A Regional City—From Division to Cohesion: Feasibility in Arad and the Western Negev

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This article assumes that the peripheralization of the Negev region of southern Israel over many decades is the product of a policy of extreme centralization imposed by central government, leading to the neglect of the region and the exclusion of some of its communities. This reality has created profound and worsening gaps—not only between the Negev and the center of Israel, but also within the region. We argue that to change this reality and move toward a more just and egalitarian region, Israel must radically change its perceptions regarding the municipal structure of regions, especially in its peripheries. The combination of neo-liberalism with ethnic nationalism, and governmental centralization are part of the explanation for peripheralization. After presenting the theoretical framework on peripheralization and regionalism, as well as the possibilities for narrowing gaps through administrative and governmental change, we present the research method as qualitative, based on primary and secondary sources (which include numerical data), an analysis of interviews with officials in the Negev, media reports, and the deliverables of workshops. These sources inform an examination of the processes and governmental attitudes with a view to possible change. Hence, we briefly describe the background to the processes and causes of inequality in the Negev; a research critique of the lack of regionalism in Israel; and an analysis of steps toward decentralization adopted in recent years. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the regional city model as an administrative and governmental structure for narrowing social gaps. The city of Arad and the Western Negev region serve as a test case, as their spatial condition is suitable for the proposed structural change. The article concludes with a summary and discussion of the need for further practical studies to validate the proposed model.

Keywords*: peripheralization, regional city, fair shared region, functioning region, regionalism*

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Political and public rhetoric employ the term "periphery" as a negative catch-all phrase encompassing marginality, gaps between the center and outer regions, the flattening of regions as "natural" phenomenon, freeing central government of responsibility for worsening peripheralization (Swirsky, 2011). In Israel, the periphery is the product of policy that imposes ethno-national logic on space, excluding and displacing a minority group; this is combined with a capital-oriented logic that creates the inegalitarian accumulation of wealth and resources (Fischer-Tahir & Nauman, 2013; Kühn, 2015). We will argue that changing the municipal structure of a region can moderate the mechanisms of peripheralization and permit progress toward fair regional space.

Our analysis is based on an approach that inculcates the urban in the regional, based on the assumption that a shift from urban to regional thinking offers a fresh perspective for correct and just regional planning. This approach includes all the diverse types of communities in the regional space and corresponds with the paradigm of planetary urbanism (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Soja, 2002; Söderbaum, 2016). As part of the discussion, the city will be examined in terms of its structure and its affinities with adjacent communities, the agricultural hinterland, and open spaces as a unified spatial unit.

In contrast to the growing diffusion of the idea of regionalism in research and in many countries, Israel lacks a layer of regional government. Spatial power relations in Israel are based on centralized government, a proportional electoral system, and ongoing policy that has shaped the municipal domain along the lines of the ethnic and class rift in the country (Ben-Elia, 2006). Researchers have for many years critiqued the existing municipal structure in Israel (particularly Rosen-Zvi and Blank, 2021; Ben-Elia, 2006; Razin and Hazan, 2006). Discourse on regionalism has recently begun to penetrate the administrative and planning agenda. Central government proposals for reforms to promote regionalism have focused primarily on economic cooperation and the encouragement of savings and efficiency (Report on Promoting Regionalism, 2020; Levi et al., 2020).

Against this background, this article seeks to examine the idea of the regional city as an alternative to the existing structure and a planning tool capable of creating functioning and fair space. The proposed structural change is supported by the development of regional identity and has the potential to encourage enhanced regional resilience, as will be presented in the theoretical section and illustrated through the case studies of Arad and the Western Negev.

INEQUALITY, PERIPHERALIZATION, AND A FAIR MUNICIPAL STRUCTURE IN PERIPHERAL REGIONS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our discussion on changing the municipal structure as a possible solution to inequality seeks to reform regional space, particularly in the case of a marginal space in Israel where ethnic affiliation largely corresponds to socioeconomic status. Thus,

the article addresses a transition from the spatialization of class, based on exclusion, displacement, and segregation, to a space characterized by social cohesion and public responsibility (Lipsitz, 2007). To this end, the article will begin by discussing the concepts of periphery and peripheralization, their causes and their roles in entrenching gaps, by way of background to the discussion of regionalism and the regional city.

Swirsky (2011) argues that the concept of periphery embodies a simplistic and substantive element of remoteness from the center; accordingly, it encourages the simple solution of rapprochement. Conversely, the concept of peripherality also addresses "soft" factors, without categorical criteria or a dichotomy between the center and the margins. Peripherality recognizes a complex, networked, layered, and contradictory social, cultural, political, and economic system that creates interests and struggles within the framework of spatial policy, manifested in exclusion from political power bases and decision-making processes (Allen et al., 1998).

