Quo Vadis? The Umm al-Hiran Events and the Arab Minority in Israel
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A general view of Umm al-Hiran/Source: Wikipedia

On January 18, 2017, a violent confrontation between the Israeli police and residents of the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran left one Israeli policeman dead and one wounded. A Bedouin resident of the village was killed while allegedly using his vehicle to ram into policemen executing government orders to evict residents from their home as part of a plan to dismantle the unrecognized village, move them to a neighboring town, and establish a Jewish residential community on the site. In the ensuing violence, a number of other people were injured including the parliamentary leader of the Arab Joint List in the Israeli Knesset, Ayman Odeh. These events and their repercussions underscore the huge gaps separating the political leadership of the Arab minority in Israel and the Israeli political establishment.

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The Bedouin tribe of Abu al-Qiʿan was settled on state lands in the area of ʿAtir – Umm al-Hiran, in the northern Negev, in 1956, by the Israeli military administration to which the Arab citizens in Israel were subject between 1948 and 1966. During the 1980s most of the tribe's members took up residence in the adjacent Bedouin town of Hura (5 kilometers away), which had been established by the government in order to settle the Bedouin population in the area. In 2014, there were between 750 and 1,000 people remaining in the original area. On the hill known as Umm al-Hiran, there were approximately 50 residential structures, permanent and makeshift, that were built without permission and subject to demolition warrants since 2003. In fact, Umm al-Hiran was one of the dozens of unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. It was not connected to basic state infrastructure, such as electricity and water, and had no school (most of the children have attended schools in Hura). Over the years, the state had offered the remaining inhabitants alternative land tracts to build new homes in Hura, including infrastructure and financial compensation, however most of them declined the offers.

In 2002, the government decided to build a new Jewish-populated "suburban communal settlement," using the name of Hiran, on the location of Umm al-Hiran. Since 2010, when the Hiran project was officially approved, residents from Umm al-Hiran have led a legal struggle against the development plan, which eventually ended with the Supreme Court rejecting the petition by a majority of two justices to one, even though the Court recognized the residents as "authorized," rather than intruders on state lands, given the history of the settlement. Nevertheless, it ruled that the houses should be demolished. The minority opinion was that the residents of Umm al-Hiran should be allocated plots of land in Hiran, instead of Hura.[1]

The Supreme Court decision did not end the controversy, which became a symbol of the crisis of unrecognized Bedouin villages. Demolition warrants notwithstanding, the legal and public struggle of residents continued, accompanied and supported by Arab politicians, NGOs, and Jewish left-wing activists. In January 2016, the Supreme Court rejected a plea by ʿAdalah – the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel - to reopen the Umm al-Hiran case for the fourth time (following the Magistrate, District, and Supreme Court decisions).[2]

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[1] The Supreme Court of Israel, Verdict on Request for Civil Appeal (RCA 3094/11), June 6, 2014 (in Hebrew).

[2] "Israeli Supreme Court refuses to reconsider decision to demolish Bedouin village of Atir-Umm al-Hiran and evict all residents," Adalah.org, January 17, 2017.

Nonetheless, the political, civil, and legal struggle to prevent Umm al-Hiran's demolition continued: there were numerous demonstrations, with participation from both local Bedouins and Arab supporters from the north, taking place in Umm al-Hiran[3] and in Be'er Sheba, the regional capital of Israel's southern region.[4] Most of the various branches and political parties representing Israel's Arab minority took up the cause, ranging from the Islamic Movement, represented first and foremost in this context by MK Taleb Abu Arar of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, and the Joint List,[5] via Taʿal ("The Arab Movement for Renewal", led by Ahmad Tibi),[6] and Arab members of Knesset (MKs) from Zionist parties. MK Issawi Frej of the Meretz Party, reflecting a near consensus among the Arab citizens in Israel, said at the Knesset Interior Committee meeting: "The government does not intend to operate for the interest of all its citizens, but is rather in favor of expelling 1,000 Arab citizens in order to establish a Jewish town."[7] MK Zouheir Bahloul of the Labor Party arranged for the local committee of Umm al-Hiran's inhabitants to be invited to a meeting of the party's MKs at the Knesset, in late November 2016.[8] However, the most prominent Arab politician on the Umm al-Hiran issue was Ayman Odeh, head of the Hadash party and Joint List.

Odeh has made the issue of the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev one of the flagships of his political activity, His first public move following his March 2015 election to the Knesset was organizing a march from the unrecognized Bedouin villages to Jerusalem, on the eve of the Knesset swearing-in ceremony.[9] On November 21, 2016, the Israel Lands Authority had announced that the demolition of Umm al-Hiran would start the following day. Odeh (a resident of the mixed Jewish-Arab city of Haifa, in northern Israel), traveled down to Umm al-Hiran and spent the night there, declaring that "the deportation [of the inhabitants] of Umm al-Hiran is the worst crime since the days of the Military Administration… they are trying to deport the Arab inhabitants in order to establish an exclusive Jewish settlement…we are going to be lodging in Umm al-Hiran in order to resist the bulldozers and the draconian demolition warrants

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[3] "Demonstration in Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, August 24, 2015.

