



## BUSTAN: Environmental Justice in the Negev/Naqab *Sustainable Community Action for Land and People*

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### *A Desert 'Mirage:' Privatizing Development Plans in the Negev/Naqab*

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When funding crises in 2003 and 2004 precluded implementation of the Sharon Development Plan, Bustan began to ask: How will those in the government find new ways to slip Sharon's blueprints for securing a Negev Jewish majority through the back door?

Then, last year, the American head of the Jewish National Fund, Ronald Lauder, announced his 'Blueprint Negev,' aimed at settling over 500,000 Jewish people (particularly Americans) in the Negev/Naqab by 2010.<sup>1</sup>

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 development plans – through corporate expansion in the desert.

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What we are discovering: The most powerful players in pushing development plans ahead increasingly tend to be American or connected with American money. Due to the innumerable challenges posed by developing the desert, over the decades dozens of locally conceived Negev development scenarios have seemingly found themselves relegated to a level of Zionist fantasy not to be realized. What better role for American Zionists to play in forwarding the Zionist vision than sharing of their wealth in the service of the

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<sup>1</sup>Jewish National Fund Website: "A message from Ronald Lauder;"  
<http://www.jnf.org/site/PageServer?JServSessionIdr012=e478zkr341.app20a&pagename=advertorial2>

great dream of 'making the desert bloom?'

Looking at decades of failed, poorly conceived, alternately racist or well-intended plans to address the poverty and wasted potential of the desert, we might wonder whether Americans are well-equipped to do any better than those who pioneered it – or for that matter those indigenous to it. Could this be another desert mirage?

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## Desert Development and the 'Demographic Debate:'

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"Some say that ticking below the surface of the violent confrontation between Arab and Jews is a silent bomb, a demographic bomb,"<sup>2</sup> noted a *Chicago Tribune* article about the growing anxiety of Israelis concerning the growth of the Arab population in Israel.

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Several years ago, the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv* blazed the headline: *Special Report: Polygamy is a Security Threat*, and detailed a report put forth by the Director of the Population Administration Department, Herzl Gadge,<sup>3</sup> The report described polygamy in the Bedouin sector a "security threat" and advocated means of reducing the birth rate in the Arab sector -- including Chinese-style population controls.<sup>4</sup> The reality is that even with government support for their settlements, Jewish 'pioneers' in the Negev/Naqab Desert will be hard-pressed to keep up with the skyrocketing Arab Negev/Naqab growth-rate. Enter, the Jewish National Fund's (JNF) solution: Private Jewish-American philanthropy and enthusiasm through the efforts of the Blueprint Negev to bring 500,000 Jews to the Negev/Naqab by 2010.

What is the aim of such an established foundation as the JNF in making such grandiose claims? Note that, when asked about the Blueprint Negev's projected 500,000 new settlers by 2010, most 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. They won't bring this many people."

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<sup>2</sup>Birthrates alarm Israel," *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 2002

<sup>3</sup>The Population Administration is a department of the Demographic Council, who's purpose, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics is: "...to increase the Jewish birthrate by encouraging women to have more children using government grants, housing benefits, and other incentives. It will also examine issues such as abortion and mixed marriages between Israelis and foreign workers." (HRA: *Weekly Review of the Arab Press*, Issue No. 92)

<sup>4</sup>Cook, Jonathan:"Unwanted Citizens," *Al-Ahram*, Jan 10, 2002

From this we can understand that it is more important to the JNF that settlements themselves get built, and 'reclaim' the land for future Jewish use, than that 500,000 professionals actually settle in the Desert and begin to vitalize the struggling Negev/Naqab economy by 2010. We can imagine that the JNF will manage to fundraise the requisite investment from a relatively uninformed Jewish American public, to build settlements which promise to remain empty for long periods of time.<sup>5</sup> These vacant settlements will come at the expense of tens of thousands of Bedouin who will find themselves displaced from their ancestral lands.

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

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The pioneers of Israel planted a pine forest in Yeruham at the heart of the 'Last Frontier.' They planted palms in Beer Sheva. They told their children to be proud their parents had greened an empty land. During history and science lessons, teachers didn't tell their schoolchildren that neither the pines nor palms they planted were indigenous to the desert. The children never learned that the pines often shriveled up in the desert sun and that those that survived would never grow so tall. They never learned that the species of palm planted would suck up 30 gallons of water a day, per tree, in the most parched part of an exceedingly dry country.