Developmental approaches for halting peripheralization—such as budgetary support, over-employment in the public sector, or top-down major projects—are usually unsuccessful. The development of a marginal region requires systemic change in the utilization of capabilities and assets in the region, with an emphasis on the inculcation of acquired local knowledge in the planning and building process through a new developmental approach in the intra-regional framework (Hasson, 2015; Rodríguez-Pose, 2017). Accordingly, this article adopts the regional perspective and the model of the regional city, within this perspective, as the starting point for change.

The region is a social unit that encompasses a full range of social and economic processes: social groups and cultures, political identities, relations of economic exchange, sustainability and locality, in the sense of identity and differences that emerge through mutual influence (Allen et al., 1998; Paasi, 2003). The new regionalism approach proposes a complex, multidimensional paradigm that focuses on the long term. It mandates social responsibility and the integration of state players and non-state players—with and without governmental affinities—in formal and informal regional actions. Its goal is to improve the quality of life and strengthen civil participation to empower the region politically within the new hierarchy that will be created in the state (Brenner and Pastor, 2016; Passi, 2009; Storper, 2011).

This subject relates to the pattern of regional spatiality and corresponds with the current debate between the planetary urbanism paradigm proposed by Brenner & Schmid (2015) and the preference for small-scale and place-based observation, as proposed by Hillary & Goh (2021). A combination of these opposing approaches may offer the best path to explaining regional space as both a macro-structure and a unique domain. The planetary urbanism paradigm describes a space in which urbanization is centralized, diffuse, and differential. The city is no longer a defined area characterized by cityness, but rather a dynamic urban space containing diverse and highly divergent forms of settlement. At any point in time, it includes growing cities and shrinking communities, and its expansion reflects unequal patterns of

development. The concrete and small-scale observation has social relevance and can explain spatial marginality in terms of the unique historical factors in a given region and explore the patterns of organization of the human domain. We suggest that the settlement model of planetary urbanism can integrate with that of the regional city, in miniature form.

A social perspective can offer fresh insights into traditional planning concepts, particularly in marginal areas. This requires an institutional arrangement of regional or local development that makes room for the human agent, in the face of approaches imposed from above. The researchers recommend the formation of policy representing local challenges in three channels: 1) emphasis on regional assets and the reduction of negative stigmatization of the region; 2) a focus on the social capital of the region; 3) coalition-building and blurring inter-local or inter-regional boundaries in order to remove opposition from planners and institutions (Hadjimichalis, 1987; Leick & Lang, 2018). This approach has the potential to reinforce regional resilience and is consistent with the idea of the regional city.

Regional resilience develops within the social capital culture of a given region. This culture is vital for the connection between the different players in order to permit participation as a condition for development. However, the spatial inequality and socioeconomic fragility common in peripheral regions impair the ability of the region to secure economic growth and achieve regional resilience. Resilience is measured not only in the ability to overcome crises and adapt to changing circumstances, but also in the ability to develop new growth channels and common entrepreneurial policy: building knowledge with shared understanding, networking of shared regional knowledge, development of participation mechanisms, and identification of ways to communicate and set priorities with an emphasis on equality and stability (Boschma, 2015; Brenner and Pastor, 2016; Christopherson et al., 2010; Putnam, 1995). Meanwhile, regional identity serves as a formative element in the construction of regional resilience, as a social process. That derives from an encounter between top-down control, stigmatization and bottom-up resistance to hegemonic stigmatization. Moreover, there must be changes in regional identity components to differentiate it from other regions (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Jonas, 2012; Paasi, 2003; Paasi & Metzger, 2017).

The purpose of the regional city is to apply values of equality and justice to the region and accordingly requires a fair distribution of resources between the groups. Fainstein (2013), who developed this direction, defines three governing principles for urban justice: democracy, manifested in the development of democratic procedures and governmental institutions; diversity, manifested in recognition of all groups in the social domain; and equity, manifested in fair allocations to the different groups, with the greatest attention to the weakest groups. A fair distribution of resources must meet needs and requirements; the contribution of the distribution to all; and compensation for past difficulties and injustices. We will argue that the idea of the regional city encompasses these three components. There is an emphasis on

democratic decision-making and procedures, as well as on human diversity as a desirable and fruitful element—without patronization and assimilation but based on the ability to exist in a shared space without leaving weakened populations behind. Accordingly, it is important to encourage a change from discourse on competition over "crumbs" to discourse on participation and fairness.

