"These people are being denied their basic rights and ignored by the planning system." This master plan is wrong environmentally, socially and politically, contends Oren Yiftachel, professor of Political Geography, Planning and Public Policy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU), who has contracted with the Council of Unrecognized Villages to produce another alternative plan for the Council of Unrecognized Villages. "The real issue here is a planning crime, because the state's discrimination has caused great suffering."

Patricia Golan

**Beduin in Limbo**

Some 80,000 Beduin live in villages in the Negev that appear on no official map. Most prefer to continue living in squalor than accept the recommendations of a recently-published government plan for the region.

Twail Abu-Jarwal can hardly be called a village. Home to some 450 Beduin, members of the al-Tlalka tribe, the clusters of tents and tin shacks are sprawled over several barren wadis in the northern Negev. Reached by turning onto a dirt road off route 40 north of Beersheba, the community - or what remains of it - is barely accessible.

This is Beduin country. Like dozens of similar shantytowns and makeshift encampments that dot the landscape around Beersheva, Twail Abu-Jarwal does not appear on any map. According to the State of Israel, it doesn't officially exist.

Twail Abu-Jarwal is what is popularly known in Israel as an "unrecognized village," one of 35 such villages in the Negev area.

Since neither the government nor the regional or municipal authorities acknowledge the existence of these settlements, their residents have no rights to municipal services such as running water, electricity, sewage or garbage collection. And since they do not officially exist, the authorities refuse to draw up statutory plans for them, so anything constructed in the region - tents, huts, stone structures - is illegal and subject to demolition.

Over the last three years Twail Abu-Jarwal has been destroyed 11 times by the Israeli authorities, most recently in October 2007, when police forces arrived at the village and demolished the structures, including the tents.

Among the piles of stones and rubble that is Twail Abu-Jarwal, chickens peck, a few sheep wander, black-robed women do their chores, and a group
of children, unkempt and barefoot despite the cold, play aimlessly. The grainy sides of the wadi are sparsely covered with low mesquite trees planted by the Jewish National Fund a few years ago, when the government first designated this arid area as a forested region. In the wadi just to the west, energetic construction proceeds for the dual-track railway between Tel Aviv to Beersheba.

All the stone structures have been destroyed in the last two years, including the school, built by the residents themselves, although the village cemetery with its mix of old and new headstones remains. The residents, who insist that this is their land and argue that they have no where else to go, rebuild after each demolition.

The state wants the Negev Beduin to live in government-developed, planned communities. The government contends that the Beduins' decision to make their homes wherever they like is unacceptable in a modern state.

While about half of the estimated 160,000 Negev Beduin have moved to government-built Beduin townships, the rest have preferred to stay, even under impoverished conditions without basic services, rather than moving into towns with diverse tribal groups. They view town life as a threat to their traditional lifestyle and demand title to the land that they claim they and their nomadic ancestors have inhabited for generations.

The Beduin are Israeli citizens; many volunteer for the army. Yet, they contend, they are being discriminated against on racial grounds, systematically denied the services provided to Jewish communities.

The results of the absence of planning and agreed-upon arrangements for the Beduin population can be seen in the chaotically expanding jerry-built collections of shacks and piles of refuse that are visible along the highways of the Negev; what was once a striking desert landscape has become an eyesore. The results can also be seen in the abject poverty and social neglect in which most Beduins live and in the growing alienation and rage that have gripped the Beduin community. The situation has become an intractable, ethnic civil standoff.

In July 2007, the Interior Ministry published the long-awaited Plan No. 4/14/23, the Outline Plan for the Beersheba Metropolis (which includes Dimona and Arad). The plan calls for doubling the total population in the Negev from 500,000 today to one million by the year 2020. (By this time, the Beduin population is expected to double from it current 160,000 to more than 300,000, 54 percent of them expected to be children.)

The plan recognizes two villages that were formerly unrecognized. But according to Beduin leaders and Israeli organizations lobbying for Beduin rights, the proposed plan ignores the needs of the Beduins living in the rest of the unrecognized villages and is blatantly discriminatory. The government, they point out, is providing Jewish residents with the choice of living in any of more than 100 southern communities, including
agricultural settlements, and even single-family farms, but Beduin citizens do not have this opportunity.

