Israel: Multiple patterns of internal displacement affect several ethnic and religious groups

Internal displacement in Israel has been caused by conflict between Israel and its neighbours, as well as by Israeli policies towards its citizens. Several waves of displacement have occurred since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, affecting Arab, Bedouin and Jewish citizens. There is little information available on internal displacement in Israel, as few organisations work with internally displaced people (IDPs), and very few studies are available. There are no government or UN estimates of IDP numbers, but based on various calculations by IDP advocates and academics, between 150,000 and 420,000 people are currently displaced in the country.

This overview considers the background, pattern and response to four different situations of internal displacement in Israel: the displacement of Arab villagers and their resettlement following the creation of Israel, the displacement of Bedouin communities in the south and the threat of eviction they currently face, the temporary displacement from northern Israel during the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in mid-2006, and the displacement from the Israeli town of Sderot due to attacks from Gaza in mid-2007.
More maps are available on http://www.internal-displacement.org/
Flight or eviction of Arab villagers and resettlement following the creation of Israel

Following the proclamation of the State of Israel in May 1948, armies from neighbouring Arab nations entered the former Mandate of Palestine and fought against Israeli military forces. The war ended in 1949, but no general peace settlement was achieved.

In 1948/1949, between 600,000 and 760,000 Arabs who had lived in the territory which became Israel were driven out or fled the country and became refugees (MERIP, 2001, “Palestinian”; Bligh, 1998, p.124). During this period another 46,000 to 48,000 Arab villagers were displaced throughout Israel. Today, estimates of the size of this group (including the descendants of the people originally displaced) vary widely, from 150,000 to 342,000 people (National Committee for the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel, February 2000; Nir, 8 January 2001; BADIL, May 2006, p.48). The vast majority (about 90 per cent) of IDPs are Muslim and most of the rest are Christian. The Druze community was spared from displacement for the most part (Al-Haj, September 1986).

In December 1948, the United Nations established the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to assist all those who were resident in Palestine in 1946 and who lost their homes and livelihoods. UNRWA assisted the internally displaced people within Israel from 1950 to 1952, when the government of Israel took over this responsibility. Following the war, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 194, which, while non-binding, affirmed the right of refugees to return to their homes at the earliest practicable date, and to be compensated for lost property (UN GA, 11 December 1948).

Meanwhile the government of Israel created an institutional and legal land regime under which most of the properties of IDPs and refugees were appropriated by the state. One of the cornerstones of this system was the Absentee Property Law of 1950. According to this law the state acquired control of all the property left by the people who had fled their homes between 29 November 1947 and 19 May 1948, even if they had stayed in the country. As a result, most of the IDPs were declared “present absentees” and the government acquired their unoccupied properties (Schechla, October 2001).

In 1949 the Israeli government started to rent land to the displaced people. While in some cases this happened without any problems, in many others they faced opposition from their Jewish neighbours. Many also feared that renting land in the area of displacement would compromise their claims to their original property (Cohen, December 2000). At the time, the IDPs lived under Israeli military administration like the vast majority of the Arab population in Israel, and their freedom of movement was severely limited as a result. The ending of the military administration in 1966 improved their situation but did not allow them to regain their lost properties.

Hopes for returning home have been disappointed

Many local non-governmental organisations promote the rights of the Arab minority in Israel, including those of the internally displaced people. IDPs, supported by local organisations, have ap-
pealed to Israeli courts against land con-

fiscation, but the process has been slow
and the displaced have generally viewed
the level of compensation as insufficient.
An element complicating this process is
that new houses and roads increasingly
occupy their land.

In June 2003, the Israeli Supreme Court
turned down a petition by people dis-
placed from the villages of Kafar Bir’em
and Ikrit in northern Israel. During the
1948 war, the inhabitants of these vil-
lages were ordered by the Israeli army to
leave their homes. They were promised
that they would be able to return within
two weeks, but were never actually al-
lowed to do so (Ettinger, Ha’aretz, 27
June 2003). After six years of hearings,
the Israeli Supreme Court accepted in
2003 the state’s claim that Israeli inter-
ests, based on a combination of the cur-
rent security situation and the
Palestinians’ persistent demand for the
right of return of refugees, could not jus-
tify the return of the displaced petitioners
unless there was a change in the political
situation.

Today many of the people displaced in
1948 and their children live, like the rest
of the Arab population in Israel, in Arab
towns with little or no Jewish population,
or otherwise they live in mixed Arab-
Jewish towns. Generally, the government
does not provide Arab Israelis with the
same quality of education, housing, em-
ployment, and social services as Jews.
Tensions between Arab and Jewish

communities have increased since the
second intifada and the general elevations
of regional tensions after 2000.