The Negev region has experienced a process of peripheralization over decades and suffers from profound inequality; a deficit of democracy due to reduction in the ability of citizens to influence the democratic institutions and the rise of the managerial state; and inegalitarian segregation between the communities that live in the region (Hasson, 2006; Rozen-Tzvi & Blank, 2021). The idea of the regional city seeks to offer an alternative that will advance equality and democracy, as will be discussed in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology draws on the argument that current knowledge is confined by the existing epistemological framework. A critical perspective can break through these confines and expand our understanding of the way reality is shaped; this article will offer such a perspective. The proposed alternative draws mainly on a qualitative approach that regards the concept of the region as a political and socio-spatial structure of unique channels and networks that consolidates and renews itself as a semi-coherent domain. Within this framework, it is important to find a way to express the administrative power of the regional structure (Dufaux and Soja, 2010; Paasi, 2009; Soja, 2002).

The research analysis includes a theoretical discussion, with empirical illustrations drawn from the data analysis; literature from secondary sources; an analysis of texts from 10 in-depth and semi-structured interviews undertaken with officials in the Negev, a mayor, a head of a regional council, and the director of the Western Negev regional Cluster (there are 12 regional clusters in Israel, as explained in the chapter below), as well as with civil society activists; an analysis of positions based on the minutes of the Southern Geographical Committee for boundaries change and rates distribution between municipalities in the region; committee reports and media articles; and information drawn from active participation in conferences and gatherings to advance the subject. This study focuses on the Negev, but it should serve as the basis for an overall examination of Israeli space.

THE REGIONAL CITY

This conceptual discussion will briefly discuss the nature and causes of peripheralization in the Negev; the status of regional identity in the region; and the problematic municipal structure in Israel, with reference to the idea of the regional

city as an alternative model. The discussion assumes that the regional city model can strengthen the Negev both internally and relative to the center of the country.

Peripheralization in the Negev

In general terms, the Negev is defined as a periphery in accordance with the statistics of the Central Bureau for Statistics. The region is remote from opportunities such as markets, jobs, health services, and cultural activities. The component of potential accessibility accounts for two-thirds of the weight of the definition, while proximity to the boundary of the Tel Aviv District constitutes the remaining one-third (Peripherality Index for Settlements and Authorities, 2018). This definition has been criticized for ignoring sociopolitical aspects, and since the distances cannot be compared and should be insignificant (Nagar-Ron, 2021).

The governmental policy towards the Negev replicates peripheralization, since it is based on two key practices – neglect and control. Technologies of control are activated by various state institutions, while at the same time the regime neglects development and planning (Roded, 2010). This creates a deficit in democracy, leading to disillusionment among residents with the functioning of the institutions and with the level of services they receive. Physical distances lead to a lack of transparency, a low level of public accountability, and limited active participation by residents (Hasson, 2006). In terms of development, the attitude toward the Negev is primarily top-down and the planning of major projects – such as the construction of highways, the establishment of new communities for strong populations (Darel, 2018), or the relocation of Israeli military functions to the Negev. All of them have failed to change the region's condition over the years, as Rodríguez-Pose describes (2017).

The extreme inequality between the local authorities in the Negev along ethnic lines, are expressed in the socio-economic gaps between municipalities: suburban communities of better off population have the highest rank, all the Bedouin (Muslim natives) localities have the lowest, the Negev towns (populated by oriental-Jews immigrants) have a low to medium rank, and the regional councils of veteran settlers have a medium to high rank (Sharvit, 2020). These gaps reflect a fractured region. As such, it will be difficult to consolidate a common regional identity in the area and to achieve resilience. Israel and Frenkel (2018) also explain this situation in terms of the symbolic capital of the strong communities, which seek to maintain their status to secure greater resources, maintain their social strength, and preserve their self-perception as dominant players.

In this reality, it is evident that the collective Negev identity is weak or even absent. Division and fragmentation are evident: centralized policy imposed on the ministerial districts and on local government prevents a unified regional system and imposes division between the ethnic groups in the region (Swirsky, 2011; Shammai, 1986; Yiftachel, 2001). Meanwhile, Dekel et al., (2018) highlight the growing involvement of civil players in spatial politics through multidimensional actions, development of knowledge and ideology, and the creation of both physical and

symbolic space. These civil society organizations reflect the presence of social capital and add a moral dimension to demands for change and for regional rights (Putnam, 1995). The affinity between the condition of regional identity in the Negev and the need to change the municipal structure emphasizes the importance of initiating such change.

Change does not come solely from civil society organizations. In most cases, they play a catalyzing and connecting role between the other players to create cooperation, drawing in the institutional echelon, local authority heads, and so forth. Moreover, the administrative vacuum from above has created a window allowing the emergence of players, in a process that embodies pluralism and local democracy (Dekel et al., 2018), though, still in a small scale. These processes reflect the strengthening of grassroots regional citizenship based on expanding social capital. Thus, the source of regional identity, as well as its fragmentation, are the product of centralized top-down policy based on the principle of a "zero-sum game," division, and a hierarchy of citizenship and neglect that attract diverse bodies and initiatives to the region, some of which have conflicting interests.

