



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

**Home Demolitions and State-Minority Relations:
The Events in Qalansawe and Umm Al Hiran**

January 2017

In mid-January, two highly publicized demolitions of homes took place in the Arab localities of Qalansawe and Umm Al Hiran in Israel, resulting in the tragic deaths of one Israeli police officer and one Arab Bedouin teacher. The confrontations ignited Arab protests and two general strikes and have brought tensions around land and housing, some of the most sensitive issues between the state and its Arab minority, to a head.

The following update briefly summarizes the sequence of events, the questions they have raised related to the government frameworks for resolving land and planning issues, and the broader context contributing to heightened tensions.

Qalansawe

On January 10th, 11 homes were demolished in Qalansawe, (a Muslim city of 22,000 inhabitants, located 20 minutes east of Netanya), marking the largest such demolition outside of the Negev in many years. The event drew widespread indignation from Israel's Arab society and led the mayor of Qalansawe, Abed El Bassat Salameh, to resign in protest. The [Higher Follow Up Committee](#) (a non-governmental body representing Arab society in Israel) called [a one-day general strike](#) and a [10,000-strong protest](#) was held in Qalansawe on Friday, January 13th.

The Qalansawe homes, built on private land, were designated as illegal because they were built without permits and on land zoned for agricultural use. This is a common issue in Arab localities because most do not have detailed urban development plans approved by State authorities, nor land reserves on which to construct new homes and neighborhoods. Mayor Salameh, [announcing his resignation](#) after the demolitions, said he had fought for years to expand the city's master plan, and "bureaucratic slowdowns were choking the residents, who build because they have no choice." An urban plan for Qalansawe with provisions to re-zone the land under the now-demolished homes has been in process with the state since 2003.

The demolitions were explained by public officials as equal enforcement of law regarding illegal construction, following a pledge made by the Prime Minister when negotiating the dismantling of the Jewish settlement of Amona in the West Bank: "[The same law that necessitates the evacuation of Amona, necessitates the evacuation of illegal construction elsewhere in our country...in the Negev, in Wadi Ara, in the Galilee, in the center.](#)" Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan echoed PM Netanyahu's pledge in a statement after the demolition saying that the "[complex operation expresses the equal application of law enforcement in Israel, as enforcement should be.](#)"

Elected Arab officials, however, argued that illegal Arab construction cannot be compared with illegal settlements in the West Bank: [“Arab citizens aren’t stealers of land and haven’t built towns under the auspices of the occupation. They’re building on their own private land they bought with their own money, or inherited.”](#) Arab leaders, activists, and [civil rights organizations](#) also cited differences between what they see as state aggression towards Arab citizens compared with the months-long negotiation-and-compensation process given residents of Amona. Qalansawe residents were given 72 hours’ notice before Israeli police with special forces and bulldozers entered the town to demolish the houses.

Other Arab and Jewish leaders discounted the equal-enforcement explanation, suggesting the demolitions are being used by [the Prime Minister to deflect public attention](#) from ongoing investigations into corruption charges against him. During the demolition, PM Netanyahu shared a message on Facebook titled [“Our forces are now operating in Kalansua,”](#) terminology that both Jewish and Arab columnists pointed out references Arabs citizens as enemies of the state. [“Until now, whenever there was criticism of the government ... the prime minister directed his own barbs of criticism at the most weakened population in the country,”](#) Nasreen Hadad Haj-Yahya writes. [“It is very scary to imagine what he is capable of doing to the Arab population in Israel if the current investigations in which he is implicated develop.”](#)

More broadly, Arab leadership expressed concerns that these demolitions indicate the government is backtracking on its recent and unprecedented efforts to address housing issues in Arab society. In 2014, the government established the ‘120 Days Committee’ to map and evaluate housing needs in Arab society. Their findings, which were adopted by the government’s Housing Cabinet, included [sweeping recommendations](#) published in June of 2015 urging the state to expedite re-zoning and retroactive legalization of hundreds of illegal Arab buildings throughout the country. In 2016, many of these targets were incorporated for implementation under the Government’s [Economic Development Plan for the Arab Sector](#).

Umm Al Hiran

On January 16th, less than a week after the Qalansawe demolitions, [police entered the unrecognized Bedouin village of Umm Al Hiran](#) in preparation for demolition of at least 12 houses. Overnight, local leaders and elected Arab officials, including Joint List Chair MK Ayman Odeh, held emergency negotiations with the Ministry of Agriculture (the Ministry responsible for Bedouin settlement and development) to try to prevent the demolition and evacuation. By early morning of January 17th, however, bulldozers arrived to raze the homes, accompanied by hundreds of policemen who ordered evacuations of the structures using stun grenades, flares and tear gas.

