

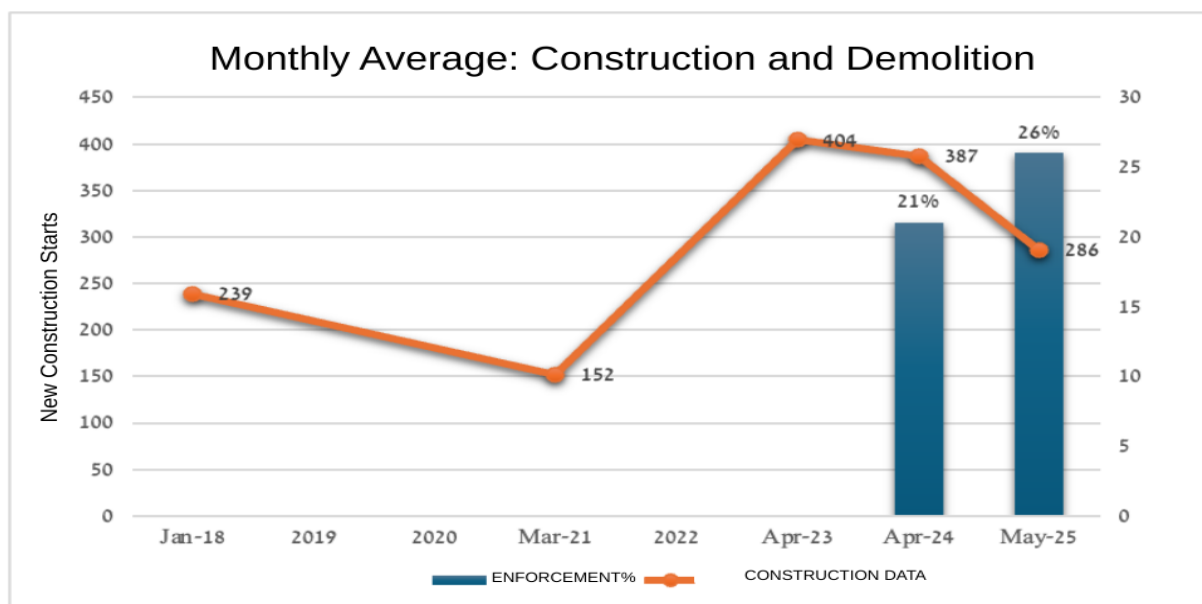
Illegal Construction in the Negev

A Comparative Periodic Review (2025)

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

After two years of steep increases in the scope of illegal Bedouin construction in the Negev, the years 2024–2025 mark a trend reversal, characterized by enhanced enforcement and a slowdown in both new construction starts and in expansion of illegal construction into new areas.

Our recommendation is to intensify enforcement within existing clusters as well, to establish a systemic and systematic framework for handling demolition debris, to create strategic inter-ministerial cooperation, and to delineate the precise boundaries of existing squatters camps.





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Background

Bedouin tribes roamed the Negev region during the Ottoman Era and the period of British Mandatory rule. Since the early 1960s, Israel has been seeking permanent solutions for Bedouin settlement. The first permanent town (Tel Sheva) was established in 1967. For political and cultural reasons, many Bedouin chose not to move to the permanent settlements (“the seven townships”) and continued to reside in unregulated scattered encampments in violation of the law.

In the early 2000s, the state decided to legalize certain clusters of illegal settlement and classify them as towns. In practice, these localities— originally organized under the Abu Basma Regional Council and later split into two regional councils, Neve Midbar and al-Qassum—were neither properly planned nor developed, as they were situated on lands subject to contested ownership claims by Bedouin residents. Although longstanding legal precedent shows that these ownership claims lack legal foundation, development projects planned on such lands did not lead to regulated settlement; instead, it created additional complexities and obstacles.¹ Ultimately, these localities remained what they had been: unplanned, unregulated, dispersed areas of sporadic settlement. It bears noting that most illegal construction occurs within the Bedouin squatters camps, far more than within the two regional councils (Neve Midbar and al-Qassum).

