

No Shelter for Palestinians in Israel's Wars

Refuges were never an afterthought in Israeli thinking, nor tied to a particular time after its establishment on Palestinian land. From the outset, the state's founders acknowledged that its existence would ignite conflicts beyond the first war, and that its longevity depended on a military and civilian infrastructure capable of cushioning the worst of warfare.

Therefore, Israeli governments made shelters a natural evolution of urban development. During the first five years after statehood, many underground shelters were built in cities and suburbs to deter conventional aerial bombing threats during wars with Arab states.

Shelters as Part of Colonial Planning

In 1951, the occupation government enacted the Civil Defense Law, mandating all residential, industrial, and public buildings to include safe underground shelters reinforced with concrete. With each war near or adjoining Israel, shelters expanded and evolved.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, shelters proliferated in northern and eastern border areas to counter rockets launched by Palestinian and Lebanese forces—as well as Katyusha rockets, which overwhelmed traditional shelters. This period saw the emergence of separate shelters serving multiple buildings, alongside defensive strategies for protecting kibbutzim against close-range attacks.

During the First Gulf War in 1991, when Iraqi Scud missiles reached deep into Israel, the need arose for shelters capable of withstanding chemical weapons. As a result, the old Civil Defense Law was reinforced, and new regulations issued in 1992 requiring “merkhav mugan” (fortified internal rooms) in buildings.

These rooms are built to resist blasts and shrapnel from conventional weapons and protect against chemical and biological threats. They feature reinforced concrete walls and ceilings, 20–30 cm thick floors, and tightly sealed steel doors and windows.

Designed for architectural diversity, shelters come in various types—“miklat,” “mamad,” “migunit,” etc.—and may be built beneath streets, clubs, residential complexes, or directly adjacent to living quarters. Some are underground, some integrated within structures. They are generally resilient against rocket attacks, though earthquakes remain a vulnerability.

Shelter Laws, Unequal Protection

Following the withdrawal from Gaza and improvements in Palestinian rocket

technology, additional legislation mandated that all new buildings include fortified rooms equipped with air filtration systems to defend against rockets and chemical weapons. Shelter numbers also increased in southern Israel, and fortified infrastructure was added to schools, buses, and public spaces. For instance, in 2008 alone, 300 defensive rooms were constructed in the settlement of Sderot.



Shelters provide safety for Israelis during missile attacks – but Palestinian citizens of Israel say they're often excluded [Abir Sultan/EPA-EFE]

However, these progressive laws and regulations consistently excluded Arab communities and towns from decision-making in development, architecture, building permits, and urban planning that matched their distribution and numbers.

Consequently, their safety was undermined in every outbreak of Israeli aggression. They remained exposed to military, demographic, environmental, and urban disasters—and became emblematic as the earliest casualties of war alongside the history of Israeli shelter development.

A Compass That Ignores Palestinians

During various wars waged by the Israeli state, Arab communities found themselves exposed early under skies filled with rockets and artillery, lacking

appropriate infrastructure, shelters, or fortified rooms. In the second Lebanon War of 2006, Hezbollah launched approximately 3,900 rockets into Israel, resulting in 44 civilian deaths—of whom 19 were Arab—constituting 43% of all civilian fatalities. Violent damage spread across Arab towns and roads.

According to a 2007 state comptroller report, over 150,000 Arabs in 13 northern towns remained without adequate shelters. Even towns with defense facilities lacked resilient underground shelters such as “miklat.”

After the war, the government launched a national shelter modernization program, focusing on northern cities: Kiryat Shmona, Safed, Nahariya, Acre, and frontline settlements—excluding Arab towns, despite a budget exceeding 90 million shekels covering construction, ventilation, electricity, and lighting.

During the 2012–2020 national plan, shelters were equipped with air conditioning, modern lighting, and Wi-Fi—but Arab communities were consistently left out. Reports noted that Jewish NGOs like “Vision for Israel” funded upgrades in 250–300 shelters during this period.