[4] "Demonstration in Be'er Sheba for the salvation of Umm al-Hiran and ʿAtir and against evacuation" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, March 3, 2015.

[5] "The Islamic Movement in the Negev: We are against the deportation from Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, May 7, 2015.

[6] "Activists in Ta'al erecting a sign bearing Umm al-Hiran's name at the entrance to the village" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, June 28, 2015.

[7] "MK Frej: The Government is committing a crime against the inhabitants of ʿAtir – Umm al-Hiran, and the Supreme Court is justifying that" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, February 17, 2016.

[8] "Labor Party receives Umm al-Hiran's committee in the Knesset [in Arabic], November 28, 2016.

[9] Shlomi Daskal, "A Leader with a Vision? Ayman Odeh and the Arab Political Vision in Israel," *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel,* No. 5, May 2015.

with our bodies, because if they succeed in demolishing one house tomorrow it will encourage them to carry out a transfer [of Arab population]."[10] In the end, the police announced that the November demolition would be temporarily postponed. Yet it was clear that a confrontation was imminent.

MK Ayman Odeh lodging at Umm al-Hiran/ Source: www.sonara.net

In January 2017 the tension surrounding Umm al-Hiran increased. On January 10, eleven houses that were built without official permission were demolished in the Arab town of Qalansawe, in the central-east coastal plain. The public outcry in response to the Qalansawe demolitions was a prelude to the Umm al-Hiran confrontation. The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, which is comprised of the Arab parties, mayors, and representatives of extra-parliamentary organizations, announced a strike, which would include schools.[11] On January 13, a major demonstration was held in Qalansawe, with the participation of Arab MKs, mayors, and demonstrators from various localities that, according to reports in the Arab media, included some 10,000 participants – an unprecedented number for an Arab political demonstration in recent years. Smaller scale solidarity demonstrations in were held in Arab communities throughout the country.[12]

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[10] "MK Odeh: we are going to lodge in Umm al-Hiran in order to stand with our bodies in the way of the bulldozers and the draconian demolition warrants" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, November 21, 2016.

[11] "11 houses demolished in Qalansawe: Follow-Up Committee announces general strike in the Arab sector on Wednesday tomorrow, including schools" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 10, 2017.

[12] "More than 10,000 demonstrating against demolition in Qalansawe" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 13, 2017.

The Umm al-Hiran evacuation began a little more than a week after the Qalansawe demolitions. Following protracted unsuccessful failed negotiations, the police surrounded the village before dawn, evacuated inhabitants to the local mosque, and demolished the houses. The demolition process was met with resistance. Two people were killed: a policeman, Erez Amedi Levi (34), who was run over by a vehicle driven by a local resident, Yaʿqub Musa Abu al-Qiʿan (47), who was shot and killed by the police. The police claim that Abu al-Qiʿan was a member of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement (a legal body represented in parliament as part of the Joint List), who had connections to the Islamic State (IS). Al-Qiʿan's family and neighbors vehemently deny these connections, noting that he was a high school mathematics teacher in nearby Hura and that he was in the process of leaving the village after collecting some personal belongings from his home, which was one of the fifteen structures scheduled for demolition.

Some observers claim that Abu al-Qiʿan was shot before his vehicle hit the policeman, and it was only after being shot, and severely wounded, that he lost control of his car and killed Levi. Recently released video footage by the police has provided some basis for this claim and the Attorney General has opened an investigation into this matter. In the confrontation that followed the policeman Levi's death, several more people were injured, among them MK Odeh, who again had rushed to Umm al-Hiran the night before. MK Ussama Saʿdi of Taʿal and the Joint list was also injured. Both were taken to hospital in Be'er Sheba; photos of Odeh, bleeding from his forehead and later wearing a bandage wrapped around head, spread quickly on social media, transforming him into "the hero of the day" for the Arab minority.[13]

Public outcry over the incident was swift among Arab citizens throughout the country. Demonstrations were held on the same day; the largest one, in Umm al-Fahm, attracted thousands and temporarily closed a section of one of the most important highways in Israel.[14] Demonstrations on a smaller scale were held in Sakhnin, ʿArraba, Tamra, Nazareth, Kafr Kanna, Qalansawe, Taybeh, and other Arab cities, towns, and villages, while the High Follow-Up Committee declared a general strike on January 19, this time excluding schools.[15] Public demonstrations were also held by Arab students at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[16]

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[13] "Bloody confrontations and demolition in Umm al-Hiran: a martyr and a policeman killed" [in Arabic], Panet.co.il, January 18, 2017; "Policeman and citizen killed in confrontations in evacuation of Umm al-Hiran: department for police investigations checking" [in Hebrew], *Haʿaretz*, January 18, 2017

[14] "Route 65 in Wadi ʿAra closes during a demonstration at the entrance to Umm al-Fahm in solidarity with the people of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 18, 2017.

