



A DESERT 'MIRAGE:' THE ROLE OF AMERICAN MONEY IN NEGEV DEVELOPMENT

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October Issue, 2006, News From Within

Last year, the American head of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) announced his 'Blueprint Negev,' aimed at settling over 500,000 Jewish people (particularly Americans) in the Negev/Naqab Desert by 2010. At the same time, as former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lay ailing at his desert ranch, American investor David Mirage established the Negev Development Corporation for the purposes of forwarding corporate expansion in the desert.

What better role for American Zionists to play in forwarding the Zionist vision than sharing of their wealth in the service of the great dream of 'making the desert bloom?' For decade upon decade, plans to fulfill the potential of the desert have failed in conception or implementation. Could the Blueprint Negev and Mirage's fantasies for the Negev be yet another mirage in the desert development landscape?

When 'Redemption' of the Desert Translates to 'Despoilment'

The 'pioneers' of Israel planted a pine forest in Yeruham. They planted palms in Beer Sheva. They told their children to be proud their parents had greened an empty land. Israeli schoolchildren were told that, just as the rest of the land was once 'empty,' the Negev is the last open 'frontier,' with plenty of space for development of all kinds.

Then the Israeli government approved plans for phosphate mines. It built a nuclear facility. It created a toxic waste facility. The Israeli government planted dump after dump, factory after factory, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) built immense military airports and firing ranges. In the end the army took 60% of 60% of the country for its purposes. Later, against a belated outburst of citizen alarm, and the opposition of generally 'pro-road' advocates, the government passed plans to extend the Trans-Israel highway full scale through the Negev.

The Negev's seemingly 'empty' span over more than half the country plays a key role in the perception of the inexhaustibleness of Israel and its resources. However, counter to the impression bestowed upon Israeli schoolchildren from the age of five onward, in reality the Negev is zoned to the maximum, full to the brim with military areas, with little space left for any kind of development. Pro-development Negev Planner Rami Charuvi laments that the IDF dominates more than 85% of the so-called 'Last Frontier.' According to Charuvi the IDF has appropriated at least an additional 25% of the Negev from the JNF, conducting harmful military exercises on land reserved for national parks and public open spaces.

Nevertheless, although Israel is the second most densely populated country in the developed world after Holland, national planners behave as if there is endless space for new development. Notes Daniel Orenstein of Brown University, hardly a single figure in the Israeli environmental movement has raised the question of overpopulation, for largely ideological {Zionist} reasons. Orenstein cites various scholars that argue that, like Holland, Israel can find endless ways to accommodate its population by merely tapping the ingenuity of its scholars. This despite the fact that while Holland's population is actually on the decline, Israel's is soaring beyond current capacity. Note that,

according to the JNF, Israel is currently over-consuming its water resources by 25 percent.

Meanwhile, within a slim triangle of toxicity between Arad, Dimona and Beer Sheva comprising less than 2% of the Negev, the Israeli government concentrated over 150,000 indigenous people along with the nation's most environmentally destructive infrastructure and industry. In this area known as the Siyag 'reservation' (Arabic for 'fence'), to which the indigenous Bedouin have been limited since the 1950's, the government worked hard to bring several successions of Russian, Ethiopian and Mizrahi immigrants to 'offset' the 'demographic threat' Naqab Arabs posed to the creation of a Jewish majority in the south of the country.

"Negev Development" as a Weapon against the "Demographic Threat"

"Some say that ticking below the surface of the violent confrontation between Arab and Jews is a silent bomb, a demographic bomb," noted a Chicago Tribune article about the growing anxiety of Israelis concerning the growth of the Arab population in Israel. Several years ago, a report put forth by the Director of the Population Administration Department, Herzl Gadge, described polygamy in the Bedouin sector a "security threat" and advocated means of reducing the Arab birth rate. With an annual 5% growth rate, there will be 320,000 Bedouin in the Negev by 2020. Enter, the JNF's grandiose solution: Private Jewish-American philanthropy and enthusiasm through the efforts of the Blueprint Negev plan to bring 500,000 Jews to the desert by 2010.

