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Arabs in Wadi Ara warn: “If it won’t be good for us, it won’t be good for you, and that’s not a threat”

The residents of Umm al-Fahm get stuck in a traffic jam every morning when they leave the city - In nearby Ara-Arara there are no buses - Both towns suffer from a shortage of daycare centers, and hope that someday industrial zones will be built there - Meanwhile they can only envy the investment in Jewish communities

Tali Heruti-Sover

From one spot in Umm al-Fahm it's easy to understand the whole story. On one side a two-lane highway that ends suddenly ("The money ran out") and on the other the exit from the city, a bottleneck that becomes increasingly narrow as it approaches Wadi Ara, Highway 65.

In the afternoon hours when we visited the second-largest Arab city in Israel – with a population of 53,000 – traffic flowed easily. But that's not the situation seven days a week at 5:30 A.M., when 20,000 cars are trying to leave the city.

"It takes 25-40 minutes," says Saliman Mahamid, the veteran city engineer. "Every resident knows that in order to get to work he has to get through the traffic jam, and 12 hours later he'll get stuck in it on the way back. There's no city in Israel, certainly not one of this size, where the exit and entry rely on one small traffic light. That's how it is here. Because 52 percent of the residents are commuters, and people work all over the country and therefore leave early, everyone is stuck in the same intolerable traffic jam. I assume that in a Jewish city of the same size they would have taken care of it already."

Mahamid is probably right: Over 10 million shekels were recently invested in an additional interchange for the second largest neighborhood in Hadera, Givat Olga, whose 12,000 residents suffered from an infuriating, but much smaller traffic jam. Now they have a new and impressive connection to the Coastal Road. In Umm al-Fahm, on the other hand, they'll wait, and not for lack of plans. This traffic congestion is the perfect illustration of the discrimination and absurdity that typify the conduct of generations of Israeli governments.



Umm al-Fahm

Already in the 1990s a comprehensive statutory plan was adopted that included a logical connection to Highway 65, and Maatz, the Israel National Roads Company, even had operative plans. "Then came [Likud Minister of Transport] Israel Katz and said – I'm not signing," says Mahamid. Katz announced the transfer of 150 million shekels to the Netavei Israel transportation infrastructure company in order to solve the problem, but if "afterwards the plan has no statutory validity, what good will the money do now? We told the Transport Ministry: 'If it's impossible to upgrade the main entrance, let's work on an entrance from another direction.' But endless planning problems are plaguing the new plan. Now the money is being transferred to the nearby Gan Shmuel-Granot interchange. There probably won't be any problem there."

So the Transport Ministry is the problem?

"It's possible that we're also to blame. Maybe we didn't demand enough, maybe we should have gone to the High Court of Justice, maybe we don't know how to ask."

In Umm al-Fahm they feel that the city suffers from discrimination, one reason being its problematic image as a dangerous place for Jews. Attorney Wissam Qawash, the deputy mayor and chairman of the engineering department, is angry about that: "No Jew has ever been harmed here," he says. "Jews walk around freely here, except for those who are convinced, thanks to [Foreign Minister] Avigdor Lieberman, that Umm al-Fahm is on the West Bank. So it's true that the northern branch of the Islamic Movement is located here, and that this place is alive and kicking and has multiple opinions, and that's as it should be, because this is a democracy, isn't it? You see us

via the plate of hummous, but we aren't hummous, and not every resident of Umm al-Fahm is [Islamic Movement leader] Raed Salah. We're Israeli citizens."

And still you don't want to integrate. You wouldn't send your son to work in the police force, for example

There's a misunderstanding in the Jewish sector: We don't want to enlist in the security forces because in their view it's always a question of the safety of Jews vis a vis Arabs. The police don't come to collect illegal weapons or to solve murder cases in the Arab communities. We meet them only when they harm us. But Arabs work at the Magen David Adom emergency medical services in Umm al-Fahm, and the firefighters are also Arabs. We want to integrate into civic organizations and government jobs, just like in other places of work. To say that we have a problem cooperating with government institutions – is not true, and even infuriating.

So where does that view come from?

"The government wants people to think that Umm al-Fahm is a dangerous place, because the government doesn't know what to do with us. One time they wanted integration, another time they wanted to marginalize us, now there are some who don't even want to see us, that's how we wound up where we are today.