[15] "Arab sector witnesses a strike for the salvation of Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 19, 2017.

[16] "Two student demonstrations for the salvation of Umm al-Hiran at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv universities, [in Arabic]" Sonara.net, January 18, 2017.

The expressions of solidarity with the Bedouins in the Negev were unprecedented.[17] They stretched from the forum of heads of Bedouin localities in the north (many of whose residents serve in the Israeli security forces)[18] to ʿAli Salam, mayor of Nazareth, the largest Arab city in Israel, who in the past had criticized Odeh for organizing a demonstration there. In this instance, Salam hurried to congratulate Odeh and Saʿdi for their "steadfastness" at Umm al-Hiran.[19] The expressions of solidarity included a special session of the Follow-Up Committee, held at the southern Bedouin city of Rahat;[20] a mass Friday prayer at the site of Umm al-Hiran, led by Shaykh Raed Salah, leader of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement that was outlawed one year ago;[21] and raising money to purchase mobile homes for the inhabitants of Umm al-Hiran whose houses were demolished.[22]

Arab students demonstrating in solidarity with Umm al-Hiran at Tel Aviv University/
Source: www.sonara.net

The public confrontation during the Umm al-Hiran evacuation again demonstrated the deep divide and mutual distrust between the Arab minority and the Israeli authorities, first and foremost the police. Veteran journalist Nahum Barnea, who arrived in Umm al-Hiran on January 20, interviewed

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[17] It was only with the passing of the Knesset's late 2013 Prawer-Begin plan targeting the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev that Arabs in the north began showing solidarity with the Bedouin of the south.

[18] "Forum of heads of Bedouin local authorities in the North announces a strike in solidarity with the people of Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 18, 2017.

[19] "'Ali Salam: I salute the steadfastness of MKs Odeh and Saʿdi against the uprooting of our people in Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 18, 2017.

[20] "Follow-Up Committee meets in Rahat to discuss the events of Umm al-Hiran" [in Arabic], January 19, 2017.

[21] Salah himself was recently released from prison, after a conviction for incitement to violence about a decade ago. See: "Mass Friday Prayer with Shaykh Raed Salah as preacher on lands of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev" [in Arabic], Sonara.net, January 20, 2017.

[22] "People from the village of ʿAra – ʿArʿara donating a caravan house to a family from Umm al-Hiran in the Negev following the demolition of its house, [in Arabic]" Sonara.net, January 25, 2017.

resident Yasir Abu al-Qiʿan, who told him: "I am a citizen of the state, who served in the army. I want the same rights as the evacuees of Gush Katif [Jewish residents who were evacuated from the Gaza strip in 2005]. I am no different."[23] Senior columnist Wadiʿ Awawdy wrote that Israel displayed "an iron hand in Umm al-Hiran, as opposed to a silk glove in Amona" (an illegal Jewish outpost in the West Bank that was evacuated and demolished in early February after a protracted legal battle).[24]

To be sure, Arab anger towards the authorities did not preclude cooperation with Israeli Jewish organizations. The Arab leadership participated in a joint Jewish-Arab demonstration in Tel Aviv on February 4, to protest against demolition of houses and "racism." Among the speakers was Amal Abu Saʿd, widow of Yaʿqub Abu al-Qiʿan, who called for an independent committee of inquiry to investigate the events at Umm al-Hiran, "during which the my husband, Yaʿqub Abu al-Qiʿan, and the policeman Erez Levi, both of blessed memory, lost their lives… we all demand answers…and equality for all the state's citizens."[25] Will this incident bring further escalation in the near future, or perhaps lead to soul-searching and eventual reconciliation? *Quo vadis* ("where to")? Much depends on the leadership of both the Arab minority and the Israeli authorities.

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[23] Nahum Barnea, "Our forces did not return safely" [in Hebrew], *Yediot Aharonot*, January 20, 2017.

[24] Wadiʿ Awawdy, "Israel: Iron hand in Umm al-Hiran, silk gloves in Amona" [in Arabic], *al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 4, 2017.

[25] Jacky Khoury and Or Kashti, "Thousands of Jews and Arabs protest against racism and the demolition of homes" [in Hebrew], *Haʾaretz*, February 4, 2017.