The reality is that even with government support for their settlements, Jewish 'pioneers' in the Negev Desert will be hard-pressed to keep up with the skyrocketing Naqab Arab growth-rate. When asked about the Blueprint Negev's projected aims to bring 125,000 new immigrants annually for the next four years, developers and geographers in Israel balk. "Everyone has such dreams. Every decade there is a new slew of plans for vitalizing the Negev," Hebrew University Geographer Eran Feitelson told BUSTAN. "Since when has anyone been able to execute them? It's a ludicrous idea in practice."

We can imagine that the JNF's principle aim is to convince a relatively uninformed Jewish American public to invest in building settlements to 'reclaim' the land for future Jewish use, as quickly as possible. These settlements, Ma'ale Adumim-style, promise to remain vacant for a long while, at the expense of tens of thousands of indigenous Bedouin who will find themselves displaced from their ancestral lands.

At present, over half of the Bedouin of the Naqab Desert are under threat of removal, their land claims retroactively 'unrecognized' and declared illegal by the Israeli government. These 80,000 Bedouin lack connection with the powerlines strung over their heads or the waterworks tunneling under their feet, living like refugees and third-world squatters surrounded by a first-world Jewish reality. Despite their status as citizens of Israel, regardless of army service, Bedouin households are often treated like those under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza in terms of vulnerability to land confiscation and demolitions.

Long-existing government plans to demolish the 45 "unrecognized" villages, remove the Bedouin inhabitants, and concentrate them in seven planned towns, were resuscitated under the Sharon administration. During his time, the 'Removal of Intruders Law' was given new teeth in conjunction with a budget for military forces devoted to demolition and removal campaigns. When funding crises in 2003 and 2004 precluded implementation of the Sharon Development Plan, the Negev environmental justice organization Bustan began to ask: How will the government find new ways to slip Sharon's blueprints for securing a Negev Jewish majority through the back door? Now that Sharon is out of the picture, we ask: How will Shimon Peres, as the new Minister of Development, build upon David Ben Gurion's vision of 'greening' the Negev, Moshe Dayan's vision of 'civilizing' the Bedouin, and

Ariel Sharon's vision of 'pioneering' it with Jewish-only settlements?

The Privatization of Negev Development

With the failure of Sharon's state-funded Development Plan for the Negev due to budget crises, the desert is seeing a kind of 'privatization' of the Ben Gurion 'vision' of Negev development, with heavy US corporate influence. Privatization could lead the government -- and citizens -- to lose much of their power in terms of planning the future of Negev development. And as with all ill-conceived moves towards privatization, it is assumed that services the government should have been rendering to its citizens all along, and development it should be responsible for planning, will be taken care of by private donors and corporations. Yet precedent shows that corporations invested in the Negev are at least as apt to exclude marginalized populations as the Israeli government.

Take the long-established Negev Foundation -- which calls itself "the only foundation exclusively devoted to the development of the Negev and the fulfillment of David Ben-Gurion's vision" -- as an example. The Negev Foundation, founded by two Ohioans with a gaping Bedouin 'blind-spot' (former head of JNF-Ohio Sam Hoenig, and retired CEO of First National Supermarkets, Richard J. Bogomolny) began promoting the Negev in the corporate sphere in the 80's. Collaboration with Kibbutz Revivim, one of three initial settlements established by the JNF prior to the creation of the State (perhaps along with a shift into "bioagrigenetics," or biotechnology) yielded innovative brackish (salty) irrigation tech for olive production. A year later, a group of Hopi Indian tribal leaders were jetted all the way from New Mexico to learn the new irrigation tech in the Negev, expenses paid. The Hopi are famous for their dry-farming agricultural methods; Similarly, during the sedentary cold season semi-nomadic Bedouin traditionally employed dry-farming skills towards grain, fruit and nut cultivation. Yet never did the Negev Foundation offer high-tech brackish irrigation to Bedouin citizens indigenous to the Negev.

