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Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Case Study #21

Country Palestine

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STOP PRAWER PLAN CAMPAIGN

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The involvement, strategies and tactics of Palestinian civil society in preventing the Israeli Parliament's approval of Prawer Plan

BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE

In June 2013, the Israeli Knesset voted on a draft bill commonly known as the 'Prawer-Begin Plan'. The bill had passed the first reading by a 43-40 vote and would legally come into force if it could pass the second and third readings. If passed, the bill would expropriate 800 square kilometers (800,000 dunams) of land from Palestinian Bedouins living in the Negev¹. The implementation of the plan would lead to the destruction of 35 villages and the displacement of 70,000 Palestinians from their ancestral land². When the bill was presented, Benny Begin, the Israeli official affiliated to the Likud Party, spearheading the proposal, alleged that the representatives of the Bedouin tribes in the Negev approved the plan.

With the first reading in sight, Palestinians in the Negev and across historic Palestine organized themselves under the banner of 'Stop Prawer Plan' (in Arabic برافر لن يمر). The campaign spanned over nine months, from March to December 2013, with the objective of preventing the plan from passing in the Knesset in the second and third readings³. Situating the issue in this historical context, Palestinians have referred to the plan as a second 'Nakba' – denoting the systematic ethnic cleansing and forced expulsion that began before 1948⁴. As such, despite its singular, immediate objective, the campaign is perceived as part of the broader context of resisting a century of settler-colonialism.

The Prawer proposal was first introduced in 2011, and Palestinian legal rights groups led efforts within international legal frameworks as an attempt to stop the plan. However, the scope of this research paper focuses on documenting the grassroots campaign that took place in 2013.

Historically, land confiscation has been a prime tool employed by settler-colonial invaders around the world, from Australia to South Africa, as a means to eliminate, subjugate, or otherwise oppress the indigenous owners of the land⁵. Israel's use of land confiscation policies has been widely analyzed and documented. To understand the background of the Stop Prawer Plan campaign, I will briefly summarize the historical use of this tool in the Negev. Bedouins' ancestry in the Negev desert dates back to the fifth century, and they have developed their own tribal laws throughout the centuries to regulate land ownership and cultivation⁶. Tribal land laws were recognized by both the Ottoman rule and the British Mandate⁷. However, in 1952 and 1953 respectively, Israel passed the Absentees' Property Law and the Land Acquisition Law – both designed to legitimize the expropriation of Palestinian land whose owners were expelled or ethnically cleansed during 1948 under the pretext that those lands had no owners⁸. By then, Israel had transferred Palestinian Bedouins to an enclosed area named 'Siyag'⁹. Ten years later, Israel took a different approach to achieve the same outcome. Using the Planning and Building Law it designated Bedouin villages as agricultural (i.e., non-residential) state land, rendering those lands 'unrecognized' villages and its inhabitants 'illegal' residents.¹⁰

¹Adalah (2013, May). *The Prawer-Begin Bill and the Forced Displacement of the Bedouin* (Issue brief). Retrieved May 26, 2019, from Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel website: <https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/English/Publications/Articles/2013/Prawer-Begin-Plan-Background-Adalah.pdf>

²Adalah (n.d.). *Demolition and Eviction of Bedouin Citizens of Israel in the Naqab (Negev) - The Prawer Plan*. Retrieved May 26, 2019, from Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel website: <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/7589#What-is-the-Prawer-Plan>

³Obeid, H. (2019, May 26). *Phone interview*.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Boisen, C. (2016). *From land dispossession to land restitution: European land rights in South Africa*. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 7(3), 321-339; see also Laidlaw, Z., & Lester, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Indigenous communities and settler colonialism: Land holding, loss and survival in an interconnected world*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁶Hall, B. (2014). *Bedouins' Politics Of Place And Memory: A Case Of Unrecognised Villages In The Negev*. *Nomadic Peoples*, 18(2), 147-164.

