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THE NEGEV A Community's Failure to Thrive but a Potential Model for Regional Advocacy

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The Negev, Israel's vast arid desert region with less than 10% of the population, occupies nearly two-thirds of the country's land mass. Once considered essential for Israel's development, the region now suffers from neglect. A "New Negev" is discussed here based on regional advocacy that will provide the indigenous population greater involvement and control over funding resources and policy and program decision making. This approach has implications for other regions, such as the Galilee in northern Israel, that suffer from a similar lack of development.

Since its establishment in 1948 as a modern state, Israel has struggled to overcome a wide range of difficulties. However, the configuration of problems that presently exist—absorption of the massive wave of immigrants from the Soviet Union, other East European countries, and Ethiopia; high levels of unemployment; unstable relations and often violent confrontations with Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza; a faltering economy; a lack of unified national mission; conflict between secular and nonsecular interests; and competition among the country's regions for development resources—cause many to question Israel's ability to meet the demands made on a modern society. Clearly, the time and options left for this country's leadership to respond to the current crises are limited. Deferring problems or addressing deteriorating conditions in a stopgap manner has proven to be shortsighted and costly. A new spirit must be generated among Israel's populace; one that is dedicated to the optimal development of the country. Of first importance in any development plans is the vast southern region where "the supreme test of Israel . . . lies in its success and gaining domination through science and pioneer-

ing over the wastelands of its . . . Negev" (Ben-Gurion, 1963, p. 211).

This article examines the history and development of the Negev and presents the concept of regionalization as a means of overcoming the area's stagnation and promoting its future.

THE NEGEV IN RETROSPECT

The Negev is where God first spoke to Abraham and where monotheism, the belief in one divine spirit, began. It is the "land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass" (Deuteronomy 8:9). As early as the fourth century BCE, the Nabateans formed large communities in this area based on artificial irrigation and carefully devised schemes for storing and using available water resources.

From the end of the Nabatean period (106 CE) until Israel's independence, the Negev remained a neglected territory characterized by the existence of nomadic Bedouin tribes and arid wastes. Even the first Zionist leaders attributed little importance to the region's potential contribution to the future of the Jewish state because of its inhospitable, harsh conditions and lack of sufficient water to support agriculture.

Throughout his life, David Ben-Gurion worked to reverse centuries of prejudice against settlement in the Negev. He believed that "without the settlement of the . . . Negev, [Israel] cannot be secure, and [will] not succeed in attaining economic independence." Furthermore, Ben-Gurion believed this settlement could not be done without the "transformation of the facts of Nature, an accomplishment not beyond the capacity of science in our day or the pioneering energy of our youth. Science and pioneering will enable us to perform this miracle" (Ben-Gurion, 1963, pp. 201-202).

Ben-Gurion valued the Negev not only for its potential contribution to Israel but also as a model for desert development and technology—an issue of extreme importance since one-third of the world's land masses is desert. The concept of leadership by design was critical to Israel's first prime minister. In 1953, his belief in the Negev served as inspiration for moving his home to Sde Boker, a kibbutz in its early stages of development, located in the remote wilderness of the region.

THE REGION AND ITS DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Shortly after the War of Independence, the Negev—comprising nearly two-thirds of Israel's territory—had only a few thousand Jewish settlers, who were living mostly in Beersheva and in kibbutzim in the northern part of the region. In addition, about 10,000 Bedouin lived in the vicinity of Beersheva. With Ben-Gurion as prime minister, the Negev took on considerable importance as an essential component of the new state's social and economic development. For example, from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, ten new towns were established for immigrants predominantly from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Large government-owned companies—The Dead Sea Potash Company and its subsidiary, the Bromide Company, as well as a few smaller companies for mining copper,

gypsum, and kaolin—were established to exploit the Negev's raw materials. Attention was also focused on the region because of its strategic location. The Negev bisects the Arab world, with Asia to the east and Africa to the west, and moreover, it serves as a natural land mass connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Also, during the Ben-Gurion years, the National Water Carrier System was planned and implemented. This initiative brought new hope to the Negev and served as a catalyst for the establishment of many new agricultural settlements and a growth in the region's population.

The 1960s was a period of industrialization to meet the pressing need for the creation of jobs for the country's large immigrant population. Industrial development posed many problems for the towns of the Negev because of their lack of infrastructure to support such activity. There were many challenges to be addressed: the difficulty of travel on a narrow, poorly surfaced road system, the long transportation distances to and from the country's major population centers and markets, the poor system of financial and banking institutions as well as service facilities in the region, and the absence of skilled manpower. The government took the initiative in meeting these challenges primarily through the promotion of capital investment; for example, making inexpensive land available to developers, subsidizing contractors, building new highways, improving water and communication facilities, and providing a variety of exemptions from taxes and customs duties. In less than 15 years, the Negev grew from less than 0.5% of the nation's population to 6.5%—nearly 200,000 people having been directed to the Negev during Ben-Gurion's time of leadership.