Forgotten Under Fire

Following the Al-Aqsa Flood (the Hamas-Israel conflict beginning October 2023), even as the Ministry of Defense launched a renewal program for shelters in strategic areas, implementation remained biased toward Jewish localities such as Tel Aviv, Gilm'a, Ashdod, and Hadera. Arab communities paid a heavy toll.

In November 2024, Syrian–Hezbollah rocket fire killed 46 civilians and injured 133, primarily in the Golan and northern triangle—four from Arab northern villages and 12 Arab Druze children in Majdal Shams, with 47 confirmed Arab injuries. The pattern of disparate targeting was clear.

Following Iran's retaliatory strikes against Israel, the racial marginalization of the Arab minority took a new form. A stray rocket hit the roof of a home in the Arab town of Tammariyah (Tamra), killing four girls—an incident met with celebratory reactions from some nearby Jewish communities, reinforcing the sense among Arabs of deep-seated hostility, and prompting accusations that they were seen by the government as “punching bags.”

Equally dismal was their dire shelter situation, reflecting discriminatory planning that prioritizes Jewish towns. In Tamra—with a population of 36,000—there are only five old, portable shelters. Majd al-Krum and Deir al-Asad, together home to 53,000, share just two public shelters. Nearby Jewish Karmiel, with 55,000 residents, has 126 public shelters, hundreds of portable units, and fortified rooms.

Even the fortified rooms mandated under post-1992 laws are missing in Arab

communities due to restrictions on urban expansion. As a result, 60% of homes lack such protected rooms. A 2018 state comptroller report confirmed that 46% of Arab citizens live in unprotected buildings, compared to just 26% of Jews.

Palestinians Viewed as Collateral Victims

Israel's discriminatory policies extend far beyond basic inequalities: 29% of schools and kindergartens in Arab communities lack attached or nearby shelters, compared with 12% in Jewish communities. Jewish areas supplement with resilient playgrounds, parks, protected buses, and robust early-warning systems—amenities absent entirely in Arab areas.

Neglect has deepened under successive right-wing governments that slashed funding for Arab public services, including first aid, civil defense, crime prevention, and infrastructure—reinforcing a political narrative that considers Palestinians, “internal enemies” to be neutralized.

Since the Nakba, Israeli policy has created a “military geography” prioritizing Jewish presence at the expense of Arabs. Preventing Arabs from building has forced unauthorized construction that remains unrecognized officially. This explains the prevalence of home demolitions in Arab areas—and the accompanying lack of shelters, inadequate sirens (e.g. primitive flares in Bedouin villages in the Negev), and delayed warnings relative to Jewish areas.

This is what happened to seven-year-old Muladda al-‘Assuni, badly injured in April 2024 by Iranian missile shrapnel while seeking shelter in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Al-Fu’ah—a village often used for Israeli air-defense drills. Designated “open areas” outside the air-defense umbrella, it frequently hosts intercepts above it, causing falling debris and injuries—again, to the detriment of Arab lives.

Instead of intercepts occurring above Jewish towns, they happen over Arab ones, exposing residents—lacking adequate shelters—to more debris. Warning times there are 1–2 minutes, versus 5–7 minutes in nearby Jewish communities—minimizing damage there, exacerbating it here.

Despite Arab demands for redistributing Iron Dome batteries, official requests from civic rights groups and the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee—for budgets to build public shelters, install fortified rooms in schools and public buildings, and synchronize alerts with Jewish communities—have resulted in only 34 portable shelters built across Tamra, Majd al-Krum, and the Negev. All this while constructing a fortified room at home takes just 14 days.

At its core, the Israeli apparatus has never been concerned with the well-being of the Arab on their own land—and never will be. As it wages existential wars,



Palestinians are treated as a fifth column: valued only as collateral damage, to be acknowledged with perfunctory condolences or token compensation, often accompanied by visible relief—and at times celebration—of their pain and death.

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