The government first attempted to impose statutory order in the Negev in 1996. In 2000 the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) and a broad coalition of Jewish and Beduin groups filed petitions to the High Court of Justice against that plan, charging that it completely ignored the Beduin living in the area, relating to the land where 45 unrecognized settlements were then located as if it were uninhabited. ( Authorities subsequently adopted a program to recognize some of the settlements and the state had incrementally recognized nine villages in the greater Beersheba area known as the Abu Basma region - see box, page 14.)

The petitions claimed that the plan was part of a longstanding policy to evict the Beduin from their villages and concentrate them into the townships built by the state in the 1970s and early 80s. The petitioners demanded that the master plan be amended to ensure the planning of agricultural villages for the Beduin population of the Negev. While not ruling on the petition, the High Court brokered an agreement in which the planning authorities would recommend solutions for the problem of Beduin settlement in the Beersheba metropolis region (which has a 25% Arab Beduin population). In response, the authorities agreed to revise the plan accordingly and the planners also promised the court that they would meet with members of the community and obtain their input in the planning process.

In the seven intervening years the government planners did meet several times with the petitioners, including the unofficial Regional Council of Unrecognized Beduin Villages (RCUV), which presented alternative plans proposing recognition of most of the villages and maintaining their rural character.

When the Ministry's revised plan was made public in July, the Beduin and their advocates were outraged. The new plan recognizes two previously unrecognized villages, each of which has about 5,000 residents, yet dozens of Beduin settlements are still ignored. According to the plan the townships are to be expanded, apparently under the assumption that most of the residents of the unrecognized villages will move there. The Beduin, however, have no intention of moving. They insist that the land is rightfully theirs, and they want to remain living in a community-based rural setting, which suits their culture and way of life.

Before it can be officially implemented, the master plan must be approved by the National Planning Council. A dozen individuals and organizations - among them ACRI, Bimkom-Planners for Planning Rights, the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages, the Arab Center for Alternative Planning and The Forum for Coexistence in the Negev - have filed formal objections to the plan with the Planning Council.

"More than 80,000 people living in the unrecognized villages have no real
remedy under this plan," states Attorney Banna Shoughry-Badarne, who submitted objections to the plan on behalf of ACRI. "These people are being denied their basic rights and ignored by the planning system." This master plan is wrong environmentally, socially and politically, contends Oren Yiftachel, professor of Political Geography, Planning and Public Policy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU), who has contracted with the Council of Unrecognized Villages to produce another alternative plan for the Council of Unrecognized Villages. "The real issue here is a planning crime, because the state's discrimination has caused great suffering."

Traditionally a semi-nomadic people, the Beduin Arabs arrived in the Negev in various waves from Saudi Arabia and the Sinai in the last 300 years in search of sources of water for their flocks. Each tribe tried to settle in places where there were wells. The area of Beersheba drew many since there were easily accessible underground water sources. By the early 20th century, 96 tribes had settled into their own recognized territories, often with Arab sharecroppers they had brought from Egypt and Sudan to cultivate the lands, who lived near the tribe.

"There's no argument that the Beduin here were using the land, and that it was in their possession according to customary law," explains Yiftachel. "In 1921 the British Mandate gave everybody a chance to register their land - within two weeks - and they didn't do it. This was published in the 'Government Gazette,' but it's doubtful that anyone read this. In any case, the Beduin are very suspicious of registering their land for many reasons: not wanting to pay tax or not wanting to be conscripted to the army, which registering implied in Ottoman times. Furthermore, the British were demanding that they register as individuals, and that would be troubling under the tribal system. You could get killed for registering tribal lands under your own name," Yiftachel explains.

In 1970 the Israeli Justice Ministry opened an office for Beduin to register land claims. Some 3,000 people submitted claims to a total of one million dunams. They received receipts for their submission, but never heard further. Many of these people are no longer alive, but their descendents still maintain the claims. Before and during Israel's War of Independence in 1948, some Beduin tribes cooperated with the Jews, while others were hostile and carried out attacks against Jews. After the war, though most of the Beduin had already fled to the Sinai or the Gaza Strip, the Israelis expelled those remaining tribes that had attacked Jews to the Sinai and the Gaza Strip.