"But you don't understand: If we're not happy, you won't be happy either – and that's not a threat. The economic interest of the government is to narrow gaps. When you come to Umm al-Fahm you have to think how to eliminate the traffic congestion in the morning instead of thinking in terms of 'security.' Planning in the Arab sector is not done for the purpose of development and prosperity but for security reasons. When you come to plan the interchange in Umm al-Fahm you don't relate to it like the Kfar Shmaryahu interchange, because here there were demonstrations, so you have to rethink the situation, maybe not do anything, maybe give money for plans that can't be implemented, and once again we're left behind."

The first bus line – two years ago

The visit to Umm al-Fahm raises quite a number of questions that haven't come up for a long time in the Jewish sector. For example, very few people know that the first public bus line began to run there only two years ago. "In other cities they're talking about bicycle paths, I'm asking for local buses," says Qawash. "Who's thinking about anything more advanced? If I want to increase the number of bus lines I need infrastructure. What seems trivial in Jewish communities becomes a barrier here."

The reason for the absence of public transportation in the Arab sector sounds absurd, but it's absolutely true: Many of the urban bus lines travel only from one point to another, where they turn around and return to the first point. In order to create the traffic circle in older neighborhoods you have to widen alleyways or move houses. In Umm al-Fahm they know how to do that, according to the local council engineer, but for that you need money. Here's the good news in the new plan announced by the

Finance Ministry at the end of 2014: This year 660 million shekels will be allocated to deal with the barriers that harm the Arab sector, including public transportation.



Umm al-Fahm

But there's a catch: "They give 20 million shekels for a transportation infrastructure to all the communities combined, and we'll get 4 million of that when after years of neglect we need 70-80 million shekels," says Mahamid. "Communities of our size receive 40-50 million shekels for that, so it's nice that the treasury is promoting a new plan, but we need a realistic budget. The problem is that whoever shouts the loudest – gets. Whoever has sources of power in the government ministries gets budgets, mayors whose party members are decision makers – get more, and we're not in the game.

"I don't want affirmative action, I really don't. I want criteria. We need parameters for the distribution of budgets. The problem is that since the establishment of the state there has been mainly one parameter for budgets: the policy of the minister and his government. Today only one organization has clear and transparent parameters for distributing money – the Mifal Hapayis National Lottery. The Transport Ministry announced that they have criteria - so they announced it. As long as there aren't any clear and transparent parameters we'll be stuck in the same vicious cycle. Those with power will get money, the weak will be left behind."

And here's another structural problem that few people are aware of: When government ministries issue a tender for a certain project, the construction of daycare centers for example, the wealthy municipalities pull out contingency plans and are able to pay external planning companies to write budget requests. The engineering departments in the Arab sector are very small and don't have the money to involve an external organization. While the government considers the tender egalitarian, the practical result is discrimination. "They submit the plans far faster than we do, and their plans are better," says Mahamid. "It's a fact that 32 Arab local councils submitted plans for a project to construct daycare centers, and 31 didn't meet the criteria."

The Economy Ministry is aware of this barrier and is working to eliminate it. "Despite the preference shown in the regulations for the Arab local councils, no councils were found whose requests could be approved, mainly for lack of the required permits," they say. "However, in the planning procedure 30 requests by local councils in the Arab sector were approved, for a total of about 10 million shekels, and in the transition procedure 18 (of 38) requests by local councils in the sector were approved, for a total sum of about 10 million shekels. Before we conclude the allocation of the entire earmarked budget, we expect two additional allocations, which will be distributed to all the local councils and local authorities that meet the criteria, including priority for the weaker sectors."

Preschools and daycare centers really are a painful issue that prevents women from entering the job market. Today Umm al-Fahm lacks preschools for about 500 children, to join the 110 active preschools. The construction problem is a chicken-and-egg situation. "In order to allocate land for public needs, which will be available and registered in the name of the local authority, the municipality must initiate and submit a plan," says Mahamid. "Often the municipality has no money to pay for the plan, and even after a plan has been submitted we encounter problems in getting a permit.

"Sometimes everything is in order, but there's no approval from an architect from the Economy Ministry, because there is no such thing. While the Education Ministry has a system for dealing with planning, the Economy Ministry doesn't. The government wants to allocate money, but they don't establish a bureaucratic system that will handle the matter easily. And without the system – it simply won't succeed."

So what should be done?

