

Bedouin Face Lockout From Israel's Solar Energy Industry

The Israel Land Authority is only including land owned by ‘agricultural communities’ – kibbutzim or moshavim – which one critic calls ‘a climatic injustice.’ Efforts are underway for a rethink

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Jun. 19, 2022 7:00 PM



Solar panels in the Negev in the south. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

The Israel Land Authority's exclusion of the Bedouin community from a critical solar energy project might keep it out of the industry for years, government and industry sources told Haaretz.

The country's pilot project will serve as a model for Israel's future solar energy efforts, so the exclusion of the Bedouin now is critical. Participation by Bedouin villages in the southern Negev region has been approved by the energy and agriculture ministries, but not by the land authority.

“The discriminatory criterion in the voltaic energy project is a climatic injustice,” said Joseph Abramovich, a solar energy pioneer in Israel and Africa and a promoter of Project Wadi Attir, a Bedouin solar energy initiative just south of the West Bank in the Negev.

Israel is falling short of its 2030 renewable energy goals; according to the agriculture and energy ministries, a main reason is a lack of open spaces for solar farms. So about a year ago, the ministries launched their pilot project to produce renewable energy in cultivated areas throughout the country.

But according to rules set by the Israel Land Authority, only land owned by "agricultural communities" can take part; according to Israel's planning and construction protocols, this means Jewish-owned kibbutzim or moshavim.



A man walking on land included in Project Wadi Attir to bring solar energy to the Bedouin community. Credit: Dor Kedmi

As Abramovich puts it, the Israeli authorities have thus invited bids “only for land owned by Jews. This discrimination makes the Arab community lag behind in the voltaic energy revolution.”

The agriculture and energy ministries selected five plots of land in Wadi Attir, as well as about 180 plots in other areas, as winners of the tender. A few weeks later, in January, the land authority announced that Wadi Attir had been scratched from the list because it did not meet the criteria.

The authority, however, told Haaretz that “there is no dispute, the Negev has great potential for nonpolluting alternative electricity production.” It says that it has been studying the issue since January, and that extraordinary approval of Wadi Attir for the project was being considered.

So far, the ministries have failed to convince the land authority to change its mind. The authority did not say why it would keep the Bedouin out, adding that the issue was still being studied.

After the government invited bids last year, residents of the Wadi Attir region lodged a bid together with Aviv Dombrovsky, a researcher at the Volcani Center, an agricultural research organization. The companies Gyn Energy and Afcon also took part.

United Arab List legislator Said al-Harumi, who was chairman of the Knesset Interior and Environment Committee, sent a letter to the energy and agriculture ministers asking that the land authority's conditions be amended.



Joseph Abramovich, left, and Gyn Energy CEO Nir Gordon, right, executives promoting solar energy in the Negev. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

“By definition, which I’m sure originated in an error, the pilot is intended for [agricultural communities] only,” al-Harumi wrote. “I’m sure that the intent was for the pilot to be open to companies and entrepreneurs from all possible agricultural areas, without discrimination as to who owns the land.” (Al-Harumi died last August.)

The CEO of Project Wadi Attir, Lina Alatawna, says solar energy efforts in the Negev could draw private sector investments that would create thousands of jobs in the Bedouin community, achieving "environmental and economic justice."

“The ILA has set criteria that are unreasonable and threaten the future of voltaic energy for Bedouin society,” she said.

Nir Gordon, the co-CEO of Gyn Energy, said Wadi Attir's involvement could produce “a great deal of important information in the field of voltaic energy in agriculture and the integration of Bedouin society in producing renewable energy, especially in the Negev.” A project of the size of Wadi Attir could produce electricity for around 3,000 families in the Negev, he added.

The National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Ministry said it believed that “agriculture in the Negev, where Bedouin land is situated, has great potential for successful involvement in solar energy production.”

The Agriculture and Rural Development Ministry said that it had recommended the project in the Negev because of its “great benefit to Bedouin society. The decision is the Israel Land Authority's.”

The land authority has not yet responded to questions from the government ministries on the matter. The government's project, the authority says, can be launched “only in places where contractual communication allows this.”