

A Shared Struggle for Housing in the Naqab*

By Oren Yiftachel[†] and Thabet Abu Ras[‡]

When did you last see the Orthodox and secular, Arabs and Jews, newcomers and natives, students and neighborhood activists engaged in a common march and demonstration? On Monday night, 25 July 2011, in Be'er Sheva (Beer el-Sabe), hundreds of them marched together, waved signs written together, and shouted slogans together, led by the rallying call, "the people demand social justice." Energized by a successful rally on Saturday, 23 July 2011 the protest organizers went a step further in Be'er Sheva, and organized groups from across the political spectrum for a common cause.

After the rally, a conference was held on the grass among the tents at the protest encampment. Many spoke over the course of an hour, including Bella Alexandrov, Haim Bar-Yaakov, Adar Stern, Seyah Al-Turi, Haim Berkovitz, Nuri Al-Ukbi, Gaby Peretz, Debby Cohen-Keshet and many others. From these names, it's apparent that there is something new and refreshing happening: a struggle for a common purpose, shared by many groups, focusing for now on housing, but representing a deep-seated desire for a more just society.

In recent decades almost every political agenda was dictated 'from above' and set one group against another. In Israeli ethnocracy, the antagonistic "struggle against" has become a leading banner so that we find ourselves in the politics of conflict, with Jews against Arabs, the religious against the secular, immigrants against native-born, and students against the rest of the nation. Meanwhile the Finance Ministry, "professionally" as it were, promotes the sale of state property—our assets—to the highest bidder, increasing the divisions among the people.

Also during the Be'er Sheva demonstration on Monday 25 July 2011, two protesters broke into the circle of protesters holding signs saying "We are all Lieberman," shouting insults against the other protesters, and demanding the removal of the Arabs. Within seconds they were detained by the encamped protesters and kicked out. This transparent attempt to divide and sow discord failed this time. Housing shortages are indeed common to all groups in Israel, and could provide common cause for a real and continuous struggle that would really unite various groups. Such a struggle would challenge the perverse and unrestrained capitalist system that has developed in the State, of which the housing market is the most prominent symbol.

But we must not be naïve. We must recognize the differing sources of the housing crisis among different sectors. Most of the distress of the Israeli Jewish public, especially among the youth, is due to state neglect of housing and the privatization of land. The plight of Arab citizens of Israel, however, is mainly due

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to the process of land confiscation in Arab towns and their surroundings, a severe shortage of allocation of state land for the Arab community's growth, and barriers to movement within Israeli public space, like a shortage of Arab institutions in most cities in Israel and the establishment of selection committees in around 700 community towns that effectively exclude Arab citizens but also harm Jewish groups. The plight of the ultra-Orthodox, no less acute, is due mainly to poverty and an unhealthy dependence on government and private charity. It is not a coincidence that the demonstrators shouted "We want justice, not charity!"

But regarding the housing issue there is more shared in common than there is difference. Despite the various sources of distress, the right to shelter and care for the next generation, can and should unite groups and require change to a fundamentally distorted system, one which does not guarantee citizens anything, even shelter. Who decides today if our children will have a roof over their heads? Namely, Finance Ministry employees, who want to apply theories that have failed around the world, and their allies, the capitalists, whose concern for profits always harms the little citizen.

Why does an apartment in Israel cost twelve years of average earnings, while in Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore and France an apartment costs only about six to seven years of work? You can learn from the experience of these countries intervening in the housing markets, creating a mix that helps all citizens obtain reasonable housing as a basic constitutional right.

These countries offer different types of public housing (governmental, urban, and cooperative). At the same time, there is a duty to build a percentage of modest but solid affordable housing in all new projects, incentives for establishing long-term rental housing, and a limited role for a housing market with principles of speculative capital.

In these systems the state helps its citizens in need to obtain social welfare. In this manner a just society is built with meaningful citizenship, making the state much more of a home for all its citizens.

One must not be given to illusions; the present government will not rush to adopt such solutions that would admit its failure and neglectful policy. The predictable response is further attempts to divide the opposition into sectarian groups that weaken them all.

But the protesters must not give up because justice and the future of society are in their hands now. Maybe from Be'er Sheva the call will ring out for a new common struggle created "from below," a great multicultural reality drawn from the peripheries. Such a joint struggle can lead not only to a change in the ailing housing system, but also to the renewal of all struggles for a better society in Israel. The sooner the better.