The principles that derive from reports on the advancement of the new regionalism, as has recently also been seen in Israel (Report on Promoting Regionalism, Interior Ministry, 2020), indicate a lack of efforts to democratize decision-making processes and to reform the relations between governmental systems and civil society—a process that requires decentralization. Instead, the Negev is subordinated to a restrictive state order that perpetuates its weakness (Ben-Elia, 2006; Sharvit, 2020).

As part of the demand for a structural alternative as a vital step toward narrowing gaps in the periphery, this article will discuss the proposal for a regional city. As a structure that shapes a fair and functioning region that is more democratic, and more autonomous, this model has the potential to bridge socioeconomic rifts and strengthen the value of equality. The next section will review the development of municipal structures in Israel, by way of background to the conceptual change proposed below.

Background

The municipal system in Israel was shaped in the 1940s and 1950s based on a spatial and functional division that was the opposite of the model in Western countries, where the regional structure was historically based on the centrality of the city (Christaller, 1933 [1966]). The power structure in Israel granted power to the cooperative associations of the kibbutz and moshav movements, while the new cities populated by migrants were left dependent for their livelihood on the kibbutzim and moshavim. Over the decades that followed, this structure became increasingly unsuited to the changing reality. The number of local authorities in Israel has grown to 259—an enormous number relative to Israel's size and population (Reingewertz, 2013); agriculture in the rural sector is dwindling; the value of land is soaring; and the suburban communities have a larger population than the communities in

the regional councils, thereby changing their agricultural and rural character. These processes have blurred the distinction between urban and rural space (Sofer, 2017; Delgo, 2010).

Over recent decades, many countries have implemented processes of top-down decentralization and bottom-up unification of settlements (Muraoka & Avellaneda, 2021; Townsend, 2019; Wollmann, 2004). An attempt to unify local authorities in Israel in 2003, as part of a broader recovery plan, was unsuccessful (Razin, 2012; Reingewertz, 2013): despite the geographical proximity, the separate affinities prevented the development of mutual ties, and the city did not play any real function in the regional fabric. This lack of cooperation is particularly problematic in the case of peripheral and sparsely populated regions.

Over the past decade, several steps have been taken that reflect a change in the relations between central and local government: 1) Cooperation has been initiated between municipalities, local council, and regional councils through the framework of "regional clusters." Six standing committees (hereinafter—the "geographical committees") have been established to change local boundaries and the allocation of income from regional state land users such as factories or the military, replacing the previous ad hoc committees. Moreover, a team has been established to promote regionality in Israel.

The Interior Ministry has adopted the regional clusters as a mechanism for promoting regional cooperation with neighboring authorities. The main goals of the regional cluster are to develop the joint and efficient supply of municipal services by pooling resources and exploiting advantages of scale; to improve the residents' lives; to enrich the diversity of services in the periphery and in small local authorities; and to lead regional development processes (Forum of Regionality Experts, 2018a). Still, deeper actions will be needed to secure significant and broad-based change and reaffirm the need for holistic change in this cooperation (Abada et al., 2018).

The second direction developed by the Interior Ministry is the establishment of six standing district committees for changing municipal boundaries and the allocation of income. The committees have an advisory status vis-à-vis the minister and work under a mandate issued by and on the initiative of the ministry. This change offered fresh hope for a fairer regional balance between the regional councils and the cities "trapped" inside them (see Figure 2) (Cohen, 2014; Hananel, 2009). But a review of the discussions of the Southern Geographical Committee since its inception reveals an initial effort to promote more egalitarian space and to change the existing balance of power under the current governmental structure, particularly between the cities and regional councils in the Negev.

In conclusion, discourse on regionality in Israel leaves intact the gulfs between urban and rural domains. This situation perpetuates governmental centralization rather than decentralizing powers and replicates the peripheralization of the region. The criticism of the status quo is essentially that such institutions constitute a "band aid," while what is needed is profound and structural change.

Development of the Idea of the Regional City

In 1976, a commission headed by Moshe Zanbar was charged with examining the relations between local and central government in Israel. The Zanbar Commission proposed, as part of the solution, that encouragement be given to introducing an "urban regional council" as an interim layer in the urban sector. For example, alongside the regional councils in the rural sector, an "urban regional council" would be established for three cities in the Negev (Zanbar Commission, 1981). This recommendation was not implemented.