Out of 65,000 Beduin who roamed the Negev in the Mandatory period, only about 11,000 remained inside the borders of the state in 1948. In the 1950s under Israel's military rule, which was applied to Arabs living within the state until 1967, the remaining Beduin tribes were forcibly relocated into a restricted zone in the northeastern Negev known as the syag in Hebrew (enclosure), and pronounced siaj in Arabic.
Like all the other Beduin in the western Negev, the al-Tlalka tribe, then about 700 members, was also moved to the syag. "In 1952 they told us that we could return in six months," maintains 65-year-old Akil al-Tlalka, the leader of the Twail Abu-Jarwal village who says his father claimed 8,000 dunams of land. "But we were never allowed back to our lands."

"There was never any intention of allowing any of the tribes to return to their lands," concedes Dodik Shoshani, one of the founders of Kibbutz Lahav in the Negev, who has been closely involved with the Beduin in various state capacities since the 1950s, including as first director of the Beduin Administration, which is part of the Israel Lands Authority (ILA).

"In order to clear the western Negev, which had more fertile lands, for Jewish settlements, [the authorities] moved the Beduin eastwards. There were some army officers that protested this policy at the time, but they were reassigned. Usually the tribes were resettled on lands belonging to tribes that had left the country," recalls Shoshani. Since none of the areas from which the Beduin had been removed had ever been registered, and since the Israeli government did not recognize traditional ownership rights, nearly all the lands previously held by Beduins were declared state lands.

By the late 1970s, the Beduin population in the Negev had tripled. As Israel sought to prepare army training grounds in the Negev after evacuating the Sinai as part of the peace treaty with Egypt, most of the Beduin living in the southernmost part of the syag area were moved further north.

It was in this period that the government launched its urbanization policy, building seven towns (Lakiya, Rahat, Tel Sheva, Hura, Aroer, Segev Shalom and Keseife) in the syag area. (An 8th town, Tarabin, was constructed in the last year.)

The government's officially declared intention in building the towns was to create conditions that would enable the provision of basic services to the Beduin population. There were, indeed, many Beduin who wanted permanent settlements where there would be decent schools for their children. But there was another unstated, though generally understood, motive. As BGU professor Ismael Abu-Saad puts it, the government sought "to concentrate as many Beduin as possible in urban locales to prevent them from cultivating, living on and/or claiming ownership of the lands the state had expropriated." About half the Beduin families in the Negev - mainly those who did not have land claims - moved to the townships. The rest, viewing town life as a threat to their traditional lifestyle and insisting that the land is theirs, refused. These are the Beduin tribes and clans that today live in the "unrecognized villages," or as the Israeli authorities refer to them, the "dispersion," since they tend to live in spread-out clusters. There are some 80,000 people living in the "dispersion" today.
In the 1980s Al-Tlalka's tribe agreed to relocate to the newly built township of Lakiya, which is populated mainly by the al-Sana tribe with whom they have a longstanding conflict. But the plots they were supposed to move to were claimed by the al-Sana who refused to allow them to settle. And in accordance with Beduin tradition, no member of one tribe would ever move into an area claimed by another - even if the tribes were on friendly terms. So in 1984 the tribe returned to live on the land from which it had been removed in 1952.

For many years the authorities left them alone. Al-Tlalka believes this is because the railway was being built through the lands they claimed and there was at least a tacit recognition of ownership. "Officials came and asked me if I agreed to the railway, and I said if it was for the public good, then go ahead," he says. No compensation was offered, and al-Tlalka apparently did not expect to receive any compensation for his land from the state.

Then in 2004 came the eviction and demolition orders. Al-Tlalka says he has proposed four different alternative locations for the village but all have been rejected by the authorities. "At the last meeting [with the authorities] I blew up. I said I cannot sit with you anymore, I am going back to my land and not moving," he declares.