⁷Abu-Rabia-Queder, S., & Ratcliffe, R. (2015). *The Naqab Bedouin and colonialism new perspectives* (M. Nasasra & S. Richter-Devroe, Eds.). London: Routledge.

⁸White, B. (2014). *Israeli Apartheid A Beginner's Guide* (2nd ed.). London: Pluto Press.

⁹Abu-Rabia-Queder et al., *supra* 7.

¹⁰Hall, *supra* 6.



CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS' ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT

When the Praver plan was first introduced in 2011, several legal rights organizations, spearheaded by Adalah Center, led efforts particularly on the legal front to document, analyze, and counter the proposal at home and abroad. These efforts persisted for a year and a half before the bill was formally presented to the Knesset for voting¹¹. Also in 2011, the High Follow-Up Committee¹² (HFC), which is a national coordination committee representing Palestinians and Palestinian factions and civil society actors in '48 lands, established a steering commission¹³ concerned with Negev-specific issues. The members of this steering commission consisted of Al Jabha (Hadash), Al Tajamu', Abnaa' Al Balad, and the Northern and Southern Islamic Movements in the Negev, in addition to local councils and a number of community-based organizations (CBOs).

According to the coordinator of the Stop Praver Plan campaign, the steering commission organized some actions prior to the first reading from protests to letters as an attempt to oppose the plan. The protests were modest in size, and it appeared as though the actions were rather symbolic. Dismayed by the rigidity of traditional and symbolic organizing, young Palestinians from the Negev formed to organize on a grassroots level. The group initially consisted of 11 members, and later grew into 40 organizers, some of whom were independent while others were active in the above mentioned political parties. It is essential to note that those youth activists "did not come together out of the blue. It was decades of work by Negev-based rights organizations, women associations, political parties, and local councils that gave birth to this network of youth organizers." Amongst the historically active actors have also been the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev¹⁴.

During the low season preceding the winter session of the Knesset, the group sought training from Ahel Association, a local CBO that specializes in supporting social and political change campaigns through the community organizing methodology. To grow in scale, the group reached out to other Palestinian activists and informal youth networks across historic Palestine, not only in 1948 lands, but also to Palestinians in the diaspora. Additionally, they created regional teams geared towards organizing geographically distributed actions for the 'Day of Rage' in which the HFC played a critical mass mobilizing role¹⁵.

Activists also sought media support from the Palestine Liberation Organization. For international mobilization, the group partnered with the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) National Committee¹⁶.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Since the bill was presented to the Knesset with the claim that it has been approved by Palestinians in the Negev, the first strategy was to negate this allegation. To achieve this end, the campaign focused on consolidating opposition of various stakeholders in the Negev.

The main tactics corresponding to this strategy were a petition and a general strike. The petition intended to lay the ground and recruit for the upcoming mobilizations as well as invoke a conversation within the Negev community as to the impact of the bill. Due to the geographical dispersion of the villages and the lack of a connecting urban infrastructure, it was initially challenging to collect signatures in high numbers. To maximize outreach, activists capitalized on the opportunity of people gathering in high numbers to vote in the local council election. Eventually, around 20,000 signatures were collected demonstrating the breadth of community opposition to the bill. The second tactic was a Negev-wide general strike. The Knesset Committee for Internal Affairs was responsible for debating and amending the draft bill before submitting a revised draft for the second reading. During these procedures, the committee headed by Miri Regev (also a member of the Likud Party) planned to visit a number of villages. The strike took place on the same day of the visit to demonstrate widespread rejection of the proposal, where people refused to engage with the committee, and in some villages, like Lakiya, blocked the committee from entering¹⁷.

Building on the fact that the first reading passed by a three-vote difference only, the campaign's second strategy was to sway public and elite opinion, especially Members of the Knesset (MKs) to prevent the bill from passing in second and third readings. To sway public opinion, it was highlighted that the price of enacting the bill would be higher than what the Israeli regime was willing to pay. The primary tactic to implement this strategy was a national and international 'Day of Rage.' Two days before the Day of Rage, the pace intensified and teams across the country were running daily activities from petition-signing drives to village visits and house meetings so as to recruit as many people as possible to join the action.