Events turned deadly when a car driven by one of the Bedouin residents, a local school teacher, Yaqoub Mousa Abu Al-Qia’an, struck and killed a policeman, Officer Erez Levi, and Al-Qia’an was shot by the police and killed in the process. The incident is [still under investigation](#) with police claiming this was a premeditated attack and local residents, as well as a [video of the event](#), casting doubts. Surrounding protests turned into violent confrontation when the deaths occurred, leading to additional injuries, including [MK Ayman Odeh who was injured](#) in the head, though it was not clear whether by sponge-tipped bullet by police fire, or a rock thrown by protesters. As of this writing, most reports indicate it was a sponge-tipped bullet, though this has not yet been officially confirmed. Police cordoned off the area after the confrontations and a number of buildings were demolished amid continuing protests.

[Umm Al Hiran](#) is an unrecognized village that has been in existence since 1956 when its Bedouin residents were placed there by the military administration then overseeing Israel's Arab population. Although in the area for decades, the community was never given title to the land. On this basis, and because "[\[t\]he suggested evacuation involves different proposals for a move, construction, compensation and a housing option, whether in the town of Hura or in the community of Hiran which is about to be built,](#)" in 2015 the Supreme Court authorized the state's plan to replace the existing Bedouin village with a new Jewish town called Hiran. All subsequent appeals by residents were rejected and demolition was set for November 22, 2016. At the last minute, the Ministry of Agriculture decided to postpone demolition and press for negotiations with residents, urging them to accept 800 square meter plots of land in the nearby city of Hura as well as financial compensation for their homes and land. While some residents accepted, most did not take the offer. In addition, the town of Hura continues to oppose absorption of the residents, citing their own housing shortage.

The village has become a symbol for the decades-long dispute between Negev Bedouin and the state on land ownership. More than 100,000 Bedouin citizens live in unrecognized villages similar to Umm Al Hiran without basic services (i.e. water, electricity, waste management) to retain their claims to the land and way of life. Several versions of a controversial resettlement plan, known as the [Praver-Begin Plan](#), have been negotiated to resolve these issues, but none have yet received Knesset approval. In the meantime, illegal construction continues and Bedouins still face home demolitions. In the past two weeks, [over 80 homes were demolished](#) in the Negev with more than 1,100 throughout 2016.

The confrontations on the morning of January 18th ignited Arab protests around the country and a call by Arab leadership once again for a one-day general strike—with the exception of the education system, where the first two hours in all Arab schools were dedicated to discussion of house demolitions. In addition, [three days of mourning were announced](#) to mark the death of Abu Al-Qia'an. Both Jewish and Arab protestors [called for independent investigations](#) of the shooting.

Arab elected leaders, for their part, [accused Israel Police for lying and inciting racism](#) in response to the confrontations. Joint List MKs, Ahmad Tibi and Osama Saadi, proposed a bill to "[freeze for 10 years all demolition of illegal structures 'during which time we develop a comprehensive national solution' to zoning and development.](#)" MK Odeh [released a video](#) in Hebrew where he called on the Jewish public to oppose demolitions and push for recognition of the unrecognized villages since it is in the "interest of all of us that the Negev will bloom".

While his message was watched over 200,000 times and welcomed by Jews and Arabs alike, there are many in Israel who feel the state has been fair and that it is Arab leadership that is using the situation as an opportunity to leverage support for political opposition. "[Despite the intentional flouting of the law, the Israeli government has been generous to all the families who have respected the law and has engaged in peaceful negotiations with Umm al-Hiran residents in a bid to execute the demolition with their consent,](#)" writes Dr. Haim Shine. "But what is the point of reaching an understanding with the authorities if the leadership of the Arab public is only interested in provocation, conflicts and presenting the police as thugs coming to destroy the homes of innocent Bedouin?"

Government Ministers including [Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel and several Jewish MKs](#) also accused MK Ayman Odeh and other MKs from the Joint List of inciting the violence. Minister Shaked wrote that "Odeh's incitement terrorism is

leading to the never-ending unrest of the Negev Beduin residents.” She was echoed by Minister Ariel who said “the violence was encouraged by Arab MKs who fan the flames.” Minister of Internal Security Gilad Erdan wrote a letter urging the Attorney General to open a criminal investigation against Odeh for incitement.

While most immediate responses focused on the fatalities and violence, the wider issue of home demolitions and the timing of the Umm Al Hiran events following those of Qalansawe are slowly appearing as well. Many fear that the sequence indicates that [additional demolitions](#) in places like Lod and Wadi Ara are soon to come. Others are pointing out that if the explanation for these demolitions was ‘equal enforcement’ than the media silence in the weeks preceding the Umm Al Hiran demolitions compared to the intense coverage of the weeks prior to the evacuation of Amona is an important form of discrimination. [“The public did not hear a word about Umm al-Hiran, which means the community does not exist. Like the residents of Amona, the intention was to move the residents of Umm al-Hiran a short distance away to an alternative site, by the name of Hura.”](#)

The issue of land ownership and urban planning continues to be one of the most sensitive sources of tension between Arab minority and the state. It touches both on structural issues of access to planning, urban development and economic wellbeing, and issues of identity, culture and belonging that permeate these processes at every stage.