If long-time investors in the Negev have disregarded Bedouin needs, new plans circulating since Sharon flout them further. Around the 2006 elections David Mirage's Negev Development Corporation and North American consulting firm McKinsey and Co. unveiled a "new development plan" to the press -- most of which was hardly new -- calling for promotion of corporate expansion in the desert and failing to promote redress of the extreme poverty from which Bedouin citizens suffer. The plan's call for the creation of high-tech parks, the extension of the Trans-Israel Highway to Beersheva, incentives for new business, tourism development, and the transplant of IDF training bases in the center of the country to a "Training Base City" near the town of Mitzpe Ramon, were all the product of a year of cooperation with the offices of Ilan Cohen (Director General of the Prime Minister), and Shimon Peres.

In turn, under Shimon Peres as Development Minister, it is clear that Sharon's efforts to empower the settlement movement will go forward, facilitated by Peres' positive image abroad as a peacemaker. According to Ynet, "Vice-Premier Shimon Peres said that the state would invest in the Galilee and the Negev instead of in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza." We cannot yet know to what degree directing the settlement movement towards the Negev may compound the dire repression and neglect of Bedouin citizens have suffered over half a century, inciting them to more violent means of expression.

An American Plan in Israel

This May, Peres announced that his first task as minister in charge of development of the Negev and Galilee is to

push forward the construction of a new Jewish community in the Negev, Carmit, the first of many such settlements "designated for wealthy, young American immigrants who want to make Aliyah and live in style." In all likelihood, Peres had in mind the JNF's Blueprint for attracting American Jewish professionals, and the support of former American JNF head Ronald Lauder, among the top 300 richest CEOs in the world.

At present, the amorphous Blueprint Negev lacks any vestige of a public 'blueprint' for Israelis to examine. How will the JNF contend with the challenges of settling new immigrants in the poorest and most polluted region in the country? The JNF has offered suspiciously little concrete evidence, or even rhetoric, supporting its claim that its plans will assist the Negev poor, much less tackle the dire needs of the Bedouin. Does the proposed Blueprint Negev – which seeks to build fully-planned towns for Jews, replete with shopping malls, amusement parks, and swimming pools while neglecting to devote direly-needed resources to the native Bedouin population or to addressing an existing environmental health crisis -- serve Israeli interests?

In answer, take the example of an affluent suburb in the Negev, Omer. Consider the contrast between Omer and the Bedouin village flanking it. Tel Sheva is just down the road, but it's a far cry from the abundance in Omer, replete with grassy lawns and gardens; Tel Sheva's roads are unpaved and the sun bakes grass-less, gravel-filled lots. At the start of the new millennium, Tel Sheva ranked 3rd lowest in the government's official ranking of the socioeconomic status of towns in Israel. In contrast, the Jewish town of Omer ranked the 3rd wealthiest town in Israel. By all indications, Omer should be the most livable town in Israel, yet it has the highest rate of car theft in the country. As a result of stark inequality, tensions between the Bedouin towns and the lush Jewish suburbs around them have clearly grown.

During the July 22nd, 2003 airing of the Israeli public television show "Second View" an Internal Security official warned that if the needs of the Bedouin are not addressed, the Negev will be the site of the next intifada. In defiance of the lingering image of the Bedouin as fierce stateless nomads, many Naqab Arabs themselves insist that this will not happen any time soon. Whatever the case, implementation of the JNF's Blueprint Negev, over-density and over-exploitation of resources – and the accompanying displacement of over 80,000 Bedouin – would be likely to stoke bloody struggles over limited land and resources.

Today, one American Jewish businessman, or the American JNF, has a certain potential to circumvent the democratic process and decide for Israelis what their country will look like. Israelis will welcome the help because, contrary to the Israeli dream of self-sufficiency, the development of the desert has been sidelined for decades, and they couldn't do it themselves.



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