Over the years, the rate of illegal construction in the Negev’s Bedouin sector has continued to rise—sometimes gradually, sometimes sharply. A major increase began in the mid-to-late 1990s, after the government halted demolitions of illegal structures, hoping this would facilitate negotiated regularization. The 2004 decision to resume enforcement also failed to curb construction, and by 2015–2017 illegal construction reached unprecedented levels, with an average of 480 new illegal structures built every month.

One of the factors contributing to this surge was the “temporary enforcement policy” formulated by the Ministry of Justice in 2016, which designated structures up to 50 m²—defined as construction for young couples, adjacent to a parent’s home and within existing clusters—as low-priority for enforcement “so long as no viable regulatory solution exists for residents of the

¹ For an extensive review of these issues, see *The Vanishing Negev: Land Use Policy and Practice in the Negev 2005-2021, Past Present and Future* (<https://bit.ly/4rz4uP3>). The Regavim Movement, 2022, pp 24-50, 60-76.



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cluster.” In practice, this policy resulted in de facto non-enforcement against small structures built inside existing clusters, even when they did not meet the exact criteria.

2018–2021: Enforcement Rises, Construction Wanes

Between 2018 and 2021, illegal construction slowed significantly. This can be attributed to Amendment 116 to the Planning and Building Law (“the Kaminitz Law”), which provided administrative enforcement tools that streamlined and accelerated enforcement against new construction starts.² The law, together with dedicated budget allocations for enforcement (e.g., Government Resolution 2397 for 2017–2021 for the Bedouin Sector), increased both enforcement volume and efficiency, contributing to a reduction in illegal construction during these years.

Illegal Construction in 2021–2023

During coalition negotiations for the formation of Israel’s 36th government (the Bennett–Lapid government), the Ra’am Party demanded a freeze on enforcement actions. After the Bedouin Authority was transferred to the Ministry of Welfare, Minister Meir Cohen asked Deputy Attorney General Carmel Yulis to update the “temporary enforcement policy.” Yulis expanded the definition of low-priority structures—from 50 m² to 70 m²—effectively ensuring no enforcement would be carried out against such structures.³

This directive, combined with the government’s dependence on Ra’am to prop up the coalition, led to a sharp rise in illegal construction during the Bennett–Lapid government’s tenure. Between March 2021 and April 2023, more than 10,000 illegal structures were added in the Negev, averaging over 400 new illegal construction starts per month.

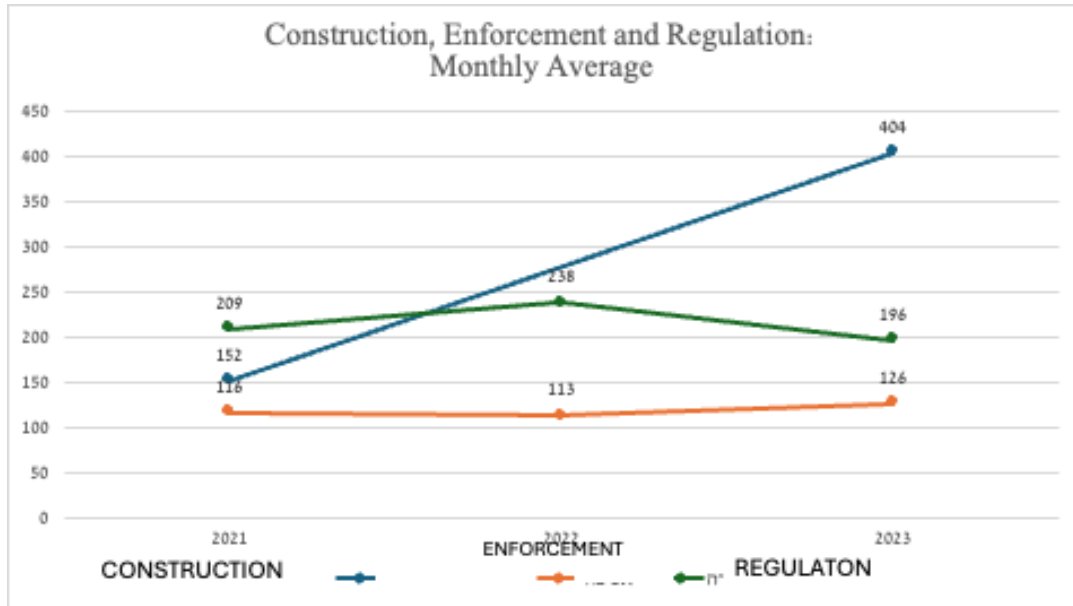
Graph #2, below, presents data compiled by Regavim, reflecting for the monthly average of illegal construction in this period, alongside enforcement and regulation data compiled by the Ministry of National Security’s Land Law Enforcement Unit – Southern Region:

² Israel’s Planning and Construction Law (Amendment 116) 5777-2017. National Legislative Archive, Knesset Website (Hebrew) <https://bit.ly/3KKqGp>

³ Updated Enforcement Policy Regarding Planning and Construction Violations in the Negev Bedouin sector and Planning Recommendations (Hebrew), 20 March 2022, Department of Counsel and Legislation, Civil Division, Ministry of Justice. <https://bit.ly/3MkTRPR>



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A methodological note: The structures considered “illegal construction” by the Enforcement Unit and the Ministry of Public’s dataset differ from those included in the Regavim analysis. The enforcement authorities count *every building element* constructed without a permit, both in its tally of illegal construction and its reporting of demolitions and enforcement, while Regavim’s monitoring includes only *significant structures*, as detailed below.⁴ This results in numerical gaps between the two datasets.

Regavim’s mapping of construction as of April 2023 reflects primarily the surge of 2022; changes that began later in 2023—after the formation of a new government—are reflected in the 2024 aerial survey.

Illegal Construction 2023–2025: Survey of Findings

⁴ Structural elements built without permits that appear in the Enforcement Unit’s data and are classified as illegal construction (both in construction data and enforcement statistics) include: tent, grove, stone structure, bale of straw or hay, cinderblock structure, wooden structure, shipping container, animal pen, earth embankment, shed or lean-to, corrugated structure, metal construct, concrete floor, other.

Regavim’s monitoring of illegal structures includes the following categories: tent, stone structure, cinderblock structure, wood structure, shipping container, shed or lean-to, corrugated structure, metal construct.



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Following the introduction of new government policy (“the Focal Points Program,” detailed below) and enforcement policies of the Ministry of National Security,⁵ enforcement against illegal construction in the Negev has increased dramatically over the past two years. Numerous structures were demolished, and entire illegal clusters (“tzvirim”)—such as Wadi Khalil, Umm al-Hiran, Umm Mitnan and others—were evacuated.

There is a clear correlation: when enforcement increases during a given period, incentives for new illegal construction decrease in the period immediately afterward, due to fear of demolition. It is notable that prior to the new policy, no entire clusters had ever been removed; the new policy introduced a shift in approach. According to Regavim’s mapping, 17 external-dispersion clusters have been removed to date. The Ministry of National Security reports a much higher figure (around 90 clusters since enforcement began in 2023⁶), due to different counting methods and the inclusion of “internal encampment” clusters—illegal structures inside legally recognized communities—which Regavim does not count.

Number of Illegal Structures Built in 2024–2025

Below, we present the number of illegal structures built by Bedouin in the Negev in 2024 and 2025, as per the mapping project conducted by Regavim’s GIS Research Division.

A preliminary baseline: Regavim’s 2023 survey and mapping project recorded 96,116 illegal structures, of which 74,507 (77.51%) were in squatters camps - outside the municipal lines of legal communities.

		2024	2025
New Illegal Structures	Total	4,640	3,719
	In squatters camps	3,723	2,845 (76%)
Enforcement	Total	1,017	990
	In squatters camps	913 (89%)	723 (73%)
Total Illegal Structures	Total	99,739	102,468
	In squatters camps	77,317 (77%)	79,439 (77%)

⁵ Shaping A New Reality in the Negev – Summary of 2024 Activity (Hebrew), 17 August 2025, Southern Directorate for Land Law Enforcement, Ministry of National Security; additional evidence is the increased incidence of self-demolition of illegal structures by construction offenders seeking to avoid the costs of government enforcement. According to Ministry of National Security data, 47% of demolitions were carried out by the offenders themselves. “82% Increase in Demolitions of Illegal Structures in the Negev,” (Hebrew). 2 July 2025, Rashuiot. <https://bit.ly/4ozMz8g>

⁶ Ibid. Since the Ministry’s report was published, additional clusters have been demolished.