Eviction of Bedouin from their land
in the Negev

Since the creation of the State of Israel,
the Bedouin have been pressured to leave
their land in the Negev region, in the
south of the country. Successive Israeli
governments enacted a series of laws and
regulations facilitating the confiscation of
Bedouin land. Dispossession was made
easier by the fact that the Bedouin generally held no land titles.

In 1949 many Bedouin were ordered to
move into a closed area under military
administration. Following the ending of
military rule in 1966, most of them con-
tinued living in the former closed area.
From the 1970s to the 1990s, the gov-
ernment built seven towns for the Bed-
ouin in the Negev. According to human
rights advocates, the Bedouin were not
sufficiently involved in the planning of
the towns and not enough consideration
was given to their lifestyle and traditions.
Furthermore, the compensation received
for giving up their land in exchange for a
new house in the towns was considered
too low. While the seven towns do offer
better access to services than the tradi-
tional Bedouin settlements, the quality
and level of services is still inferior to
those in Jewish towns (Lithwick, 2000).
Also, according to the US Department of
State, government planners have noted
that funds to complete the seven towns
were far from sufficient (USDoS, Febru-
ary 2005).

Today, about half of the 140,000 Bedouin
in the Negev live in the seven towns. The
rest live in “unrecognised villages”,
which were declared illegal by the Na-
tional Planning and Building Law of
1965. About 45 villages of displaced
Bedouins are viewed as illegal by the
government and lack public water and electricity infrastructure as well as educational, health and welfare services. Children in unrecognised villages are 2.4 times more likely to suffer from malnutrition than youngsters living in other Bedouin villages (Sinai, Ha’aretz, 7 February 2005). Close to 31 per cent of school-age children in those villages are illiterate (Ha’aretz, 24 June 2004). Overall, the Bedouin are the poorest community in Israel, and entire regions in the Negev have become hubs for drugs, violence and serious crime (Ha’aretz, 24 June 2004). Bedouin infant mortality rates have also increased by 50 per cent over from 1997 to 2003 (Lavie, Ha’aretz, 30 January 2004, part I).

**Permanent settlement plan leading to renewed displacement**

In April 2003, the Israeli government adopted a five-year plan to build permanent settlements in the Negev region for the Bedouin living in the villages it considered illegal. The programme also provided for the compensation of displaced Bedouin. The plan was poorly received by the Bedouin, whose leaders complained about the lack of consultation with their community, in particular regarding the price set for their land and the percentage of land exchanged. The Israeli government began in 2004 to implement the plan, which includes intensification of house demolitions, destruction of crops and filing of eviction suits (ACRI, June 2004). Due to the resistance to the plan from affected Bedouin communities, clashes between authorities and residents escalated in 2004, resulting in the killing of one Bedouin resident of the village of Atir (Hasson, Ha’aretz, 22 March 2004; Ha’aretz, 24 June 2004). One of the measures used from 2002 to early 2004 to displace the Bedouin was the spraying of crops to discourage land cultivation. This measure was halted in March 2004, following a temporary injunction from the Israeli Supreme Court (Yoaz, Ha’aretz, 16 February 2005). In April 2007, the Court in its final ruling ordered that the spraying of fields in the Negev cease, due to the damage caused to the health of inhabitants and their livestock (Adalah, June 2007).

In 2005, the government said that it was in the process of establishing seven new Bedouin towns and expanding existing towns, in close consultation with representatives of the Bedouin communities (CERD, 23 July 2005). In November 2005 the government adopted the National Strategic Plan for the Development of the Negev for 2006-2015, known as “Negev 2015”, which failed to acknowledge or plan for unrecognised villages. As of mid-2007, however, the implementation of the plan had not started, and in the absence of official recognition of the Bedouin villages, homes continued to be demolished, and no services had been provided to the villages considered as illegal by the state (ADVA Center, January 2007; ADALAH, June 2007).

In April 2005, following an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court by several organisations representing unrecognised Bedouin villages in the Negev, the Interior Ministry began the process of granting recognition and providing municipal services to one of the unrecognised villages, Um Batin (Rinat, Ha’aretz, 28 April 2005). But eviction from other unrecognised villages continued, and even accelerated in 2006 (Adalah, June 2007). In May 2007, some 100 residents of the village of Al-Twayil were made homeless when the Israeli authorities demolished
their tents and shacks (Ha’aretz, 8 May 2007).

Temporary displacement from northern Israel during Israel-Hezbollah conflict

Several hundred thousand people fled northern Israel for the centre and south of the country during the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in July and August 2006. The fighting began after the Islamist militia attacked across the Lebanese-Israeli border and captured two Israeli soldiers. Israel retaliated with a month-long military offensive targeting Hezbollah strongholds all over Lebanon, which also caused heavy damage to civilian infrastructure. Over 1,000 Lebanese people died, and close to a million were displaced due to Israeli attacks (AI, 23 August 2006). Meanwhile, Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets into northern Israel, a region which is home to 1.5 million people. Most of the Hezbollah rockets appear to have been directed at civilian areas, and pedestrians, hospitals, schools, homes and businesses were hit (HRW, 5 August 2006). At least 43 civilians died in northern Israel, seven of them children, and over 300,000 fled their homes (Israel MFA, 23 August 2006; Brookings, 15 August 2006, p.2).