The presence of Israel's major nuclear reactor near Dimona and the establishment of Ben-Gurion University, whose primary mission is scientific and technological pioneering, gave the Negev new significance among national priorities. As a focal point for regional development, the new univer-

sity planned and implemented special programs in line with Ben-Gurion's thoughts on the Negev and the desert environment. Among the programs generated were an institute for desert research (The Jacob Blaustein Institute for Desert Research); an institute for social ecology (The Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Social Ecology), which addressed issues of policy and development; a community-oriented medical school (associated with Soroka Hospital); the Jack and Charlotte Spitzer Department of Social Work; and various academic programs designed to serve the region, its industries, and people through direct community involvement.

The subsequent decline of the Negev since the mid-1960s may be attributed to two major factors: first, the resignation in 1963 of David Ben-Gurion as prime minister and chief advocate for the region, and second, the Six-Day War in 1967, which opened up new territories for Israeli investment. With most projects still unfinished, the Negev was neglected in favor of other regions, whose advocates were closer to the personal and political ideologies of the new national leaders. Granted, the shift of government attention started with Ben-Gurion's followers from his own political party (i.e., Eshkol, Meir, and Rabin), but it was promoted more strongly by the Likud Party under the leadership of Menachem Begin beginning in 1977, with Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) being the focus of government. The Negev, once envisioned as a pioneering frontier land of promise and potential, was forced to accept a government posture of benign neglect—the attitude that its future could wait.

This shift of government attention from the Negev has shown over the years that certain gains and footholds taken to be building blocks for the region's development were in fact fragile and unstable. The industrial foundation established during the 1960s proved to be highly labor-intensive, providing the unskilled immigrant workers with poorly paid jobs. Government incentives for industry to locate in the

Negev, previously viewed as attractive, became almost meaningless once an alternative (i.e., Judea and Samaria) was sanctioned that was closer to Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, where there is greater access to skilled manpower and markets for finished products. Science-based industries with an emphasis on research and development, such as aircraft, computer, and electronics, did not therefore locate in the Negev, causing the region to fall further behind in Israel's race to modernize and upgrade its quality of life.

Today, there is an increasing gap between the nation's central region and the Negev in terms of industrial activity. Average wages in the south, for example, tend to be generally lower than those elsewhere. Limited employment opportunities among the region's industries and support services are causing skilled workers, including science and technology graduates of Ben-Gurion University, to seek employment outside the region (Gradus & Krakover, 1977). And, although there were high expectations that the Negev's population would increase in time, demographic statistics show no significant rise in the number of regional residents for the last decade except for Eilat—a resort center—which has grown because of the availability of employment, especially for young people (Table 1). Although the precise number of Soviet immigrants being absorbed in the Negev is not known, certain population centers, such as Beersheva, are experiencing a growth spurt. For example, nearly 12,000 new residents over the past 2 years—two-thirds of the increase being new immigrants—have moved to the region's capital city.

It is clear that Ben-Gurion's departure left a vacuum in terms of the Negev's advocacy. For the Negev, the concept of regional representation is meaningless because of Israel's highly centralized unitary political system, which ignores territorial dimensions. Because the voters of the Negev do not choose individual candidates to represent their interests on a regional, city, or town level, they have little or no influence on

Table 1
SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEGEV

	Population			Dependency Ratio (0-19 and 65 + yr/20-64 yr)			Percentage of Population Increase	
	1978	1982	1989	1978	1982	1989	1978-1982	1982-1989
Israel	—	3,789,800	4,559,600	—	.99	1.03	—	20.3
Beersheva	103,300	112,600	113,800	.92	.91	.88	9.0	1.1
Dimona	27,300	27,600	24,800	1.19	1.13	1.06	1.1	-10.1
Eilat	18,200	19,600	25,600	1.13	1.10	.73	7.7	30.6
Netivot	7,500	8,500	10,000	1.23	1.21	1.24	13.3	17.6
Arad	10,100	12,900	13,800	1.37	1.29	1.01	27.7	7.0
Ofaquim	11,200	12,700	13,300	.89	.93	1.14	13.4	4.7
Sederot	8,300	9,000	9,700	1.11	1.04	1.02	8.4	7.7
Yeruham	6,100	6,600	5,900	1.02	.63	1.16	8.1	-10.6

The Negev's population, based on the cities and towns listed above, increased 9.1% from 1978 (192,000) to 1982 (209,500). From 1982 to 1989, the population increased by 3.5% or 7,400, as compared with 20.3% for the nation during the same time period. These statistics do not include the influx of immigrants during 1990.

the formation of major policies and government decisions affecting the region's development. Even within the area itself, major units of influence—kibbutzim, moshavim, development towns, and the Bedouin Arabs (population estimate: 70,000)—have put their special political and economic interests before those of the Negev as a whole, resulting in a lack of needed unity and cooperation around key regional issues.