Hasson and Razin (1990) argued that confrontation between local authorities reflects the empowerment of the urban periphery, which is now demanding distributive justice. Their conclusion was that change must include distributive justice and the addition of a regional layer to the governmental structure in Israel (see also Zohar, 2020). This idea has been raised repeatedly over the years (Team to Promote Regionality in Israel, 2020); Lehrer, 2019). The Committee for the Unification of Authorities in the Southern District (2003) considered the possibility of unifying a city and a regional council; one of its grounds for this related to social justice.

Several additional proposals have since been raised. Razin and Hazan (2006) recommend considering alternatives on the regional level to moderate inequity in the allocation of municipal wealth. Ben-Artzi (2010, 47-57) A letter to the interior minister written by Cohen (2014), who served as head of the Southern District Planning Administration, recommends freeing the trapped cities and attaching them to the rural area, which will be under their management.

The proposed regional city

In Israel, the concept of a "regional city" refers to a new spatial division in socioeconomic and political terms. The idea of establishing a regional city is grounded in the combination of urban space, delineated by the city limits, with rural space, delineated by the area of jurisdiction of the regional council, thereby creating a shared space under shared administration. In place of urban authorities forming enclaves in the heart of the regional councils, the urban authority will include the built-up urban area, rural and suburban communities, farmland, industrial areas, and open spaces within the determined area of jurisdiction. For example, this could be achieved through the combination of the city of Netivot and Sdot Negev Regional Council, or of Ofaqim and Merhavim Regional Council (see Figure 2).

The bottom-up development of the idea of the regional city in the Negev has prepared the public domain for the dissemination of new ideas. Accordingly, not only is the idea of the regional city more relevant than ever, but it seems the time is right to develop discourse on this issue in the public and political domains.

Since there is no regional level of government in Israel, we will present two examples. The first is the attempt by the heads of two authorities—Arad and Tamar–

as a bottom-up initiative, including the obstacles that blocked the initiative. The second, hypothetical example, as a preferable alternative to the Tkuma ("revival") Administration. Tkuma has been established by the government, following the disaster of October 7th 2023 near Gaza Strip, to rebuild the settlements which had been ruined by Hamas. We believe that the municipal structure of the Western Negev Cluster can yield a much better results than the new entity of Tkuma.

THE CASE OF ARAD

The case of Arad marks the first bottom-up initiative to create a regional city in Israel. Arad is a city in the eastern Negev with a population of approximately 30,000. The city was established in 1962 and grew through a precise and careful planning process. Later the city underwent changes and deteriorated, as policy toward the Negev changed and its socioeconomic ranking fell to cluster 3 out of 10 in socio-economic rating. Arad functions as a regional city due to its location in the heart of Bedouin villages and towns, and in proximity to the Dead Sea, with its major mineral plants and hotel zones (see Figure 1). Arad serves as a source of employment, labor, services, and consumption for an extensive area. In 2015, the elected Mayor of Arad, Nissan Ben-Hamo, joined a delegation of mayors that toured Europe and encountered the regional city model.

Ben-Hamo recalled: "I saw this arrangement in France, and it seemed totally logical. The connection with Tamar Regional Council seems to me to be appropriate. We (Arad) are surrounded by Tamar Regional Council and serve as a human resource for the hotels and factories in its area of jurisdiction" (interview, May 6, 2024). Ben-Hamo contacted the head of Tamar Regional Council at the time, Dov Litvinoff, and they decided to adopt the idea and translate it into practical steps. They decided that whoever was elected would lead through consensus and a discourse of equals; each authority would enjoy appropriate representation. They contacted Mordechai Cohen, the Director-General of the Interior Ministry at the time. Cohen was enthusiastic about the idea, in contrast to the Local Government Center, which expressed its opposition. When they consulted an attorney, it emerged that there was "no legislation consistent with this arrangement, so he stopped us. Later Dov resigned and his successor did not show interest" (ibid.).

Figure 1: Arad's Zones of Influence based on daily traffic data
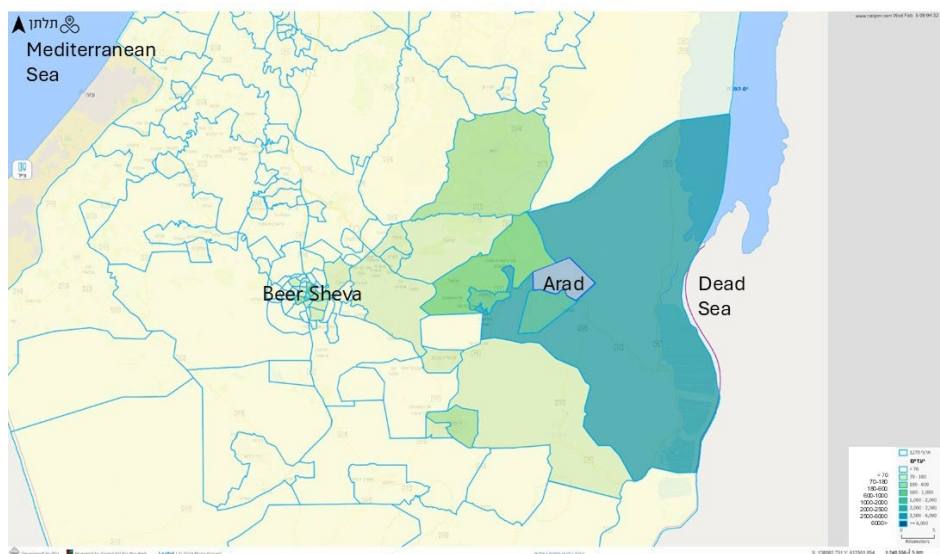
Source: Cellular survey Aug. 2017, Tiltan system of National Roads Company of Israel