The Day of Rage took place on November 30, 2013, whereby more than 30 cities around the world partook in this action. To enable such international mobilization, the campaign tapped into the global network of the BDS movement who issued and coordinated a call to action amongst its chapters. International solidarity helped the campaign gain coverage in international media and brought the issue to the attention of parliamentarians, human rights associations, and policy-makers abroad. Yet, the straw that broke the camel's back was the popular organizing that took place nationwide, whereby dozens of Palestinian cities joined forces with the Negev, from Haifa to Gaza to Jerusalem¹⁸.

To carry out this multi-tiered strategy, and enable the involvement of organizers in the campaign on a larger scale, the structure of the campaign was based on five teams, part of which were geographic (i.e., Negev, national, and international) and others were function-based (i.e., media and outreach)¹⁹.

¹¹ Abu Ras, T. (2013, December 17). *المشهد على هامش المشهد* (A'ala hamesh al-mashhad) [Interview by The Palestinian Center for Israeli Studies (Madar)]. Retrieved May 26, 2019, from <https://www.madarcenter.org/3773-المشهد-الإسرائيلي/عن-هامش-المشهد-3773>
الدكتور-ثابت-أبو-راس-ل-المشهد-الإسرائيلي-حكومة-إسرائيل-جمدت-مخطط-برافر-بعدهما-فوجئت-من-ردة-الفعل-المحلية-والدولية
¹² *Lajnat almutabaa' al'olya liljamahir al'arabia wal fasa'yil alfilastinia* (لجنة المتابعة العليا
للجماهير العربية والفصائل الفلسطينية).

¹³ *Lajnat altawjih al'olya l'arab alnaqb* (لجنة التوجيه العليا لعرب النقب).

¹⁴ *Obied, supra 3. Almajlis aliaqlimi lilquraa ghyr almu'etaraf biha* (المجلس الإقليمي للقرى غير
المعترف بها).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Anonymous (2019, April 28 - May 26). Personal communication.*

¹⁷ *Obied, supra 3.*

¹⁸ *Anonymous, supra 16.*

¹⁹ *Obied, supra 3.*

INFLUENCING FACTORS AND POLICY OUTCOME

In recent memory, images of physical confrontations between masses of unarmed Palestinians confronting repression by Israeli forces from tear gas and bullets to arrests and violence has been prevalent across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Day of Rage brought a unique replication of this 'intifada scene' within 1948 lands not only in the Negev but across major cities like Haifa and Jaffa. This crackdown was happening "in the belly of the beast", which was enough to trigger an alarm for the various actors within the Israeli regime²⁰. The two major Israeli political blocs that formed the coalition government at the time were the Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu, in addition to three other smaller Israeli political parties. Competing political interests within the coalition were mounting. The tension following the Day of Rage sparked a further rift between Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) and Netanyahu (Likud). Liberman, and other officials, politicians, and MKs – who had initially supported the draft bill – announced that they no longer support the plan. In a rather fanatic and perplexing discourse, some members of that coalition claimed that they voted for the bill on Begin's allegation that Palestinians in the Negev supported it²¹ while simultaneously arguing that the bill was "too generous" to Palestinians²². Either way, the Likud lost the slim majority they had at the first reading. After hearings and debates between the different factions and MKs in the days that followed the Day of Rage, Begin announced in a conference on December 12, 2019, that the bill has been shelved.