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Analysis of Findings

Between March 2021 and April 2023, a total of 10,111 illegal structures were built (about 404 new starts per month) in the Negev Bedouin sector.

In 2024–2025, another 8,359 illegal structures were built (about 334 per month), and 2,007 were demolished (about 80 per month), resulting in a net increase during these two years of 6,352 structures—an average of 254 per month. This constitutes a **40% reduction** compared with the previous measured period.

The graph below presents the average number of monthly construction starts each year, alongside the percentage of illegal structures that were demolished. From the findings and from official reports, it appears that until 2023 enforcement activity was carried out on a more limited scale,⁷ whereas during 2023 a shift in trends emerged—reflected in the 2024 data.

It is evident that after a significant rise in illegal construction between 2021 and 2023, the two subsequent years show a clear decline: from an average of **404 new illegal construction starts per month in 2023**, to **387 per month in 2024**, and a sharp drop to **286 in 2025**.

This dramatic change stems from both the more focused enforcement policy and increased the increased scope of enforcement on two complementary tracks: On the one hand, **The Focal Points Program**, initiated in June 2023⁸ by Minister for Diaspora Affairs and Combatting Antisemitism Amichai Chikli (Likud), who oversees the Bedouin

Authority, which prioritized concentrated allocation of government resources to defined geographic zones—Hura, Mara'it, Rahat, and Bir Hadaj—between 2023 and 2025. On the other hand, Minister of National Security **Itamar Ben Gvir (Otzma Yehudit)**, advanced a series of steps to promote increased enforcement against new illegal structures, which, among other tangible results, resulted in unprecedented full-cluster demolitions and created a new “enforcement environment” in these areas. The transfer of the Land Enforcement Authority from the Ministry of

⁷ See, for example, “Enforcement Activity in the Planning and Construction Sphere – Summary for 2023,” and “Directorate for Land Law Enforcement, 2024 Summary of Activities” (Hebrew)

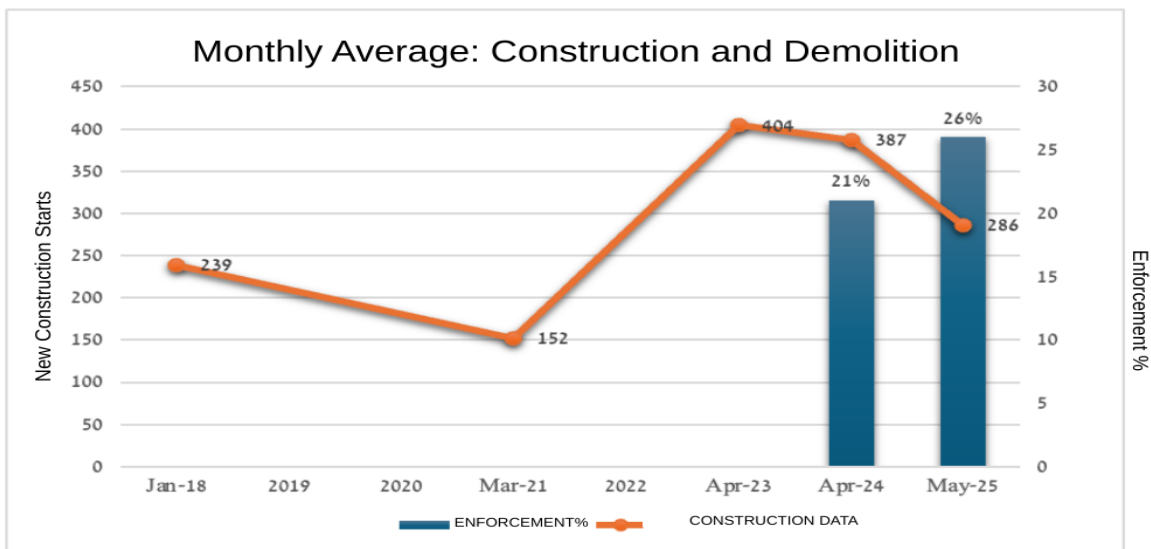
⁸ “Program to Promote Regulation of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev 2023-2025” (Hebrew), 30 June 2023, Prime Ministers Office.



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Finance to the Ministry of National Security further improved coordination among enforcement bodies and the Israel Police.

