



## Call for Written Contributions: ILEF Conference on *Civilian Protection and Regional Stability*

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### ***Civilian Protection in the Negev: Unequal Access to Shelters and the Urgent Need to Implement International Humanitarian Law***

*The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF) is an Arab-Jewish civil society organization based in southern Israel's Negev/Naqab region. Founded in 1997, NCF works to promote the civil and political rights of Arab Bedouin citizens of the State of Israel, with a focus on spatial justice, equitable planning, and access to essential services. Within this framework, and in the current context of war, NCF has devoted significant attention to the urgent issue of civilian protection—documenting how Bedouin communities face systematic exclusion from shelter infrastructure, emergency planning, and state-provided safety measures.*

*The findings in this communication draw on NCF's documentation and the work of its research center, **Nagabiya: The Bedouin Society Knowledge and Research Hub**. Established in 2023, Nagabiya was founded to fill a critical gap in official data regarding some 80,000 residents of 35 unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. These communities are largely absent from State surveys and statistics, resulting in their needs being ignored in planning and policymaking.*

#### **Introduction**

In recent years, and especially during repeated rounds of conflict, Bedouin communities have faced severe absences in protection and infrastructure. Entire families have been left without access to bomb shelters, warning systems, or clear emergency protocols. This contribution draws on NCF's extensive fieldwork and research to highlight these ongoing challenges and to propose urgent steps to ensure equal civilian protection for all.

### **Section 1 – Legal Obligations Under International Humanitarian Law**

Under international humanitarian law (IHL) and Israel's national framework, the State of Israel bears a clear and inviolable obligation to ensure the protection of all civilians in times of armed conflict.

#### **International Obligations**

Article 3 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) requires all parties to a conflict to safeguard the lives and dignity of civilians without discrimination. Civilian populations must be protected against the dangers arising from military operations and provided with necessary measures for their security.

These provisions are not optional; they apply equally to all civilians, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or legal status of their locality.

## **National Civil Defense Obligations**

Israel's Civil Defense Law (1951) enshrines similar duties at the national level. It empowers the Home Front Command and other State bodies to provide civil defense infrastructure—including public shelters, reinforced rooms (mamad/miklat), and emergency guidance. The law does not limit these protections to recognized towns; it defines them as a responsibility toward all citizens.

## **Breach Through Exclusion**

Despite these obligations, decades of planning policy have excluded approximately 80,000 Bedouin citizens living in 35 unrecognized villages in the Negev from basic civil defense infrastructure.

- These communities cannot legally obtain building permits for reinforced rooms or shelters because their villages lack formal planning status.
- The Home Front Command, while legally authorized to install protective infrastructure, has repeatedly declined to do so in unrecognized areas.
- As a result, entire communities are left with no shelters, no designated safe spaces, and no official emergency protocols—despite being full citizens living in areas repeatedly struck by missiles.

## **Consequences**

This exclusion is not only a planning failure; it constitutes a breach of Israel's obligations under both IHL and national law. By denying equal access to life-saving protection, the State creates a hierarchy of citizenship in which Bedouin communities face disproportionate risks during conflict.

The result is evident in tragic incidents: children killed while sheltering in open fields, families sleeping under bridges, and residents forced to dig makeshift trenches while fearing legal repercussions.

**The absence of shelters in unrecognized villages is therefore not a simple lack of infrastructure — it is a systemic violation of the fundamental right to protection.**

## **Section 2 – Strategies to Protect Civilians**

While legal obligations are clear, practical strategies to protect civilians in the Negev have remained disparate and, for Bedouin communities, largely absent. Drawing on NCF's documentation and advocacy, the following urgent strategies are proposed to close these protection gaps.

### **A. Immediate Deployment of Protective Infrastructure**

Bedouin citizens in both recognized and unrecognized localities require rapid access to life-saving infrastructure:

- **Mobile Shelters:** Out of 102 mobile shelters deployed to southern communities in spring 2025, only **two** were placed in Bedouin villages. Mobile units must be distributed equitably and prioritized for unrecognized villages, where permanent structures are legally barred.
- **Public Shelters in Towns:** Even in recognized towns, the number of public shelters is critically low (e.g., Rahat has only five shelters for 79,000 residents; Ar'ara BaNegev has none). Scaling up protected spaces in Bedouin towns are an immediate, achievable step.