"This is not a village," declares Ilan Yeshurun, director of the Beduin Administration, a division of the ILA. "[Twail Abu-Jarwal] doesn't exist on any map or in any legal registration. It's only a village in the eyes of the Beduin. These people can go to live in other places, as long as they are feasible." In 1993 the ILA decided to compromise on land claims. According to Beduin Administration head Yeshurun, although the state does not recognize traditional land claims and insists that it owns the lands occupied by the Beduin dispersion, the government is willing to pay "immediate and generous financial compensation" to those who withdraw their ownership claims and move to permanent villages. "Recognition of a land claim is simply based on the owner's declaration. If no one else claims this land, then no further proof is needed," explains Yeshurun.

Sounds simple. But most of the Beduin claimants have not taken up the government's offer. So far the state has reached settlements on less than 3 percent of the 650,000 dunams claimed by Beduin, according to the Ministry of the Interior's Southern District Commissioner Dudu Cohen.

Cohen insists the revised master plan, which includes the expansion of the existing towns, offers at least "a partial solution" to the Beduin demands. "We do understand the Beduin needs. There are 4,500 new plots being developed in Rahat. Almost all of them have been purchased," he says.

But the Beduin towns, as numerous studies and reports show, have proved an exercise in failure. Created without consideration for the traditional Beduin way of life, there were few provisions for ensuring proper housing
infrastructure, parks, community centers or industrial areas to generate employment opportunities, the latter particularly vital for a population adjusting to urban, modern life.

The towns quickly became hotbeds of crime and drugs, pockets of unemployment, social tensions and dependency on welfare. They rank among the country's 10 poorest municipalities. Rahat, the largest of the Beduin towns, has 50,000 residents today, but almost no employment possibilities.

"I'm not surprised at the results of taking people suddenly from their traditional way of life and expecting them to adapt overnight to modernization without preparation," comments education professor Ismael Abu-Saad, the co-founder and first director of the BGU Center for Beduin Studies and Development.

"They moved to the towns and there was nothing, no economic infrastructure and it was unsuitable for the lives the Beduin were used to. So overnight they turned into unskilled laborers, because they'd lost their traditional livelihood."

"The forced urbanization of this population has been disastrous," confirms Prof. Alean Al-Krenawi, chairman of the BGU Department of Social Work. "The Beduin lost the basis of their traditional economy of flocks and farms, and became dependent on the Jewish economy for which they were not trained."

The statistics are depressing. The Beduin, who make up 30 percent of the population of the Negev, have the highest unemployment rate in the country. Impoverished, uneducated, land-poor and dependent, they also have the highest fertility rate in the country, perhaps in the world, doubling their population every 15 years.

Although some Negev Beduin do serve in the Israel Defense Forces, the last few years have seen a fast-growing religious fundamentalism and alienation from the state. And the Jewish Israeli public has become unsympathetic. According to a recent poll conducted by the non-governmental organization, "Bimkom-Planners for Civil Rights," one of the organizations working with the Beduin on the issue of the unrecognized villages, fully 70 percent of Israelis between the ages of 18 and 29 do not believe that the Beduin deserve the same rights granted to Jews.

Early one morning last May, more than a dozen police cars pulled into the unrecognized village of Alsera, about 10 kilometers west of the city of Arad. With weapons drawn and batons at the ready, scores of officers fanned out while one officer went from house to house, pasting demolition notices on each doorway.

"The notices were addressed to 'Unknown,' as if they don't know who we are," remarks Khalil al-Amour, 42, a high school teacher and member of the local council of Alsera, another unrecognized village. "We've been here for at least 100 years," he maintains and says the residents were never
told the reason for the demolition orders, the execution of which has been postponed until next November, following a court appeal.

There is no electricity or sewerage system, although the village was allowed to connect pipes to the water system in 1998. Israel's compulsory education law mandates that the government provide all children with an education through the 10th grade. Some of the unrecognized villages have elementary and middle schools; the Education Ministry is supposed to provide school buses for children from villages with no schools, and the 100 village school children are bussed to schools in Kseife 12 kilometers away.

The government is also obligated by law to provide health services "according to the principles of justice and equality." Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of unrecognized villages have no health clinics, infant services or other medical services. In almost all the unrecognized communities, those education and health services that do exist were achieved as a result of court petitions and social advocacy undertaken by residents and non-governmental organizations.