The graph below illustrates the percentage of demolitions of illegal structures in 2024 and 2025 relative to the number of new illegal structures that were built in the same year.



This illustrates the impact of enforcement on illegal construction trends. As noted, from a monthly average of 404 new illegal construction starts in 2023, that number dropped to 387 in 2024, and plummeted to a monthly average of 286 new illegal construction starts in 2025 – a drop of some 30% in only two years.

Analysis of the data on new illegal construction reveals a parallel rise in enforcement activity. In 2024, the number of structures demolished constitutes 21% of the number of new construction starts, while in 2025, 26% of new construction starts were demolished.

In addition, Regavim’s field survey of the area revealed another very significant finding: New illegal construction in 2024-2025 was concentrated within existing communities clusters, with almost no expansion to new areas. This marks a significant change after decades of constant



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expansion and takeover of pristine state land. For the first time, no new landgrabs were documented, with the exception of a number of new expansions adjacent to existing settlements – some of which have already been demolished and others that are in the process of enforcement.

Conclusions

Data collected over the past two years indicate substantial intensification of enforcement, accompanied by a significant reduction in illegal construction starts. Additionally, a major development is the near-complete halt to new encroachments onto state lands.

Despite this progress, 2025 marked a symbolic and troubling milestone: the number of illegal structures in the Negev exceeded 100,000. This reflects decades of governmental failure to resolve the issues of illegal Bedouin settlement and to relocate residents to permanent, legal communities, primarily due to the absence of a unified, long-term national policy.

The Focal Points Program (led by Minister Chikli) and the surge in enforcement activity (led by Minister Ben Gvir) illustrate the state's ability to integrate regularization with enforcement. Israel has articulated attainable goals for relocating Bedouin residents to permanent communities while simultaneously creating an 'enforcement climate' that deters illegal construction, alongside addressing interconnected issues (such as polygamy, which propels illegal construction in squatters camps).

The improvements seen over the past two years demonstrate that systemic change is achievable—both immediately and in the long term. Achieving it requires enhanced cooperation among government branches and the creation of a unified inter-ministerial strategy anchored in multi-year targets for regulation and enforcement.



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Recommendations

A. Enforcement within clusters

The “enforcement policy” formulated by the Deputy Attorney General—exempting enforcement against structures up to 70 m²—was defined as temporary and was limited to an 18 month period. Given its contribution to the surge in illegal construction and the fact that it has expired, enforcement must be strengthened not only to protect open state lands but also within existing illegal settlement clusters.

B. Preventing renewed incursions

In several cases, after clusters were evacuated and demolished, squatters returned to the site. At least seven such clusters were re-inhabited (e.g., Wadi Khalil, which saw significant renewed squatting, and Umm Mitnan, where the return was partial). Lands restored to state control must remain so.

C. Removal of demolition debris

Extensive demolition operations leave behind large volumes of rubble, creating severe environmental hazards. Enforcement authorities must ensure that enforcement action includes full debris removal, not only structural demolition.

D. Adherence to the Focal Points Program

Despite the program’s formulation, enforcement has in practice been carried out in numerous areas not included in the designated focus zones. Coordinated dual-track policy—parallel regularization and enforcement - would yield better, more efficient results. An inter-ministerial strategy is required to align regularization on one hand and enforcement on the other, to ensure maximum impact.

E. Delineating the unregulated encampments

Although expansion into new state lands has largely ceased, it is necessary to fully delineate the boundaries of the existing encampments—concentrated primarily in the triangle formed by Arad–Be’er Sheva–Dimona, and prevent development in isolated or remote areas. One example is the Kana’im Valley north of Arad, near Masada, an area disconnected from the sprawling encampment hinterland that risks becoming a new axis of expansion.



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F. Transitioning from Tactical Measures to a National Strategy

The national objective is not merely to count demolished structures, but to shape the future of the Negev. To replace a reactive approach with a long-term national master plan, it is necessary to integrate firm and effective enforcement, modern planning that serves the national interest, and a final, time-bound and geographically defined regularization process. This policy is essential for safeguarding Israel's land reserves for future generations and for advancing the Negev toward effective governance and prosperity for all its residents.

The weekly coordination meetings held by the Minister of National Security have proven their effectiveness. This process must be continued and maintained.