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 to build phosphate mines. The Israeli government built a nuclear facility. The Israeli government built a toxic waste facility. The Israeli government built dump after dump, factory after factory. The Israeli government built immense military airports and firing ranges, and the army took 60% of 60% of the country for its purposes. 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/Naqab.

The government constructed all of the above-mentioned environmentally destructive infrastructure and industry within a slim triangle of toxicity between Arad, Dimona and Beer Sheva. Into this sliver of land comprising less than 2% of the Negev/Naqab, the Israeli government also concentrated over 150,000 indigenous people who once ranged their familiar portion of the entire Middle East. In this area known as the *Siyag* 'reservation' (Arabic for 'fence'), to which the indigenous Bedouin have been limited since the

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<sup>5</sup>Like the settlement of Maale Adumim, which stayed empty for years but eventually filled up.

1950's, the government also worked hard to bring several successions of Russian, Ethiopian and Mizrahi immigrants to 'offset' the 'demographic threat' the Negev Arabs posed to the creation of a Jewish majority in the south of the country.

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 in a soon-to-be-published draft, "Population Growth and Environmental Impact: Ideology and Academic Discourse in Israel," hardly a single figure in the Israeli environmental movement has raised

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the question of curbing population in Israel, for largely ideological {Zionist} reasons. Some even argue that, like Holland, Israel can tap the ingenuity of its scholars and find endless ways to accommodate the population. This despite the fact that while Holland's population is actually on the decline, Israel's is soaring beyond current capacity. The fact that the Negev/Naqab comprises more than half of the country and appears to remain largely 'empty' plays a key role in the perception of the inexhaustibility of the land and its resources.

Today, counter to the impression bestowed upon Israeli schoolchildren from the age of five onward, in reality the Negev is zoned to the maximum, with little space left for any kind of development. The Negev is full to the brim with military areas, laments Negev Planner Rami Charuvi, arguing 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.

To illustrate what the IDF's hegemony over the Negev/Naqab translates into: Officially, at least 7,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Negev/Naqab's approximately 12,000 km<sup>2</sup> is reserved for military training and other IDF uses. According to Professor David Faiman, director of Ben-Gurion University's National Solar Energy Center, solar energy plants in the Negev/Naqab could theoretically produce all the country's power on 225 square kilometers of suitable land. Free up 3% of military terrain, and suddenly Israel could meet all its energy needs.

Until serious questions are raised about the way the desert is zoned – particularly the IDF's hold over the Negev/Naqab -- visions such as these can not be realized. Yet rather than intrinsically challenging the way the Negev has been planned and making way for development beneficial to all citizens and residents in the region, the status quo response is to assume that so-called Bedouin 'squatters' should be displaced to make way for future Jewish settlers.

Moving beyond ideology and looking bravely and frankly at the limitations and potentials of this little land, we must immediately begin to face the implications of over-developing and over-settling this country. Until we can address the existing strain on resources with which Israel already contends, until we can conceive

of radical new ways to accommodate the economic needs of those who currently live in the Negev/Naqab, and until we can do so without adding to the degradation of the desert and further deteriorating the health of its people, we should not be considering yet more Negev development which falls into the status quo mold.

From the environmental justice perspective, one can easily conclude that the land and people of Israel/Palestine today can at most absorb 1-2 million more souls - Israeli and Palestinian, and should be limited to that. We must place the needs of those who live here today in a

situation of conflict and economic decline, and particularly the needs of those suffering the most extreme poverty and discrimination, before those of people from abroad and hailing from relative comfort. Ultimately, extreme overcrowding will lead to a heightened struggle for resources, leading to more armed and existential conflicts, thus exacerbating the violence between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

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## The New Development Strategy: Blueprint Negev & Peres' Plans

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"Vice-Premier Shimon Peres said that the state would invest in the Galilee and the Negev instead of in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza,"<sup>6</sup> reported Ynet News in May 2006. Under Peres, it is clear that Sharon's Negev/Naqab legacy will live on, his intrinsic development aims will be promoted, and his efforts to empower the settlement movement will go forward, facilitated by Peres' international image as a peacemaker. Peres' positive image abroad will make it more difficult for Negev/Naqab advocates to internationally convey the grievous impacts of ethnically preferential development aimed at securing a Jewish majority.