In an occasional bureaucratic twist, one government ministry has actually dismantled what another provided: The education ministry built a kindergarten and paid for a teacher for the children of a settlement of the Al-Atrash tribe, whose members refuse - because of tribal disputes - to move to the nearby Beduin township of Hura. The Interior Ministry inspectors demolished the kindergarten because the structure was illegal. Alsera, home to 70 families, is just outside the perimeters of the Nevatim air force base, built in 1982 on Beduin-held land known as Tel Malchata following the Sinai evacuation. The clans who had been living there agreed to accept compensation in exchange for relocating to the newly created towns of Kseife, Rahat and Aroer. Many Beduin point to this as a sorry compromise. The Tel Malchata Beduin received little money and ended up in townships where they are miserable.

Al-Amour shows his guests a bill of sale written in Arabic for Alsera's lands. Tucked inside a plastic sleeve, the yellowing 1923 document, with British Mandate customs stamps, attests to the purchase of the land by his great-grandfather for 150 gold pounds. "The Lands Authority say this is a forgery," says Al-Amour. "They do not recognize any claims to ownership. If tomorrow I say I want to sell, they will treat me as the unique owner of the land and buy it from me. But I'm not going to sell." Like most other unrecognized villages, the residents of Alsera want to maintain their rural lifestyle where they are now, but with proper roads, utilities, clinics and schools. In other words, recognition and benefits equal to the Jewish communities in the region.

While tens of thousands of Beduin citizens had hoped for official recognition of their communities as part of the greater Beersheba Metropolitan Plan, the plan does, however, include the establishment of new Jewish communities in the Negev, some located where unrecognized
villages already stand.

The plan calls for the construction of a new Jewish neighborhood, Hiran, on the site of Attir-Alhiran in the Yattir area, land occupied by members of the Abou-elkian Beduin tribe who were moved there in the 1950s. The tribe's buildings are slated for demolition. The Interior Ministry says the tribe can move to the nearby town of Hura, where they've been given plots of land. The Abou-elkian are demanding to stay where they are and maintain their rural lifestyle.

"The Beduin are willing to consolidate their villages," states Dr. Yeela Raanan, public affairs representative for Leaders of the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages (RCUV), an organization established by residents of the unrecognized villages. "They understand that they will have to give up some land in order to receive services, but they will agree only if the periphery of the village gives them lands for agriculture and industry. They must be able to have work. Why can't the government strengthen these communities by giving them the same help they give the [Jewish] moshavim?" "People have a right to maintain their culture, even if the general culture is different. Israel can't allow them to be semi-nomadic, but it can let them remain living in a rural setting, to be community-based," argues Raanan, who teaches public policy at Sapir College.

According to the Interior Ministry's Cohen, the revised master plan provides a solution for the unrecognized communities by creating new Beduin communities and expanding existing ones to accommodate additional residents. "In general, plans are drawn up with the involvement of the Beduin themselves," says Cohen. "We are trying to accommodate the tribes at the broadest level, but it is impossible to deal with all the divisions of clans and families, and often they aren't cooperating among themselves because of disputes between the families."

"It's always difficult trying to deal with the various tribes," agrees Clinton Bailey, an authority on Beduin culture and history in the Negev and a long time advocate for Beduin rights. "They all squabble about plans." This intra-communal infighting among the Beduin may be a symptom of the malaise, but it frequently undermines progress.

The village of Abu Qrenat was slated to have a paved road constructed from the settlement to the main highway (under the Abu Basma Regional Council scheme, which is tasked with improving unrecognized villages, see box below). But the residents fought one another bitterly over who would give up land for the road. It was only after Council head Amram Kalagi arbitrated a settlement that construction could begin.

A new concept in the Negev Master Plan is what is termed an "integrated rural agricultural zone." But the criteria for such a zone are vague. Cohen says that under this category both Beduin and Jewish communities can be established, "if there is a big enough group that wants this and is willing to compromise on their land claims. These will be set up according
to demand since it involves huge costs," he contends. The plan envisions the 2020 population of the Negev to be distributed as 83 percent urban, 11 percent suburban and 6 percent rural. However, Jewish Israelis living in rural areas today already constitute 8 percent of the Negev population.

"The government wants to de-Arabize the land," charges BGU's Yiftachel. "They tell the Beduin to go to a town, and then opposite them they build a farm for one Jewish family. Supposedly we are citizens of the same country. All this does is to create more alienation and more anger."

