continue to go family to family to work out deals. We think we can come to an agreement with the majority of Beduin.”

He expects future evacuations of illegal

as possible and develop the area.

ON FEBRUARY 12, the government approved a five-year (2017-2022) three billion shekel plan to develop the Beduin sector in the south.

“The program combines activities in the areas of education and society while simultaneously taking substantive action against illegal building and returning land to the state,” said Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel, who is responsible for regulating Beduin settlement in the south.

The plan also includes a budget for improving infrastructure and creating 10 new industrial zones to increase the employment rate. Only 25 percent of Beduin women and 64 percent of men are employed. According to data released by Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, the employment rate in the fourth quarter of 2016 among Jews ages 25-64 was 81.6 percent.

“It is high time that the government devote funds to support education and em-

settlements to be easier after the Umm al-Hiran demolition is completed because it will establish that the state is serious. He sees the state finishing the resettlement process for the entire Negev over the next six to eight years, predicting that most Beduin will end up settling for a deal similar to what was offered to the residents of Umm al-Hiran.

ELI ATZMON, former deputy head of the Beduin Development and Settlement Authority (1996-2000) and currently serving as an adviser to local Negev Beduin authorities, tells The Report that the state's version of events in Umm al-Hiran should not be believed.

He blames the government for not starting the negotiations earlier and giving them more time.

"The problem of the Beduin is not a judicial problem, but a social one. If the solution is judicial, then they can all be evacuated," he says.

Atzmon explains that some of the land that the state wishes to grant the Beduin already has been divvied up among the families themselves, and that if Beduin from an outside family moved in it would create conflict.

"The law of the Beduin is stronger than that of the state," he says.

Atzmon recalls that he was dealing with the issue of Umm al-Hiran back in 1997, when some 80 percent of the residents agreed to move to Hura but the minority blew up the deal.

Regarding current events, he does not see the reason for the government to use force, saying, "Israel will not succeed by doing anything by force in the Negev," and that clashes will continue if the state continues to destroy settlements.

As for the involvement of Arab MKs and the Islamic Movement, Atzmon says they usually enter where there is a vacuum, and where there is poverty, poor infrastructure and unemployment, which ripen the conditions for these political movements to enter.

Indeed, the Beduin tend to be non-ideo-



logical with only small numbers joining the Islamic Movement, Islamic State or nationalist political movements such as the Balad party, a faction in the Joint List that holds three Knesset seats.

Dr. Mordechai Zaken, head of minority affairs in the Public Security Ministry, tells The Report that "the primary Beduin loyalty by far is to their own family or clan, and they use the religious and nationalist political movements for their own benefit."

This reality creates an opening for the state to negotiate and deal pragmatically with the families themselves, but the Arab MKs, NGOs, and a minority of ideologically radical Beduin forces have coopted the Beduin issue, making it harder to solve.

Beduin in Umm al-Hiran and nearby villages say they are open to compromise. Yet sources tell The Report that the reality of

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carrying this out has been thwarted by their leadership's submission to greater political forces.

Faiz Alawil, a schoolteacher from the Beduin town of Tel Sheva, located about 30 minutes west of Umm al-Hiran, says he



AMIR COHEN / REUTERS



AMMAR AWAD / REUTERS

would like to see the Beduin move from unrecognized villages into recognized ones and gain access to improved health care, education and standard of living.

ALAWIL, HOWEVER, accuses Arab politicians, in particular from the Islamic Movement and Balad, of using the issue for propaganda purposes to boost their influence in the Beduin sector.

“The politicians seek media attention and don’t do anything,” he says. “The Beduin are not suckers. It cannot be that the Arab MKs come [only] when there is a conflict.”

Younis Abu Saad of the nearby recognized village of Lakiya, also located within the cluster of villages near Hura, says the government is not offering the Beduin enough land or money for resettlement.

“If the state would offer us a good solu-

tion, we would agree,” he says. “We want the same conditions as Jews, but the state does not want to give land to Arabs because they are Arabs. The solution can only come from the government.”

That sentiment is backed up by another resident of Lakiya who did not want to be identified. “We want to take part in the country, to integrate, but the other side doesn’t want us,” he says.

Saying that Lakiya is overcrowded and the city limits need to be expanded, he adds, “The state wants to give us a small amount of land and throw all of the Arabs onto it.”

While it appears likely the state will have some success in convincing Beduin to accept resettlement offers, resistance is likely to continue each step of the way. Arab MKs and NGOs will seek to further international-

(Above) Police and demonstrators clash after a resident of the village and a policeman were killed during the early hours of the operation; (left) Joint List MK Ayman Odeh was injured during the clashes

ize the conflict, but this strategy could prove to be limited since the new US administration probably will oppose any international moves to condemn or punish Israel.

The question is whether the state will have the stomach to push resettlement, come hell or high water. If the state demonstrates this during the next demolitions, its resettlement strategy is likely to be successful, forcing the Beduin to compromise or come away with nothing – which is what happened to those residents of Umm al-Hiran who rejected the deal offered to them. ■