Does the JNF's proposed Blueprint Negev – which seeks to build fully-planned towns for Jews, some of which will be replete with shopping malls, amusement parks, air-conditioned houses, grassy lawns and swimming pools (while neglecting to devote direly-needed resources to the native Bedouin population) -- represent Jewish values, and in the long-term, does perpetuating severe inequality serve the interests of Israelis or the Jewish people at large? Will siphoning off a few token percentage points from the proposed development budgets to address the proportionally far greater needs of the Negev Arab population, perceived as a good-faith gesture, and if not, will it serve to placate those who call for more equitable distribution of resources? In particular, does Jewish-only development created in the image of lush American suburbs serve the interests of Israelis living in the desert?

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<sup>6</sup>Golan, Gadi & Manor, Hadas: "Peres: We'll invest NIS 7b in Negev/Naqab in 3 years;" Globes Online, April 5, 2005

In answer, take an older example of an affluent suburb in the Negev/Naqab, 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 grassless, gravel-filled lots. At the start of the new millennium, Tel Sheva ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest in the government's official ranking of the socioeconomic status of towns in Israel. The Jewish town of Omer ranked the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 grown.

As compared with 16% of Arab citizens of Israel who are not Bedouin, over 42% of Negev/Naqab Arabs today reject Israel's right to exist.<sup>7</sup> During the July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 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 Naqab/Negev/Naqab will be the site of the next intifada* – a view propounded by political analysts for years. It is within this context that Jewish-only development plans are being funded. While many Negev/Naqab Arabs themselves insist that, for a multitude of reasons, they have no intention of launching an intifada any time soon, there is no reason to take the chance of internal civil strife on this side of the Green Line.

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## The Privatization of Negev Development: The Role of North American Money

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In 2003, when the Sharon Development Plan for the Negev/Naqab was under discussion in the Knesset and Ministries, *Bustan* and our peers managed to bring international attention to the Negev/Naqab Bedouin land struggle via strategic direct action and advocacy. This international attention to the Israeli government's ethnocentric development efforts was crucial. Bustan built a clinic near Ramat Hovav, on the grounds of the unrecognized village of Wadi Naam, putting, as our partner Najib Abu-Arabiyyeh says, "a village that was once the most unrecognized of all Bedouin villages, on the map, and making it one of the most recognized and visited Bedouin villages in the Negev/Naqab." International advocacy and legal efforts by the coalition of Arab and Jewish NGOs organized in support of Bustan's Medwed Clinic Project were successful at highlighting the ethnocentric nature of the Sharon Negev/Naqab Development Plan.

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<sup>7</sup> Nir, Ori: "Treatment of Bedouin Blasted;" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, May 10, 2002

Budget crises under then-Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu drastically delayed implementation of Negev/Naqab development plans and bought NGOs concerned with Bedouin rights and Negev development a little extra time. Then Ariel Sharon fell back from the political scene, and his plans appeared to recede from public conscious as well.

However, within a very short period of time, American investors such as Colorado CEO David Mirage came to the rescue. Mirage's Negev Development Corporation was established in 2005 with a family 'investment' of USD 35 million,<sup>8</sup> and quickly started to work to promote corporate expansion in the Negev/Naqab.

With the failure of Sharon's state-funded Development Plan for the Negev/Naqab due to budget crises, the Negev/Naqab has begun to see a kind of 'privatization' of the Ben Gurion 'vision' of Negev/Naqab development, with heavy US corporate influence.

By early 2005, the Negev Development Corporation dove into cooperation with Prime Minister's Office director general Ilan Cohen and the office of Vice-Premier Shimon Peres, and hired US consultant firm McKinsey and Co. to prepare a Negev/Naqab development plan.<sup>9</sup> In what might have been one of the first manifestations of their efforts, later that year, the Manufacturers Association of Israel established an authority to begin marketing a project to move 60 factories to the Negev/Naqab with 100 million NIS in government subsidies.

In February 2006, around the elections, the Negev Development Corporation and McKinsey and Co. unveiled a 'new development plan' calling for the creation of high-tech parks, the extension of the Trans-Israel Highway to Beersheva, investment in education, incentives for new business, tourism development, and getting the Israel Defense Forces to move its training bases from the center of the country to a "Training Base City" at the Negev/Naqab junction near the town of Mitzpe Ramon.