Most of the people displaced left for the centre and south of Israel. In the absence of a government evacuation system, people who fled the north left under their own steam, or with the help of NGOs (JBI, 15 August 2006). In addition, up to one million either stayed in bomb shelters, hid at home or alternated between the two (Brookings, 15 August 2006). Many of the shelters were described as crowded, with little or no fresh air, and dirty (JBI, 15 August 2006; IRIN, 12 August 2006). Those who stayed behind did so because of their work, because they refused to be chased out by Hezbollah, or because they were too weak or too old to leave (AFP, 4 August 2006). The situation of Arab Israeli residents in towns hit by the rockets was particularly difficult. Most did not have relatives to stay with in safer parts of the country, and many could not find safety in their towns, as Arab towns generally lack public infrastructure, including bomb shelters (NYT, 31 July 2006; IRIN, 6 August 2006; ADALAH, June 2007). IDPs without relatives elsewhere found refuge in the centre and south of the country with strangers who opened their homes, and also in hotels and in tents (IRIN, 15 August 2006).

The government primarily relied on Israeli NGOs, international Jewish voluntary agencies and individuals to assist the displaced. About 40,000 children from the north were taken to special summer camps in central Israel, to keep them out of harm’s way (Jewish Agency, 20 August 2006).

Following a cessation of hostilities on 14 August 2006 based on UN Security Council resolution 1701, most IDPs and those living in bomb shelters cautiously returned to their homes in northern Israel (IRIN, 17 August 2006). Those too weak or too old to return on their own were assisted by organisations like Magen David Adom, a member of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (MDA, 24 August 2006). Once home, many had to cope with the trauma of their displacement. Economic and social life had been paralysed during the month of conflict, and many businesses were reportedly going to close down because of the level of
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physical damage sustained. Thousands of homes, schools, businesses, synagogues and cars were damaged or destroyed by Hezbollah rockets, and many crops were lost (JBI, 15 August 2006).

Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, facing criticism for his government’s handling of the war in Lebanon, promised $2 billion to rebuild the northern Israeli towns hardest hit by Hezbollah rockets (Reuters, 24 August 2006). Following the war, the Israeli government settled some 25,000 claims by individuals and businesses who had suffered direct or indirect damage (UNGA, 2 October 2006). The Prime Minister’s Office appointed a Coordinator for the Reconstruction of Infrastructure and Institutions in Haifa and the North to liaise with ministries and local authorities. The Coordinator completed his work at the end of 2006 (Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, 26 December 2006).

In June 2007, rockets were launched from Lebanese territory into northern Israel, but no casualties or instances of displacement were reported as a result.

Displacement from the Israeli town of Sderot due to attacks from Gaza

Since 2000, the Israeli town of Sderot, close to the Gaza border, has been the target of rocket attacks, killing eight residents, including two children. In May 2007, Palestinian militant factions, including Hamas, stepped up the rocket fire from across the border, and many Qassam rockets landed in or around the town. Israel responded by targeting Hamas military sites in Gaza and attacking groups it believed to be involved in the attacks (NYT, 1 June 2007). According to the mayor of Sderot, some 10,000 people fled the town in mid-May 2007 (IRIN, 18 May 2007). A minority was evacuated by the Israeli government, and most left independently (Israel National News, 17 May 2007). Thanks to private funding, over two thousand of them found refuge in hotel rooms in the southern town of Eilat, while several hundred others stayed for ten days in tents in the city of Tel Aviv (Ha’aretz, 5 June 2007; IRIN, 18 May 2007).

Many schools in the city were closed temporarily, with some students leaving the town, and others afraid to leave their homes (IRIN, 29 May 2007). Meanwhile, mental health workers set up a 24-hour emergency centre to treat Sderot residents suffering from panic and anxiety attacks (IRIN, 18 May 2007). The Israeli Supreme Court ordered the government to reinforce all Sderot schools to withstand attacks, but the government said it would only be able to complete the Court’s demand within one to three years (Ha’aretz, 12 June 2007; Ha’aretz, 23 July 2007). An Israeli Parliamentarian Committee asked the Finance Ministry to compensate both Sderot workers who showed up at work, and those missing days of work for fear of attacks, but the Ministry responded that such a provision did not have a legal basis (Ha’aretz, 6 June 2007). Sporadic attacks against Sderot from Gaza continued as of August 2007 (Y Net, 6 August 2007).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC’s country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Israel. The full country profile is available online here.
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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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