## **B. Integrate Unrecognized Villages into Emergency Planning**

Civilian protection strategies must reach communities currently invisible to State systems:

- **Include in National Siren Networks:** Many unrecognized villages lack access to siren warning systems. Connecting these areas would provide early warnings that save lives.
- **Establish Clear Emergency Protocols:** In previous escalations, residents were told by the Home Front Command to “exit their homes” without guidance on where to go. Official emergency instructions, drills, and designated safe zones must be established in every community.
- Emergency alerts and safety instructions are not consistently available in Arabic. Deploying Arabic-speaking personnel and ensuring that all materials are culturally and linguistically accessible would remove a critical operational barrier.

## **C. Remove Structural Barriers to Self-Protection**

Residents of unrecognized villages often fear fines or demolition orders for even minimal self-built protection:

- **Decriminalize Self-Built Shelters:** Families who dig trenches or build makeshift shelters should not face punitive enforcement. A temporary protection waiver or an emergency permit system could save lives.
- **Support Community-Led Initiatives:** Local committees and NGOs such as NCF and RCUV have demonstrated the capacity to organize shelter access and document needs. State institutions should partner with these initiatives rather than obstruct them.

## **D. Close the Budget Gaps**

Budgets for civil defense infrastructure are currently tied to planning status, effectively excluding unrecognized villages. This creates systemic discrimination:

- Allocate dedicated funds for shelters, mobile units, and emergency planning in unrecognized areas.
- Establish transparent criteria for distribution, monitored in partnership with civil society.

### **E. Examples of Local Coordination**

During the June 2025 escalation, NCF worked with the municipality of Be'er Sheva to open underground parking shelters in shopping centers to Bedouin families. While some access was granted, families often had to travel long distances, bringing mattresses and supplies to spend nights in makeshift conditions. These experiences highlight both the willingness of some local authorities to cooperate and the urgent need for closer, formalized coordination.

## **Section 3 – Humanitarian Crisis Response Coordination**

During the recent escalations, disparities in State response forced civil society to step in and coordinate life-saving measures for communities left without protection.

NCF, together with partners such as the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages (RCUV), Bimkom, Itach-Maaki, the Abraham Initiatives, and others, worked on the ground and at the policy level to bridge these disparities.

### **Actions Taken by NCF and Partners**

- **Rapid Coordination with Municipalities:** In June 2025, NCF engaged directly with the municipality of Be'er Sheva and members of the city council to ensure that underground parking lots and shopping center shelters were opened to Bedouin families during missile alerts.
- **Joint Advocacy:** Civil society organizations submitted joint letters to the Ministry of Defense and other State bodies demanding equitable distribution of mobile shelters and immediate protection measures in unrecognized villages.
- **Field Monitoring and Support:** NCF teams documented shelter shortages, collected testimonies, and relayed urgent needs to decision-makers while also coordinating donations of food, mattresses, and basic supplies for displaced families.
- **Information Sharing:** NGOs disseminated real-time safety information in Arabic through community networks, compensating for the lack of official guidance.

### **Recommendations for Improved Coordination**

- **Formalize Civil Society Input:** Establish standing coordination frameworks between government emergency bodies and recognized NGOs with field access and expertise.

- **Deploy Arabic-speaking Liaisons:** Assign designated contact points in the Home Front Command and local authorities for Arabic-speaking communities.
- **Transparent Resource Allocation:** Include NGO representatives in decision-making on the distribution of mobile shelters and other emergency resources to ensure equitable access.
- **Support Community-Led Responses:** Provide legal and financial support for local committees and NGOs that already operate in marginalized communities, rather than relying solely on ad hoc measures.

## Conclusion

The situations documented above reveal that the protection of civilians in the Negev/Naqab is not simply a matter of infrastructure but of rights. Despite clear obligations under international humanitarian law and Israel's civil defense legislation, tens of thousands of Bedouin citizens remain without access to shelters, warning systems, or official emergency guidance.

Repeated escalations — in 2021, 2023, and most recently during the June 2025 conflict with Iran — have revealed the same reality: communities left unprotected, children traumatized and cut off from education, and families forced to take desperate measures to survive.

NCF and partner organizations have worked tirelessly to document these gaps, provide immediate assistance, and coordinate with municipal actors. Yet civil society cannot and should not replace the State's duty to ensure equal protection for all.

We therefore urge the ILEF Conference and all participating diplomats and experts to recognize the situation in the Negev as a critical test of civilian protection policy. Concrete steps are needed now — removing legal barriers, deploying mobile and permanent shelters, ensuring information and alerts in Arabic, and establishing formal coordination mechanisms that include the voices of affected communities.

**Protection must not depend on geography, planning status, or identity.  
Every civilian has the right to safety.**

NCF stands ready to provide additional data, testimonies, and recommendations, and looks forward to contributing to the ongoing work of the ILEF Conference to advance civilian protection and regional stability.