

Playing with Supertankers:

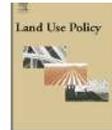
Centralization in Land Use Planning in Israel – A National Experiment Underway



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Playing with Supertankers: Centralization in Land Use Planning in Israel — A National Experiment Underway



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ABSTRACT

Compared with decentralization of planning powers, centralization has not been popular in planning policy in the past few decades. Centralization has become associated with dysfunctional governance, obsolete planning, and unconstitutional and unaccountable policies. Nevertheless there are cases in which countries have experimented with centralization in order to solve crises and improve the supply of goods and services. This paper focuses on centralization reforms in Israel that were designed to deal with a chronic shortage in housing. Through interviews with experts, and analysis of laws, and related documents, we address several questions. First, what kinds of steps have been taken recently to centralize planning in the Israeli planning system? Second, what were the motivations behind these steps? And last, in what way have these steps reformed planning in Israel, and what were their consequences? We investigate these issues by looking at a newly established national planning committee: the National Committee for Preferred Housing Plans also known as “the Supertanker”. The paper examines the aims and objectives of the legislature in forming the Supertanker, and whether these objectives were fulfilled. The findings show that the new policy arrangement has revamped the planning system, reduced the roles of regional planners, and created a fast track that circumvents older, and slower, planning processes, in an attempt to increase the production of housing units, including affordable apartments. The findings also suggest that despite public scrutiny, the Supertanker’s performance cannot be judged solely on the grounds of it being undemocratic and environmentally destructive, as there is conflicting evidence about its ability to speed-up plan approval processes, and enlarge the future housing stock.

1. Introduction

This paper reviews land-use planning policies in Israel in the face of the centralization of planning powers. The paper addresses three questions. First, what kind of steps have been taken recently to centralize planning in the Israeli planning system? Second, what were the motivations behind these steps? And last, in what way have these steps reformed planning in Israel? We investigate this issue by looking at a newly established national planning committee: the National Committee for Preferred Housing Plans (NCPHP, also referred to by its Hebrew acronym “Vatmal” or by its nickname “The Supertanker”). Specifically the paper examines the aims and objectives of the legislature in forming the Supertanker, and whether these objectives were fulfilled.

The Supertanker was established as a planning committee controlled by government ministries with a high level of power and

authority, hence its nickname “Supertanker”. In fact, a Supertanker is an airplane designed to extinguish wildfires.¹ In the Israeli case, the wildfire has been a dramatic increase in housing prices and a shortage of housing.

The main purpose of the Supertanker was to create a fast-track for the production of housing units. This was to be achieved through cutting red-tape, streamlining planning procedure in various ways, and through ancillary measures such as endowing the Supertanker with the capacity to take back government land held by farmers, as well as the capacity to override all former national, district, and local-level plans.

The Israeli case-example is particularly interesting in the context of international research for two reasons. First, it is an example of efforts to centralize planning which were extreme in their scope. This case illustrates a national government takeover of planning and a move towards ‘hands-on’ planning by national-level officials. Looking at the

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Supertankers?



Boeing 747 fire-fighting airplanes

December 2010: Northern Israel



Source: https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_2010_northern_Israel

Crisis, negligence, photo op',



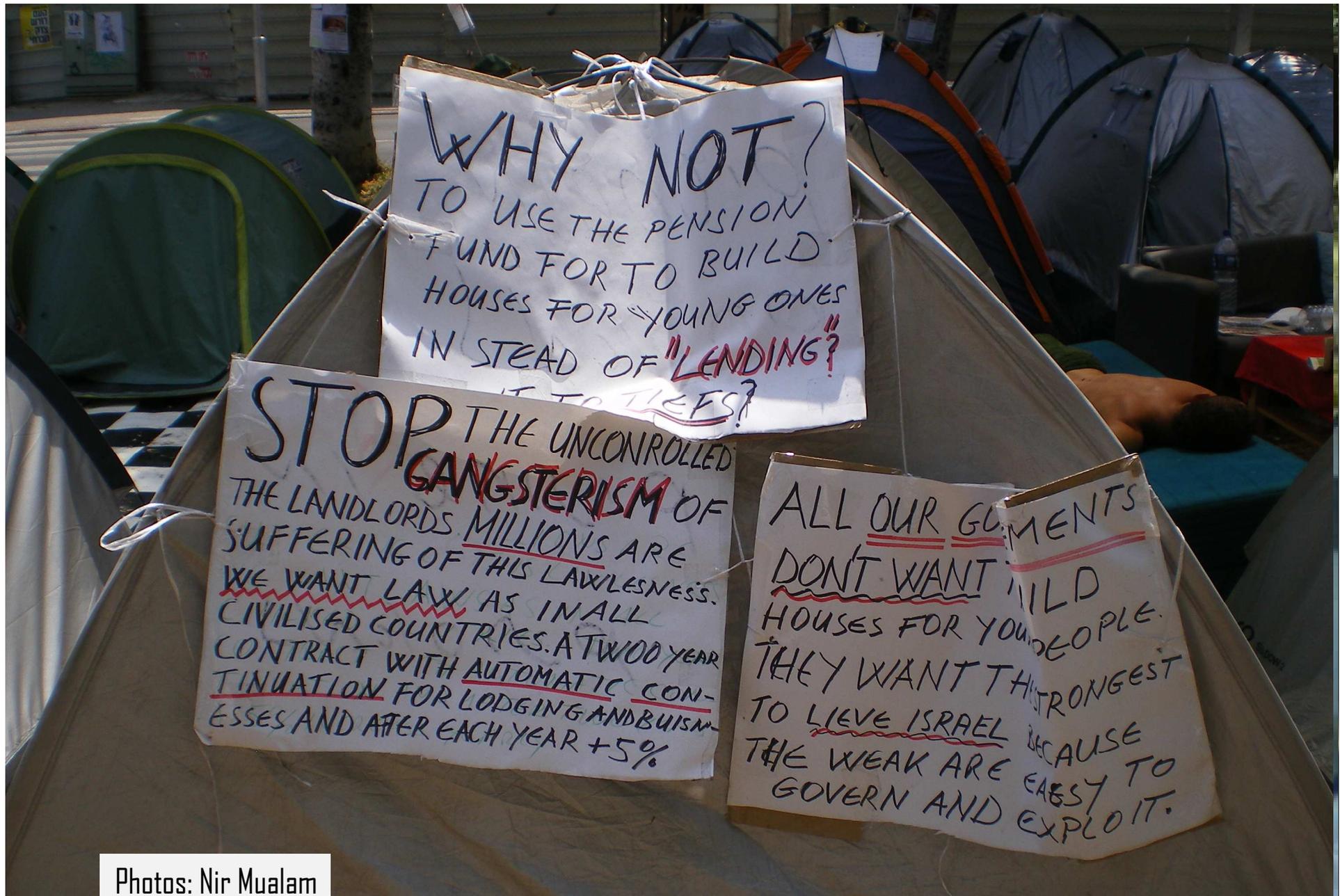
Source: Reuters and Ha'aretz. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/local/1.3133893>