And so a new trend seems to be emerging: With the failure of Sharon's state-funded Development Plan for the Negev/Naqab due to budget crises, the Negev/Naqab has begun to see a kind of 'privatization' of the Ben Gurion 'vision' of Negev/Naqab development, with heavy US corporate influence. Even in its most positive sense, this means that services the government should have been rendering to its citizens all along, and development it should be responsible for planning, are being taken care of by private Israelis and American donors and by Israeli and American corporations. At its worst, this trend could lead the government, and citizens, to lose much of their power in terms of planning the future of Negev/Naqab development.

The new trend rides on old business relationships. In 1982, following several visits to the region, Richard J. Bogomolny of Cleveland, Ohio, retired CEO of First National Supermarkets, Inc., acknowledged the

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<sup>8</sup>Golan, Gadi: "Eitan Wertheimer, US partner found Negev/Naqab investment co," Globes, February 16, 2005

<sup>9</sup>Golan, Gadi: "Eitan Wertheimer, US partner found Negev/Naqab investment co," Globes, February 16, 2005

potential of Israel's "remaining frontier", and decided to rekindle the pioneering spirit of David Ben-Gurion. Together with Sam Hoenig, former head of the Jewish National Fund's Ohio region, they convened an informal group to discuss promotion of the Negev/Naqab. The Negev/Naqab Foundation calls itself, "the only foundation exclusively devoted to the development of the Negev/Naqab and the fulfillment of David Ben-Gurion's vision."<sup>10</sup> The foundation is primarily engaged in funding corporate agribusiness expansion and is in the process of "considering new innovations presented by Negev/Naqab farmers in the fields of aquaculture, organic agriculture and bioagrigenetics".<sup>11</sup>

In essence, from Bustan's perspective, the role of States – whether Israeli or American – in Negev/Naqab development aimed at securing a Jewish majority, seems to be in decline in comparison to the role of multi-nationals and American special interest groups – or, even worse, private-public mergers. 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 Negev/Naqab has been sidelined for decades, and they couldn't do it themselves.

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 Negev/Naqab has been sidelined for decades, and they couldn't do it themselves.

We should ask: What effect will the Blueprint Negev have upon the Jews who settle in the new towns? What happens when you settle still more immigrants in one of the poorest and most polluted regions in the country? What will you do to rectify the present ails of industrial pollution? How will you supply the new immigrants with jobs, and won't building more industry to create more jobs – in a region with cancer rates higher than the rest of the country – just add to the environmental health crisis in the region? Promising to saturate Israel's 'Last Frontier' with new development and industry, without addressing the existing environmental crises in the Negev/Naqab, is self-destructive, is it not? Does the JNF have answers to these questions; Has it conducted a solid environmental impact assessment of its development plans at all? What is its answer to the long-range ecological implications of such a high-density development? The onus is on the JNF to show Israel's citizens, and especially Negev/Naqab residents, that these plans will not only rectify the mistakes made by developers thus far, but will not exacerbate the inequalities perpetuated by culturally insensitive and ethnocentric planning strategies over the past few decades.

In May 2006, Shimon Peres, as the new Minister for the Development announced that his first task as minister in charge of development of the Negev/Naqab and Galilee is to push forward the construction of a new Jewish community in the Negev/Naqab, Carmit, the first of many such settlements "designated for

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<sup>10</sup>[http://www.Negev/Naqab.org/About/about\\_us.htm](http://www.Negev/Naqab.org/About/about_us.htm)

<sup>11</sup><http://www.Negev/Naqab.org/Projects/initiatives.htm>



wealthy, young American immigrants who want to make Aliyah and live in style.”<sup>12</sup>

How will Peres build upon Ben Gurion's vision of 'greening' the Negev/Naqab, Dayan's vision of civilizing the Bedouin, Sharon's vision of pioneering it – literally – with Jewish-only settlements? What is Peres' new version of this vision? With the privatization of Negev/Naqab development, under the 'pristine' guidance of Peres, it will be far more difficult to hold the government accountable for its oppression of the Bedouin, at the local level, and in the eyes of the international community.

Promising to saturate Israel's 'Last Frontier' with new development and industry, without addressing the existing environmental crises in the Negev/Naqab, is self-destructive, is it not?

To reiterate, should we fail to address the economic, resource, and health needs of the Negev population, we must recognize that over-density and over-exploitation of resources could indeed ultimately lead to yet more bloodshed.

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<sup>12</sup>Alush, Zvi: "New town for rich US immigrants;" Ynet News - May 2, 2006