Despite this setback, Ben-Hamo continued to adopt a regional approach to planning. He asked to incorporate into Arad enclaves of unaffiliated land housing a winery and mushroom factory. His goal was to establish an employment zone for the local authorities in the region focusing on the development of advanced agricultural technology; he also proposed installing a solar field (Southern Geographical Committee, meeting on April 15, 2023). He reached agreement with all the bodies involved in these enclaves—a precedent in discussions on municipal boundaries. Later, a new mayor was elected in Arad who had a different agenda. As of the time of writing, the Geographical Committee has not yet made a recommendation regarding the fate of the enclave.

Another idea advanced through the Arad-Yeruham-Tamar Environmental Unit is to establish a regional wood park some 5 km from the edge of the built-up area that will serve all the communities in the region. The planning is based on in-depth learning concerning needs and uses that will also be suitable for residents of Kseifah and the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the region (Roded, 2023).

Over the years, additional cooperation in the fields of culture, sport, and tourism have developed with the Tamar Regional Council, particularly relating to the environmental situation in the Dead Sea drainage basin and the mineral plants. The idea of connectivity was also discussed, connecting Route 90 in the Dead Sea area to Route 3199 from Arad, together with a cable car from Arad to Ein Bokek (17 km aerial distance) for tourism and employment uses. This planning was at an early stage and did not progress further.

Arad is an example of a grassroots initiative that could have served as a pilot project. The obstacles it faced included personal changes on the local and national level, in other words, political instability. The successor to Director-General Mordechai Cohen sought to centralize local government under Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked. A further obstacle was the lack of appropriate legislation. However, the partial implementation constitutes a first shot offering a model that can be replicated in similar initiatives elsewhere.

THE CASE OF THE WESTERN NEGEV

We include the Western Negev as a case study in a negative capacity. In terms of its structure, this region is suited to the implementation of the idea of the regional city and the unification of the regional cities in the area to form a distinct unit. However, various plans in the region prevent this direction of development. The Western Negev is adjacent to the Gaza Strip and suffered badly on October 7, 2023. Hamas operatives who entered the region from the Gaza Strip destroyed many communities, whose residents were evacuated.   The case of Tkuma ("revival") Authority is an example of the mistaken division of space and top-down leadership that thwarts a process of regional planning and recovery that could benefit the whole region. The Western Negev Cluster comprises 11 cities and regional councils (see Figure 2). However, the area under the authority of the Tkuma Administration was arbitrarily limited to area 0–7 km from the border with the Gaza Strip. This excluded some of the communities in the cluster that also suffered from the Hamas attack, albeit less intensely.

Figure 2: Western Negev Cluster map
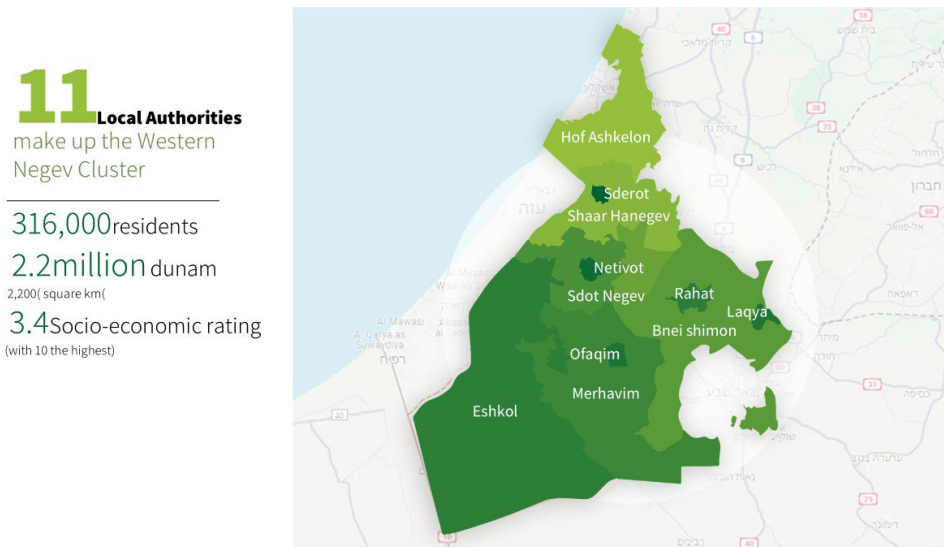
Source: Western Negev Cluster website. https://www.westnegev.org.il/