"On one hand the government can't build a village for every group that wants it, but the broken promises and unfulfilled obligations made by successive governments over the years have all but dissipated the Beduins' good will," agrees Bailey. The Beduin point out that some individual Jewish farms were established privately - without planning or approval - and were recognized after the fact. There are some 50 individual Jewish farmsteads, some with as much as 800 dunams (200 acres) each, throughout the Negev. Some date back to the 1950s, but most were established in the early 1980s when the ILA gave permission to Jewish citizens to set up sheep ranches and farms in order to stop Beduin squatters. But approval was for pasturing and farming only; whatever structures were erected over the years (including fences) on these farmsteads have not been legalized. No demolition orders have been issued for Jewish farms.

More recently the ILA approved ex post facto 15 existing farms of 30 planned single Jewish family homesteads of 50-80 dunams of land each, which are part of the tourist-oriented "Wine Route." Arguing that the farms will damage desert ecology, the Israeli Union for Environmental Defense (IUED) and the Society for the Protection of Nature (SPNI) waged a lengthy but unsuccessful fight against the individual farms, which they say were set up without the necessary legal permits. Two other organizations, Bimkom and the Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, are still pursuing legal appeals against the farms, protesting what they call the discriminatory allocation of land.

In a 2005 amendment to the Law of Public Lands, the Knesset enacted the "Eviction of Trespassers" law. It allows the Israel Lands Authority and its enforcement bodies to serve eviction notices and forcibly remove residents from government land, without going through the court system - even when that land is under dispute.

"We've lived under the Ottomans and the British; these were very harsh rulers, but they never called us trespassers on our land," laments Khalil al-Amour of the Alsera village. "We can't forgive this. There are people here who make plans for the next 20 years and they don't see me. We are very accepting, we can overcome anything, but we are going to lose our unique character."

SIDEBOX 1
Another Committee on Beduins

In October 2007, the government approved the establishment of an independent committee headed by retired Supreme Court Judge and former State Comptroller Eliezer Goldberg to regulate the settlement of Beduins in the Negev. The eight-member committee, which operates under the auspices of the Housing ministry, has been charged with submitting recommendations, determining the amount of reparations for expropriated land, arranging for the allocation of substitute land and setting a timeline for implementation. Announcing the formation of the committee, Housing Minister Ze'ev Boim [Kadima] declared, "The Beduins' unregulated construction requires a broad, far-reaching plan which will bring about a solution. The Beduin population is loyal; many of its sons serve in the IDF. We must find an expeditious solution to their problem."

But Thabet Abu Ras, professor of Geography and Environmental Development at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, has little faith in the new committee. "What is its mandate?" he asks. "The problems haven't been solved in decades and they're supposed to come up with recommendations within six months, and with only two Beduin representatives on the committee. It's not going to work."

Amram Kalagi, director of the Abu Basma Regional Council development plan for nine Beduin communities, is hoping that the committee "can find a key to finding a solution to this complex problem."

But wistfully he adds that, over the years, there's been "an overload of plans. If there had been one that worked, we wouldn't need this pile of plans. The minute that something works, you don't need all the rest."

SIDEBOX 2

The Abu Basma Plan

In the years between 2000 and the summer of 2007, during which the District Outline Plan was being revised, government authorities began to implement a plan that would enable recognition of nine of the unrecognized Beduin villages.

The novel scheme provides for the amalgamation of clusters and encampments in each of nine existing settlements into tribally homogeneous towns, organized under an umbrella administration called the Abu Basma Regional Council.

The plan, popularly known as the Abu Basma plan, initiated in 2003 by former prime minister Ariel Sharon, seeks to develop municipal services in the chosen settlements, making them attractive enough to persuade residents of the remaining unrecognized villages to move into them.

In each of the chosen villages the government is to develop a central area, with clearly delineated borders, to provide municipal services such
as schools, clinics, roads and utilities. Those living outside those borders are expected to relocate to prepared sites within the new borders. The previously denied modern services should (theoretically) provide an incentive for people to agree to move closer to the center.

"It is not feasible to provide all these amenities if people remain spread out," explains economist Dr. Miki Malul of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev School of Public Policy. "There has to be a critical mass of people that will allow you to supply the infrastructure."

