

Acute Shortage of Protective Infrastructure for Arab Residents in Israel

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Overview

A deadly missile attack from Iran has resulted from the Israeli government's aggression policy, which consistently disregards the lives of its own citizens and human life in general. At the time of writing, 23 citizens of Israel have been killed, others remain missing, and hundreds have been injured. In most cases, those who managed to reach bomb shelters in time were either unharmed or lightly injured. This position paper aims to highlight the cost of war borne by Israel's civilian population, which is a direct outcome of the Israeli government's neglect of its duty to protect vulnerable communities, particularly its Arab citizens.

According to the State Comptroller, while approximately 26% of households in Israel lack access to standard protective shelters, among Arab households this figure is at least 46% (i.e., some 550,000 citizens).¹ However, it is likely that this is an underestimate, and that in reality, even more households have no access to shelters. The lack of protective infrastructure in Arab localities directly results from the Israeli state's long-standing discriminatory policies in urban planning and spatial development. Building restrictions, curbing development opportunities, minimal investment in planning and public improvements, and the unwillingness to devise and implement suitable solutions — all these have led to a severe shortage of protective spaces. This shortage exists both at the private level — including shelters in apartment buildings and reinforced security rooms — and at the public level — which includes public shelters and protected spaces in public buildings.

Southern Israel: Unrecognized Bedouin Villages

The most acute situation is that of unrecognized localities, mainly in the Negev and Galilee, home to dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of residents. Estimates suggest that over 100,000 Bedouin citizens live in roughly 35 unrecognized villages, in makeshift structures built from flimsy materials such as sheet metal or concrete blocks, offering little to no protection, and certainly lacking reinforced security rooms or shelters.

Another 200,000 Bedouin citizens live in recognized towns and villages, where even in areas zoned for development most homes are informally built, and therefore also lack shelters. Many of these towns and villages are located near sensitive civilian and military facilities, which are targeted by the Iranians. In the April 2024 Iranian attack, a young girl, Amina Al-Housani, was critically injured in her inadequately built home in the recognized village of Al-Fura. Civil society organizations estimate that there is a need to add protective infrastructure in more than 10,000 locations in both recognized and unrecognized Negev villages. However, since October

¹ State Comptroller, July 2018. Reports on the Audit of Local Government 2018: Protection and Sheltering in the Jurisdiction of Non-Jewish Sector Local Authorities in the North and South.

2023 only some 250 shelters have been installed across the Negev, half of them by state initiative ative, and the rest through private or NGO efforts.

Northern and Central Arab Towns: Bureaucratic and Planning Failures

The level of protection is not significantly better in Arab localities in northern and central Israel. While after years of planning discrimination, updated outline plans in most localities now allow for residential construction, many still lack the necessary detailed plans to obtain building permits. Due to the acute housing shortages, many residents build homes without obtaining building permits. The end result is substandard homes that do not have bomb shelters, leaving construction non-compliant with building codes and unprotected.

The dense and informal construction patterns, coupled with unclear land titles, further complicate regularization of existing homes, which would allow adding protective rooms. Even when all necessary planning is in place, the financial and engineering burden of implementing protective infrastructure falls on the residents - most of whom are in the country's lowest socio-economic deciles.

Public Infrastructure: Stark Disparities Between Jewish and Arab Areas

In older Jewish neighborhoods, many public and private shelters have been built over the years. In Arab towns and villages, chronic planning discrimination has blocked private protection measures, while the government has also failed in its responsibility to provide public shelters. In the absence of state-driven development, almost no public shelters exist in Arab towns. This lack of adequate planning, or restrictive plans incompatible with community needs, has further led to shortages in public buildings such as schools, clinics, kindergartens, and community centers, which include safe spaces and can thus complement protection. Where such public buildings do exist, they are insufficient in number and unevenly distributed across localities, leaving entire areas without accessible protection.

Palestinian East Jerusalem: A Case Study in Institutional Discrimination

The discrimination in Palestinian East Jerusalem is even more pronounced. While West Jerusalem has around 200 public shelters, East Jerusalem has only one. Additionally, in the Jewish-Israeli neighborhoods of West Jerusalem, there are hundreds of shelters in schools and other public buildings, and many new or renewed buildings contain private shelters. In contrast, the Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem only have about 60 school-based shelters, mostly clustered in a few locations. These shelters are not clearly mapped on the municipality's website, and residents often aren't aware of their existence or location. Frequently, they remain locked during emergencies, especially at night. Furthermore, due to decades of planning neglect, an estimated half of the housing units in Palestinian East Jerusalem were built without permits. Most of the remaining units are considered legal only because they were built before Israeli law was imposed in 1967—meaning the vast majority lack protective infrastructure. Clearly, the existent shelters are in no way adequate for the nearly 400,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, leaving most without basic protection against very real threats.

National Protective Planning: A Flawed Response

Following the events of October 7, 2023, the Israeli Planning Authorities created a new National Outline Plan (TAMA 40a/1/1) whose aim is to simplify and accelerate the permit process for adding private safe rooms and retrofitting public buildings with shelters. However, this is a long-term defense strategy, not a rapid solution. Furthermore, the plan's focus on streamlining permits does not solve the financial, bureaucratic, and technical challenges of actual construction. Nor does it include mechanisms for state support of the process. In fact, the program shifts responsibility to provide protective infrastructure from the state to private individuals and, in the case of public buildings, to municipalities, without providing means for implementation. In Arab localities, and especially in Bedouin communities, which are the most deprived in Israel, where much construction does not meet formal standards, expedited permits alone are insufficient to improve protection levels. Additionally, the plan includes no oversight or monitoring mechanisms, making its effectiveness impossible to evaluate.

This plan teams with the older National Outline Plan for Seismic Retrofitting (TAMA 38), which was also intended to provide protective spaces in older buildings. In practice, TAMA 38 relies solely on market mechanisms, offering retrofitting based on potential profit rather than according to needs. As a result, towns in the geographic and economic periphery, including most Arab localities, which lack economic incentives for developers, have remained largely unprotected.

Conclusion: A Pattern of Neglect and Discrimination

Bimkom – Planning and Human Rights and other organizations have long warned against the state's neglect of protective infrastructure in Arab and Bedouin and Palestinian communities, and of the need for preemptive solutions. Providing adequate protection is complex, requiring coordination across public bodies, significant funding, long-term planning, and substantial execution time—none of which are available during an active crisis. This neglect reflects broader institutional discrimination—against Arab citizens of Israel, whom the state refuses to recognize as truly equal citizens, and against Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem and Area C of the West Bank.

The state must take full responsibility for protecting all civil populations, especially in areas inhabited by impoverished and marginalized people and communities. Expecting the free market to provide remedies is not only unfounded but also literally dangerous. Instead of seeking mechanisms to cover up for its inaction, the state should adopt a proactive approach to recognizing existing communities, plan them properly, and integrate public shelters into public buildings, commercial structures, parks, and playgrounds. Such action would be indicative of a willingness to address the substantial development gaps that have accumulated over decades of discrimination and neglect.