

Opinion | Haaretz Editorial

Editorial | Who Will Protect Israel's Arab Citizens?

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Eight Bedouin-Arab residents of the Negev, seven of them from unrecognized villages, have been killed in rocket strikes from the Gaza Strip since October 7. This tragic loss is not unique to the current war. During every military operation, Israel's Arab citizens are exposed to rocket strikes due to a lack of protected spaces in the areas where they live. The result is a needless loss of life, and not only in southern Israel.



A Bedouin child in the Negev. 40 percent to 50 percent of the Arab population does not have access to a shelter. Credit: Alex Levac

Of the 44 Israelis who were killed by Hezbollah rockets and mortar shells during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, 19 were Arab. Most of them were in their homes, or in an Arab community, during the strikes. Six of the dead were children, the youngest just 3 years old. During the last round of fighting, in 2021, a man and his daughter in the unrecognized village of Dahmash were killed in a direct hit by a rocket.

While Arab communities in southern Israel are paying the highest price in the current war, many in the north fear what may happen if a war erupts on the Lebanon front because nothing has changed since 2006. An examination by Arab local authorities found that 40 percent to 50 percent of the Arab population did not have access to a shelter. Rahat, the biggest Arab city in Israel, does not have a single public bomb shelter. The situation is no better in other communities. Deir al-Assad has around 13,000 residents. The city's mayor estimates that only about 30 percent of them have a shelter in their homes. According to estimates, only about half the homes in Fassuta, which has a population of 3,500, have protected spaces. Access to the six public shelters is difficult, and residents may not reach them in time.

In addition, Arab communities are characterized by older construction, narrow alleyways and difficult topography. All this makes for additional challenges in the event of a disaster because it is hard for rescue and medical teams to get where they are needed to save lives. Moreover, no Arab community except Nazareth has a hospital.

For years, Arab communities have sought help, but in the current government Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and other ministers, with the consent of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have

frozen the budgets for Arab local governments. This has had a direct impact on them, rendering them incapable of helping their residents protect themselves.

The government must ensure that all Israelis, including Arabs, are protected, especially in wartime. The state must act immediately to end the years-long policy of neglecting its Arab citizens.

The above article is Haaretz's lead editorial, as published in the Hebrew and English newspapers in Israel.

P.S.

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