Another incentive under the Abu Basma plan is financial compensation - at market price - paid by the government to families living in outlying clusters that agree to relocate within the new perimeters.

Malul is overseeing a course at the university to teach governing and planning skills, including dealing with budgets, to help leaders of the villages make the transition to a civil administration. The 70 participants of the two-year course, the brainchild of Abu Basma director Amram Kalagi, include illiterate elders and residents with advanced degrees. "People thought I was crazy suggesting such a thing," says Kalagi, adding that what the participants have in common is a desire to learn how to run a municipality." He has high hopes that it will help prepare a genuine and informed leadership core.

Kalagi, a former Interior Ministry director general, concedes he faces massive challenges. Unlike other regional councils in the country, Abu Basma, he explains, "has to accommodate an enraged population at a very low socioeconomic level that has had very bad experiences with governments over the years. So we are dealing with a basic mistrust. We are supposed to find answers and very fast," states Kalagi.

He has handled planning muddles before. As Northern District Commissioner in the 1980s he was charged with solving the problem of unrecognized villages in the Galilee. "Little by little, without warfare, we found solutions for everyone. Some of the villages were consolidated."

But in the south the situation is much more difficult, Kalagi admits, and it has taken four years since the project was first launched to begin to see some progress. Obtaining official status of all nine villages - which means that legal construction can begin - has been the major achievement to date.

And Kalagi warns, "Without solving the problem of unemployment, none of the plans has any meaning. The Beduin population doubles itself every 13 years."

In addition to planning the communities, the Council has been charged with the education and welfare of all the unrecognized villages in the Negev. The Abu Basma Council has set up schools in three villages and two more are under construction. Kalagi is particularly proud of the new ORT technological high school in Abu Qrinat, where for the first time, village
girls are continuing their education. Most Beduin families do not allow girls to leave the settlement after age 12. Abu Basma has also arranged for special courses for high school graduates at the Technological College in Beersheva, and a commitment from Intel to eventually hire those completing the course.

Kalagi says that the goal of Abu Basma is to conduct "a real dialogue, and not dictate to the Beduin what they need." By including the residents of the Abu Basma villages as "true partners, we want to try to prevent even more bitterness than there is today," he says.

"The Beduin appreciate what Kalagi is trying to do, but there is a basic problem of mistrust," comments geographer Dr. Thabet Abu Ras, professor of Geography and Environmental Development at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev who also headed the three-year "Abu Basma Initiative" project sponsored by the New Israel Fund, an organization that funds social change groups, and the Joint Distribution Committee to help Beduin in the designated villages organize to work with the Abu Basma Council.

"There are a lot of different government bodies contradicting each other."

And some of the Beduins are losing patience. "They lied to us," charges Salman Ibn Hmeid, whose village Bir Hadaj in Ramat HaNegev is included in the Abu Basma plan. "We sat with all the officials and all the representatives and told them what we wanted. They want everyone to move closer to the center, and we agreed as long as this is an agricultural village. We don't agree to their borders which don't allow for this. We need water to grow crops for our sheep. There is underground water available, but we are still waiting," says 36-year-old Ibn Hmeid, who successfully petitioned the High Court of Justice in 2000 to obtain an elementary school for the village.

"This project is twisted," Ibn Hmeid continues. "The Ramat HaNegev Council has 100,000 dunams for 3,700 Jews. All of Abu Basma together - 28,000 people - is being allotted 30,000 dunams. We must have better arrangements."

Dodik Shoshani, one of the founders of Kibbutz Lahav in the Negev, who has been closely involved with the Beduin in various state capacities since the 1950s, including as first director of the Beduin Administration, which is part of the Israel Lands Authority (ILA), knows Bir Hadaj well. "In 1998 I told Ariel Sharon, who was then Minister of Infrastructure, that we must build a proper settlement for the Beduin in Bir Hadaj. He agreed and we sat with the Treasury and came up with a budget [reported to have been 470m shekels ($120m) - P.G.]. We hired an architect, one of the best in the country. To this day, almost 10 years later, there's still no settlement. They built them a temporary building for a school.... They have 1,100 pupils in this school already. This is what is happening."