

POSTSCRIPT

Miami Beach, Florida—18 May 2009

It has been nearly two years since I last spent time in the Negev conducting intensive research on the bedouin community. During that time, life continues for everyone in this study; timely discussion of this subject is, as with most things in the Middle East, like aiming at a moving target.

On this day, I am walking down the beach with Kher El-Baz, Director of Social Services in Segev Shalom. He and I are both in Miami—more than 10,000 km from his home in Tel Sheva—for the same reason, namely, to attend the convening of a small conference devoted to Negev regional development. The day is perfect, in the high eighties though rather humid. White puffy clouds hang just above the horizon beyond the azure Atlantic. Sunbathers abound, and we stop and ask one if he will kindly photograph us with the tourist hotels of South Beach in the background. The photo is surreal; we are still in our dress shoes after all, and do not exactly look like we are prepared for a day at the beach.

Finally, we find a Starbucks and sit at an outdoor table in the stiff breeze as a front begins to slowly move in. Sipping our steaming coffee, we reminisce about the first time we met, nearly 20 years ago in West Mt. Airy, a neighborhood of Philadelphia, not far, coincidentally, from where I now teach. We retell the story once more: how Kher borrowed a mutual friend's car the day we met, only to have the car and his many belongings in its trunk stolen from right in front of their home. We laugh now—though we certainly were not laughing then.

Our conversation weaves back and forth from the past to the present, and from the “personal” to the “professional,” in a seamless fashion. We talk of family and friends, work and school. He notes that Amir Abu-Mu'amar has again been elected for a five-year term this past November (2008) as *Rosh Ha'Moatzah* of Segev Shalom, replacing Saeed El-Harumi. His election just followed the death of his father Sheikh Ouda, who passed away in early 2008 at a very ripe old age—96.

Amir is taking over at a time when, in Kher's opinion at least, Segev Shalom is showing increasing signs of economic growth. He notes that that the

town has succeeded in its bid to acquire a number of positions in the newly developing labor force for the new military base, *Ir HaBahadim* (Hebrew: City of the Training Bases), to be built just south of Be'er Sheva. As the name implies, *Ir HaBahadim* will be more of a new town in the Negev than merely a base, designed to house the Israel Defense Force's Armaments School, Logistics Training School, Military Police, as well as providing a variety of essential facilities for a population of between 10,000 and 20,000 servicemen and women. This will translate into numerous jobs, though Kher notes that virtually all of that will be available to the bedouin in the low-skilled, lower paying fields (laundry, food services, etc.). It was noted at the conference by one civic agency representative whose goal is to increase non-discriminatory practices (such as hiring) in the workforce that high security jobs in particular will not likely be availed to bedouin community members.

Kher adds that the poultry processing plant that was previously only in the planning stages is nearly completed in Segev Shalom as well, and will be up and running, employing perhaps 450 employees, by early 2010. Once the plant has achieved full operating capacity, it is believed that this number may double, and that female employees will likely be a significant part of its labor force, given the close proximity of the Industrial Zone to *Shekhuna Bet*.

"So," Kher asks me as we head back toward my rental car, the sky beginning to darken in anticipation of a terrific early summer storm, "when are you coming back?" "Soon," I respond as I distractedly mull over the past few hours of discussion, my mind racing in anticipation of yet further study of what lies ahead for the bedouin of the Negev in general, and Segev Shalom in particular, "*Insh'Allah*, very, very soon."