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Housing for Arabs Too

By Ali Haider

When housing protests are spreading across the country and tent cities are popping up at every corner, that's when it is important to raise public consciousness on the longstanding housing shortage of Arab citizens, who constitute about a fifth of all citizens. The right to adequate housing is a basic right of every citizen. Housing availability, prices and quality provide a good indication of a community's welfare. Many different groups in Israel suffer from housing shortages, but the Arab community's situation is by far the most severe and complex.

The primary reason for this situation is the historical and political conflict and its repercussions for government policy. Of all aspects of Israel's attitude toward its Arab citizens, the question of land and housing is considered to be the most emotionally charged issue between Jews and Arabs. Since the establishment of the state, most of the land belonging to Arab have been confiscated and allocated for the establishment of Jewish towns, nature reserves, and public infrastructure. Arab local governments have jurisdiction over 2.5 per cent of the country's lands. The area available for construction has been greatly reduced, which in turn has exacerbated the housing crisis among the young generation. Since its creation, the state has not permitted the establishment of a single new Arab community (The only exception being the Bedouin communities in the South, where new towns designed to concentrate the Bedouin in the smaller areas and remove them from their lands, have been built.)

Arab towns and villages are undergoing change, their population is increasing, but the infrastructure is still inadequate for the needs. The population's density is increasing and there is no proper planning and development process. To this must be added the absence of a rental property market and the greater difficulty Arabs have in renting accommodation in Jewish communities, especially in light of a wave of racism and incitement against them.

The government had admitted back in 2000 that it was necessary construct some 10,000 new housing units each year for four years just to close up the then existing gap and meet the natural growth needs of Arab citizens. But to date only about 8,000 new apartments have been marketed to the Arab community in Israel. Lack of government sponsored public construction initiatives has only exacerbated the housing shortage.

The government is capable of closing the gap between Jews and Arabs that exists today in planning and housing through several key steps. It needs to

present a comprehensive plan to solve the shortage of a housing and land in the Arab communities, expand the supply of both, accelerate the process of planning permits, develop more land for construction, and allocate funds dedicated to this matter. The government needs to allow for fair representation of Arab professionals in key positions in the Ministry of Housing, the Israel Land Administration and the various planning and construction committees. Representatives of the Arab communities must have a role in solving the housing shortage.

The government must also ensure the increase of land under the control of Arab local government through the incorporation of adjacent state lands. It needs to designate these newly acquired areas as residential and employment zones. Despite the unique circumstances of the housing shortage in the Arab sector, the Arab citizens should join the united protest of all citizens, as the residents of Tamra have already done, in the hope that it will lead to change in the housing situation and promote democratic values.

It just may be possible that such protest may cause the government to pay attention to the distress and cries for help emanating from its own citizens and then act quickly and thoroughly to find a real solution to housing problems. Because, every citizen is entitled to a roof over her/his head and a decent quality of life.

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