Saliman Mahamid: "In the late 1980s, when I came to government ministries they would ask me: 'Are you a Druze?' When I said that I wasn't, they would say that there's no budget. Today the situation is somewhat better, but the lack of trust exists. Once they didn't give at all, today they do, but the distribution is incorrect. Good will is important, but it's not enough."

Qahwash: "We managed to rent buildings, but the physical conditions aren't always good and we have to pay the rent. We of all people, the weak Arab local authorities, have to pay rent for preschool and school buildings, while the Jewish authorities don't. Local non-profit organizations operate five preschools subsidized by the Economy Ministry, but that's not enough. Registration begins in February and ends within two days, and the situation is good relative to other communities.

"In the past the government didn't think that the Arab sector needs daycare centers. In 2010 the situation was catastrophic and there was nobody to talk to, today things look somewhat different because the government gives budgets, but the shortage is still great, mainly because of planning problems. Here they have to help us. The

problem is that the planning is done from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and they exclude us from dealing with problems that we know more about than anyone else.

"Why don't they ask us? Why don't they include us? Why don't they sit with the city engineer and ask: 'Where is it most important to invest?' Of course the information about budgets that can't be utilized doesn't help either, nor does the fact that there is no transparency in the planning parameters. If there aren't any – how will I know how to plan when the money arrives?"

You're painting a harsh portrait. Do you feel that the attitude has been changing recently, or is it the same old story?

Qahwash: "After so many years there is great distrust, but now we have more power in the Knesset, and that could be a turning point. We'll begin to believe that something is changing when there's an objective policy based on criteria. On the other hand, the Arab population also has to undergo a conceptual change - we have to start thinking about high-density construction and begin an urbanization process. When the government sees that we, as a society, are contributing our part to the change that will lead to more budgets and approval of plans."

Half the houses are connected to pirated electricity

The real estate market in the Arab sector is also a significant barrier: Today the city lacks about 2,000 residential units, but the municipality itself is already planning a new neighborhood that includes affordable housing. It's more difficult to handle local employment. Unemployment in Umm al-Fahm in particular and in Wadi Ara in general is 12 percent-13 percent, and the area residents travel to work in Tel Aviv as well as in the north and the south of the county. In the early 1990s we started planning a small industrial zone, which will begin to be marketed only this year, and the construction of two additional industrial zones, which are supposed to be built in cooperation with the neighboring Megiddo and Menashe regional councils, are still stuck.

"In such a situation it's impossible to attract factories to provide local employment, or to clear away nuisances such as garages or workshops. The city coffers also suffer. Umm al-Fahm is in socioeconomic cluster 2 [the clusters range from 1-10, in ascending order], 81 percent of the arnona property tax comes from households (which legally receive a large number of exemptions), while revenues from commercial property tax are very limited. The situation is reversed in Jewish communities, where according to a study by Sikkuy, 50 percent to 60 percent of property taxes come from businesses, industry, infrastructure facilities, public buildings and more."

Even when the new industrial zone is built - after 25 years in the planning - it won't help 28-year-old Athar Masarwa, a teacher from the neighboring community of Ara-Arara. Like dozens of her colleagues, she leaves the house every day for a long trip

south. Masarwa teaches Arabic in the Bedouin diaspora near Dimona. The trip, for which she pays 80 shekels a day, takes about two and a half hours in each direction. In order to get to the school in time she leaves at 5:30 A.M. and returns home in the evening. Mudar Younis, the head of the local council, as well as the director general of the municipality (the only woman in the position in the Arab sector) Ruida Younis, are very familiar with the procession of cars that leave the village every morning, and at the moment there is no solution."

"There's no work for teachers in our area," says Younis. "And unfortunately they are rarely hired to work in the many Jewish schools in the area, and have to travel far in order to make a living. They start out there and after several years they request a transfer to the north. Meanwhile they travel."

The merged village in the heart of Wadi Ara turns out to be a lovely place: The atmosphere is quiet, the place is clean, and only the potholes in the roads indicate that there's a problem there. The homes in Arara's new neighborhood could compete with nearby [upscale] Caesarea, but the roadways are nonexistent. The scouts have a beautiful community center built by the Mifal Hapayis national lottery, but the road that leads to it is unpaved and the children have to fight the mud in order to get there on rainy days. There is no public transportation at all.