This process created problems in several spheres. 1) The 7-kilometer limit of the Tkuma region created not just geographical limitations, but also social division. Such as between the rural/kibbutz sector and the cities, thereby sparking tension along the historical fault between the kibbutzim and the Negev towns. The exclusion of Rahat from the program created separation between Bedouin and Jews. 2) The Tkuma Administrational system is to work separately with each community, rather than promoting spatial cooperation and examining the regional system. This has once again encouraged competition between communities, rather than the pooling of resources for the benefit of everyone in the region. 3) Planning - Several different plans now apply to the region—A: the Tkuma Administration plan; B: the National Strategic Plan of the Planning Administration, which divides Israel into zones that do not match the borders of the Tkuma area, but dissect this area; C: the Strategic Plan for the Western Negev, prepared by the Planning Administration and the Israel Lands Authority, which applies to a larger area than the Tkuma plan; D: the plan for the Beersheva metropolis. How can all these uncoordinated plans be combined to form a spatial plan for the region based on connectivity between the urban and rural sectors and between Jewish and Arab communities? How can the region be strengthened without such a socioeconomically oriented planning approach? 4) Centralization of the central regime – The staff of the Tkuma Administration, and particularly its head, were appointed by the Prime Minister's Office without securing the residents' consent; the administration's physical base is far removed from the rehabilitation area. The remoteness and alienation of this body, which is not familiar with the region, its residents, and its ways of life, together with the need to initiate the process rapidly, led to misunderstandings, mistrust, and bureaucracy. In addition, a network of loyalties exists in Israeli politics that favors unitary cities (Roded, 2025).

As the map shows (Figure 2), most of the cities are situated in the center of the regional councils, so that the rural areas are organized around these cities as regional centers, and together they are unified in the joint framework of the "cluster," which has been in operation since 2013. Accordingly, we argue, it would be preferable to define the cluster as the Tkuma region, grant it autonomous statutory power, and charge it with responsibility for the rehabilitation process. The cluster has longstanding knowledge of the socioeconomic and physical reality in the region, with its unique characteristics, advantages, weaknesses, and leadership, and has acquired extensive local knowledge that is not held by the Tkuma Administration. However, central government in Israel has such a strongly centralizing tendency that this kind of change is unthinkable.

DISCUSSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ESTABLISHING A REGIONAL CITY

The above summary highlights the need for fundamental change to the status quo, as the example of Arad shows. This in turn raises the need to establish a regional identity to enhance solidarity and change the competitive nature of the relations between local authorities. These insights can serve as the basis for discourse on structural and governmental change. A network of regional cities will reduce the direct political ties in the authorities and encourage a focus on promoting the common good in the Negev to strengthen the region from the grassroots up, as will be defined in the future in accordance with the Recommendations to Advance Regionality and the Decentralization of Powers from Central Government to Local Government (2020).

The transition from a zero-sum game that has fostered mutual mistrust, clientelism, and battles over crumbs to a win-win strategy requires the consent of the parties involved. This can be secured based on an understanding of the advantages of cooperation and civil autonomy through democratic elements in order to free the Negev from its dependence on central government. Essential conditions for success include transparency, training in preparation for the process, and securing agreement between the partners, even if this takes a long time. The actors will include a broad range of civil and commercial bodies, residents and civil society organizations, representatives of central government and the local authorities, professional civil servants and public representatives, all of whom will be involved in the decision-making process, the formulation of a vision, creating a network of connections, resource development, and management (Abada et al., 2018; Rhodes, 1991).

The spatial model of a rural hinterland managed jointly with a city already exists in Bedouin society on the informal level (Meir et al., 2021). Formalizing this structure as part of a complete set of regional cities will end the neglect that is manifested in the region in fear, hazards, and poverty.

The implementation of the idea of the regional city has radical significance within existing discourse in Israel. There is fear of the destabilization of the existing power relations and strong opposition can be expected to this proposal. However, the picture in the field suggests that some cities already function as de facto regional cities to an extent, providing services and consumer goods that are unavailable in the rural domain, specialized services, and cooperation in various fields, such as tourism, the environment, and entrepreneurship.