The Negev's planning and development process is a direct reflection of the nation's political organization, which is structured to fulfill centralized aims. In the existing "top-down" regional development approach, interaction among the various bodies charged with implementing activities is limited and uncoordinated. For example, each ministry involved with the region determines its own set of priorities and distributes its budget and resources accordingly. Because decision makers are located in the center of the country far removed from the Negev, their actions are sometimes unrealistic or unrelated to the problems that must be addressed at the regional and local level. One prime example was the redeployment of military personnel and installations from the Sinai after the peace treaty with Egypt. Expectations were high that the transfer of Israel Defense Forces bases to the Negev would be a sig-

nificant reason for career officers and other army personnel to relocate their families and places of residence to the region. Such action would have stimulated a demand for attractive, low-cost housing; generated interest among businesses and industries in establishing operations in the Negev, thereby creating new work opportunities; and encouraged the development of improved social, educational, and recreational services in the region. Centralized government decision making—in this case from the Ministry of Defense—bypassed the Negev's need for development, and few attempts were made to involve the region's residents or leadership in planning and creating cooperative working relationships. The impact of the redeployment, a potentially valuable means of vitalizing the Negev's depressed towns and economy, has been minimal at best.

THE FUTURE: REGIONAL ADVOCACY

No false hopes should be raised about the Negev's future. Since the years of Ben-Gurion's leadership, little effort has been made to develop the region. However, the Negev's economic, social, cultural, and educational infrastructure can be improved through regionalization, which requires decentralizing national policy and program decision making, including the ways in

which funds are distributed. Such decentralization does not mean providing the Negev's representatives, elected officials, or leaders with a license to do what they want without a specific functional framework. Accountability should be ensured, for example, by a board of overseers. A carefully defined plan must be developed cooperatively by the people of the Negev and those responsible for national governance so that authority and responsibilities for the region can be shared appropriately.

The basis for promoting regionalization—which, as a departure from the existing order, poses a threat to those in power—must be rooted in the ideology of advocacy. Advocacy in this sense—persuasive activity on the part of an individual or group to ameliorate conditions—must come firstly from the Negev's inhabitants. Common interests and concerns need to be promoted and used as rallying points and as a basis for generating a greater degree of self-reliance among the region's people. Since no serious effort has yet been made to harness the interests and concerns of the area's diverse population to a program necessary for improving conditions in the Negev, it cannot be said that such an effort is impossible.

Organizations—and the Negev needs to be thought of as an organization for developmental purposes—evolve in response to events, people, or the circumstances of time. Initially, the charismatic leadership of Ben-Gurion promoted enthusiasm and a drive to accept change in the region. Efforts were made to build structural elements that would ensure the Negev's growth, but with the passing of Ben-Gurion, these efforts did not take root. The Negev of today, with little political power, influence, and known natural resources of value and limited access to the communication media, poses a formidable, but not impossible, challenge to those attempting to mold its future through renewed regional organizational efforts to achieve institutional and social change. Because political influence is often directly related to popu-

lation size, there will continue to be an emphasis on the growth and development of the region (Grosser, 1977).

In order to attract favorable government policies and funding support for the region, the Negev has been portrayed by its city and town mayors, regional council officials, and others as being in a condition of constant disrepair and crisis. This tack has brought little success; worse, it has perpetuated a negative image of the Negev as a "loser," inhibiting rather than promoting investment and development. Although the Negev has not thrived for the reasons enumerated in this article, it has not dropped into an unrecoverable abyss. A "New Negev" must be promoted so that its appeal is high and its inhabitants involved and so that it can command substantive support from present and potential advocates—factors important for attracting new immigrants, business, industry, and jobs. Morale may run high if success can be achieved initially; but the critical issue will be how to maintain motivation and sustain achievement. Such achievement will depend on the ability of officials to develop a practical plan for regional development and to secure the resources necessary to promote implementation, coordination, cooperation, and follow-up among the area's varied interest groups—its capital city Beersheva, development towns, rural and agricultural settlements, and Bedouin communities.

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