"I live in Baka al-Garbiyeh, 15 kilometers from here," says Younis. "If I don't have a car I travel for two hours via Hadera. The community has never had public transportation. We pay to transport the children to school, but the government is unwilling to subsidize public transportation. Why? Because the bus doesn't have a terminal. A truck and a cement mixer can enter the center of the community, but not a public minibus. The Transport Ministry says - we'll discuss one bus line, maybe in early 2016, first we have to do infrastructure work, squares, traffic circles, for that we need money. We're in 2015, in the middle of the State of Israel, and public transportation is just a dream. That doesn't happen in any Jewish community."

Not only public transportation and work in the area are a distant dream, so is a standard thing like being connected to electricity. "Until the two villages merged in 1993, each village owned 6,000 dunams," says Younis. "When they merged the government decided to take over 4,000 dunams, with which nothing was done. It turns out that to the east we're restricted by nature reserves, and to the west there was a firing zone, and you try to plan inside the can of sardines that the government left to you. Due to serious planning problems there is no master plan. The residents built large houses for the extended family, but there are no roads between them. Since there's no Form 4 (a permit for receiving services) there's no link-up to the Israel Electric Corporation. Of 4,770 households, 2,000 lack a permit, and the electrical connection is pirated. Homeowners pay electricity contractors who arrange an electrical link-up for them and pay the IEC, and of course they make a profit. It turns out that the weaker elements pay more for a basic item like electricity."

But it's illegal construction, how can the government give them a Form 4?

"It's a chicken and egg situation: People build because you have to live somewhere, pay large fines here, and deal with demolition orders by going to prison, among other things, and many homes are demolished. That happens for a simple reason: We're 30-40 years behind in planning. I want to build upward, three stories, six stories, but that requires planning and budgets.

"The problem is that there are no criteria for distributing money. If the head of the local council bangs on the table - there's money. Anyone who doesn't - is forgotten. If the government returns the area that it nationalized quite a few problems will be solved. It would be possible to build an industrial zone and a college that would attract students, but the government is in no rush to expand the borders of our jurisdiction. It took [land] and it says - you'll manage.

"There are good intentions, there's a realization that the situation cannot be left as is, but the problem is that the council heads didn't participate in the planning discussions, and with all due respect – one Interior Ministry conference that is attended by members of the local councils does not constitute public involvement. They have to relate to Arab society as different. I'm not competing with Tel Aviv: There they have contingency plans, industrial zones, and preschools. They have lots of money and manpower. We have a shortage of professionals. They tell me - bring project heads from outside. I need an expert on energy efficiency; he'll cost me 10,000 shekels - who will pay?

"It's convenient for the government to ignore us because we aren't nudniks, we don't have the Israeli mentality. Someone told me: You want an interchange? Sit in the Transport Ministry and don't budge. You have to be a favorite of the government in order to get anything. When there are friends in the Likud, there are more opportunities. I say - don't do it for me, do it for yourselves. If things aren't good for us here, they won't be good for the Jewish sector either. Let us dream too."

660 million shekels? It's not certain that 6 billion would suffice

Sikkuy – The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality, a joint Jewish-Arab organization, was established in 1991. Since then it has been working with government ministries to advance equality between Jewish and Arab citizens. Sikkuy is very familiar with the frustration in Arab society and is a partner to the harsh criticism, but also identifies a positive change.

"If 10 years ago they didn't talk about discrimination at all, today the era of denial is over," says Ron Gerlitz, the co-executive director. "A significant percentage of Jewish officialdom wants to promote equality for economic-pragmatic reasons, and for some it's a matter of values. There's a consensus today that it's impossible to improve an economy when 20 percent of the citizens are thrown outside the job

market. This realization was helped by Israel's entry into the OECD and by pressure from civic society organizations.

"Happily, today we are hearing some different music in the government ministries, in the treasury and the Budget Department in particular. At the same time, the government traditionally prefers to operate by means of special programs instead of fighting for a change in the allocation mechanisms of the various ministries. The activity of the Authority for the Economic Development of the Minorities Sector in the Prime Minister's Office, headed by Aiman Saif, is important and is bringing about change, and the Budget Department is also working in that direction, but change is coming too slowly.

"It's nice that they're giving 660 million shekels in the context of the program to develop the economy and reduce the gaps in Arab society, but it's not at all certain that even 6 billion would suffice. The solution has to be far more radical: standardization of the allocation mechanisms of all the ministries, along with the special programs. In addition, the budget of the Arab local councils has to be increased by expanding the equalizing grants [grants to reduce budget deficits created when the expenditure of municipalities and local councils for essential services exceeds their income].