The Fair Regional Space group in the Negev has set itself the goal of promoting the idea of the regional city. In the period 2018-2025, interviews were held with several mayors, strategic advisors in the municipalities, the director-general of the cluster, and an official from the Planning Administration. The idea was presented to the Southern Geographical Committee and to the geographical committees in the north of Israel. Three workshops were held for local authority workers, the Eastern Negev Cluster, academics, and civil society organizations. An analysis of the interviews, workshops, and committee discussions shows general agreement for the

idea, as well as the identification of difficulties and proposed solutions:

1. Interest is shown in the proposal and broad agreement, based on criticism of the status quo, which creates spatial segregation, administrative obstacles, and a narrow view of the region. The regional city is important in that it strengthens the regional dimension. The process of transition to regional cities must be based on agreements.

2. Expected difficulties: A) Spatial differences related to the "trapped city" syndrome. B) The idea will not enjoy institutional support due to the power relations in the political domain. C) Strong and wealthy local authorities can be expected to refuse to join the process. D) The idea will not solve the problems in Bedouin society; at least some of the villages should be integrated in a Jewish regional city.

3. Constructive proposals for advancing the model: A) Promoting merger and expansion gradually through services and cooperative ventures in a growing number of areas. B) Building a network of arrangements through applied research. C) Beginning with a single pilot project.

The advantages of the transition to the regional city structure seem to fall into several directions: 1) Correlation between the municipal domain and the planning domain, freeing the cities from the trapped city syndrome (Figure 1), which entrenches gaps in the region (Cohen, 2014; Rozen-Tzvi & Blank, 2021). 2) Services will be adapted to the particular needs of each region; the range of services will be expanded, so that the region will benefit from productive diversity, the development of unique needs, utilization of resources, and the protection of open spaces for the benefit of all. 3) The change will facilitate a transition from the traditional economy that plays a central role in employment in the Negev to an economy with a more diverse and progressive blend, creating capital for future development (increasing the pie). Capital development will reduce dependence on the state, which has encouraged a focus on increasing income from municipal tax or balancing grants, a limited form of state funding that perpetuates local authorities' dependence on support (Sharvit, 2020). 4) The reduced emphasis on ethnic, ideological or political identity will strengthen partnership at the regional level between the regional cities. Arenas of encounter will consolidate communality, strengthen and deepen regional identity, and lead to the recruitment of a common voice from the Negev, translated into political power (Yiftachel, 2001). If the Interior Ministry implements the regionality reform, cooperation, democratization and resilience will be further strengthened.

CONCLUSION

The Negev is rich in natural resources and in landscape and natural assets that embody the potential for wealth. However, most of the Negev's capital leaves the region, most of its communities are poor, and gaps between the local authorities within the region are widening. This demands fundamental structural change. While the administrative structure of local government may seem to be a technical matter, researchers—and this article—argue that the proposal to create a unified governmental center combining a regional council and a city goes far beyond this level. It encourages possibilities for the economic, social, and political development of the region and has moral implications. The change will enable the cities of the Negev to halt the process of peripheralization through a fairer and more egalitarian foundation.

As noted, the regional city model meets the three foundations of urban justice as defined by Susan Fainstein: democracy, in the sense of the building of democratic procedures and governmental institutions; diversity among all groups in the social domain; and equity, manifested in fair allocations to different groups, with particular attention to the weakest populations. In the context of the planetary urbanism model and the regional approach, the regional city transcends boundaries and lowers the walls of segregation that have historically created barriers between cities and regional councils and between ethnic communities. The city will enjoy a regional status as a functional center and will gain strength.

The Ministry of the Interior has recognized the need to decentralize powers to meet changing conditions. However, its reforms do not address the underlying causes of inequality: the communal/municipal hierarchy and ethnic segregation. To secure fundamental change, there is a need for a new structure capable of changing reality through the utilization of local knowledge and the unique attributes to the region, to lower fences and mend rifts. Thus, the south of Israel can offer knowledge and innovation that can end a reality that replicates regional inferiority, as part of a process of change that will transform the city from an enclave to a core.

This article studied the discourse represented in the media, research, and the establishment, by way of a preliminary examination of the idea of the regional city. The aspiration is to promote change in the existing political, cultural, and social climate in Israel. The discussion here opens a window to the issue and the proposed model. Further studies with an applied dimension are needed; while it seems that the regional city model could play an important role in solving the situation in the Negev, its feasibility must be examined in each particular instance.

This article articulates a demand for spatial change, a desire to utilize the potential wealth of the Negev to overcome the region's peripheralization, and a call for a fairer and more democratic region. These are long-term processes that will face numerous challenges. Meeting these challenges will require the mobilization of the local authorities in the Negev, the state, and civil society.

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