On the Palestinian front, the scrapping of the bill was celebrated as a victory. While 'Stop Praver Plan' was a campaign in which Palestinians from across the diverse political, geographic, and thematic spectrum took part, the group of young activists connected by informal ties jump-started the mobilizations to such a scale. In his book 'Power in Movement', Tarrow presents an analysis of what he calls a "cycle of contention" in a social movement whereby moments in this cycle give rise to an opportunity that enables temporary transformational collective action. The cycle "produces general outcomes that are more than the sum of the results of an aggregate of unconnected events"²³ and is championed by what he calls the 'challengers' and the 'early risers'. In the case of Praver, policies of land expropriation had persisted for decades, yet the formalization of those policies into a bill gave rise to an opportunity in which the challengers, in this case, the various actors within Palestinian civil society discussed above, could influence the outcome of the issue at hand. Early risers, substantively rather than chronologically, in this case were the youth group who consolidated their limited yet multi-layered resources from across the spectrum in a 'spin-off' movement causing a coalition amongst the challengers that further aggravated the rift within the Israeli government coalition. Early risers "give rise to coalitions and conflicts among disparate actors and create or reinforce instability in the elite."²⁴

²⁰Anonymous, *supra* 16.

²¹Solomon, A. B. (2013, December 10). MKs Learn Beduin Did Not See, Agree To Resettlement Plan, Threatening Bills Passage. *The Jerusalem Post*. Retrieved May 18, 2019, from <https://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/MKs-learn-Beduin-were-in-the-dark-over-resettlement-plan-threatening-bills-Knesset-passage-334502>

²²Omer-Man, M. S. (2013, December 12). Allow me to rain on the Praver parade. *972 Magazine*. Retrieved May 20, 2019, from <https://972mag.com/allow-me-to-rain-on-the-praver-parade/83543/>

²³Tarrow, S. G. (2011). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 199.

²⁴*Ibid*, pp. 201.



CONCLUSION

The Stop Praver Plan campaign had an immediate and singular objective that it achieved, which was preventing the bill from passing in second and third readings. While it is important to celebrate singular moments of victory, it is equally important to understand and organize towards substantive, long-term impacts on politics and policies. The single objective of stopping the Praver-Begin plan is better understood as part of a broader political reality that is deeply seated in the essence of Zionist settler-colonialism in Palestine: dispossession and subjugation of the native population by the invaders. From July 2010 until May 2019, the Araqib – one of the unrecognized villages in the Negev – faced house demolitions and crop destruction over 140 times²⁵. Since the bill was shelved, Israel has persisted in its policies of home, school, and other structure demolitions not only in the Negev but also across different Palestinian cities from Hebron to Jericho. Palestinians continue to confront such policies on a regular basis with Khan Al-Ahmar in Jerusalem coming to light more dramatically in 2018²⁶.

As anticipated, after the campaign achieved its objective, the Stop Praver Plan coalition diffused and returned to its modular organizational structures. Despite diffusion, people-powered movements tend to bring together claims from across the socio-economic and political spectrum in a way that leads “ordinary people to think of themselves as part of broader collectivities.”²⁷ This indicates that moments and opportunities may be momentary, yet they inevitably aggregate into the flow of social movements’ history-in-making. In the Praver campaign, informal connections between youth and traditional organizers became stronger, new networks and relationships were formed, and resources were pooled innovatively²⁸; perhaps at a different lifespan of the cycle of contention, this may contribute to the broader social movement repertoire of contention.

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²⁶Amnesty International (2018, October 1). *Demolition of Palestinian village is war crime*. Retrieved April 20, 2019, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/10/israel-opt-demolition-of-palestinian-village-of-khan-al-ahmar-is-cruel-blow-and-war-crime/>

²⁷Tarrow, *supra* 23, pp. 58.

²⁸Obeid, *supra* 3.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

1948 lands
BDS

CBO
HFC
MK

Palestinian lands occupied in 1948
Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions
movement

Community-based organization
High Follow-up Committee
Member of the Knesset

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Houda Obied (2019, May 26). Coordinator of the Stop Praver Plan Campaign. Phone interview.

Anonymous (2019, April 28 - May 26). Local activist. Personal communication.

BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid- 2018, the “Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World” program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project “Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making”. This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project’s goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media’s expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research-based, policy oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab region. The Institute is committed to expanding and deepening knowledge production and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society actors, and policy makers.

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