"The treasury maintains that not all the resources will be properly exploited. That's true. But without more resources they are completely suffocated. On this issue the Budget Department still doesn't get it. They don't understand that many positive processes that they are promoting will fail as long as there is no minimal budget for professional work in the Arab councils."



Sikkuy staff (l-r): Moran Aviv, Ron Gerlitz, Shirley Racah, Abed Kanaanah

Shirley Racah, a co-director of the Equality Policy Department in Sikkuy, once again mentions the main solution: "Budgets are distributed without clear and uniform criteria," she says. "Those who ask in a more professional manner and a loud voice get more, but that's not how to make up for 67 years of discrimination. The Budget Department has to lead a process of uniform and equal criteria according to which government ministries will allocate the money. That's an essential step for repairing the discrimination."

Abed Kanaaneh, co-director of the Equality Policy Department, mentions the biggest problem. "The Arab sector has suffered years of disappointments from the government," he says. "They are mired in crowded conditions and sewage, and see nearby communities developing. In Sakhnin there's no room to build, but the new neighborhoods of [Jewish] Galilee communities keep growing, and the property tax of the Teradion industrial zone goes to the communities of the [Jewish] Misgav region, not to Arabeh. So now the officials and the government are beginning to understand, but when for almost 70 years they slapped us down, and in the 70th year there is genuine sincerity – I say just a moment, is this really happening?"

"The government has launched a process, but Arab society doesn't believe it. That's why the government representatives have to understand – talk won't be convincing, only action will help. When there are buses in Kafr Qasem and transportation is cheap and subsidized, as opposed to the years when they spent twice as much for pirate transportation, people say to themselves – the government is taking an interest in me."

"You can't take something that's suitable for Jewish society, copy-paste it to Arab society and then say 'We've done it,'" says Gerlitz. "Narrowing the gaps requires complex work that includes an understanding of the barriers and how to dismantle them. Fortunately, everything is possible. With a joint effort even the Umm al-Fahm traffic congestion can be eased soon."

Budget Director Amir Levi agrees. "We're coming with genuine good will to integrate the Arab population into the economy, in order to achieve improved growth and to narrow gaps. This is an important strategic socioeconomic target," he says. "We consider the present situation an opportunity rather than a threat."

Levi, one of those behind the promotion of the program for economic development and narrowing gaps in Arab society, knows that there is need for a change in the traditional methods. "It's clear that budget allocation is insufficient, and that we have to change the allocation mechanisms. We're also working in that direction. In the past year we made sure that at least 20 percent of the budget for daycare centers would be earmarked for the Arab local councils so that they won't have to battle within the general budgetary reserves as has been the case until now.

"At the same time, we supported the Education Ministry in promoting differential budgeting, which will also benefit the Arab local councils. In addition, 40 percent of

the increase in the public transportation budgets, an important tool for integration into the job market, will be channeled to Arab communities. These are all important changes in the budgetary mechanisms that will yield significant results and were promoted with full cooperation and team work with the Prime Minister's Office, and the economy, education and transportation ministries."



Umm al-Fahm

The claim is that this process is too limited and too slow

Amir Levi: "Significant changes naturally take time. It's important to remember that in order to achieve the implementation of this mutual interest, both sides have to work. Our job is to present this issue as an important economic issue, and the local authorities are responsible for taking the existing budgets and knowing how to get things done. Today there is complete understanding of the importance of prioritizing the issue in terms of budgets, and there is a clear strategy that recognizes its importance.

"Success depends on the work of the government ministries and the local authorities. If everyone does his job there's no reason why we shouldn't succeed by means of joint efforts. In effect we are seeing positive trends: an increase in employment rates, in the percentage of people with academic degrees, in the percentage of those gaining a matriculation certificate, as well as a decline in poverty in the past year."

You plan from Jerusalem and don't allow residents of the communities to participate

In the context of the new program a 120-day team was formed, composed of members of the third sector, Jews and Arabs, which is formulating recommendations on housing, another major issue for Arab society. It's important to us to include all those with an interest in the matter and we maintain almost daily contact with the heads of Arab local councils and various civic organizations. It's a joint effort, at which we can succeed only if we work together."