Political and Civil Unrest: July-August 2011



Photo: Uriel Cohen. Calcalist

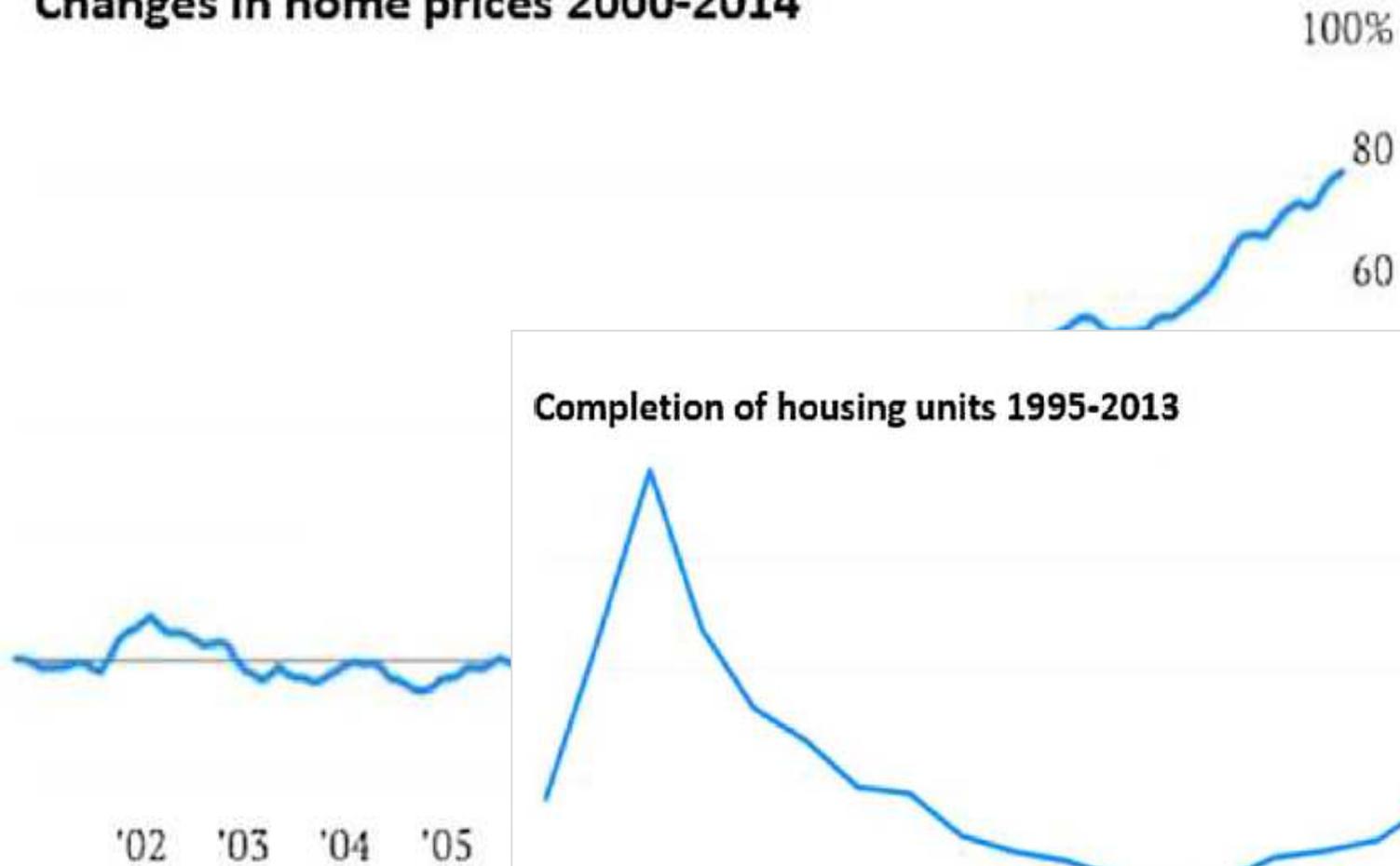
Political and Civil Unrest: July-August 2011



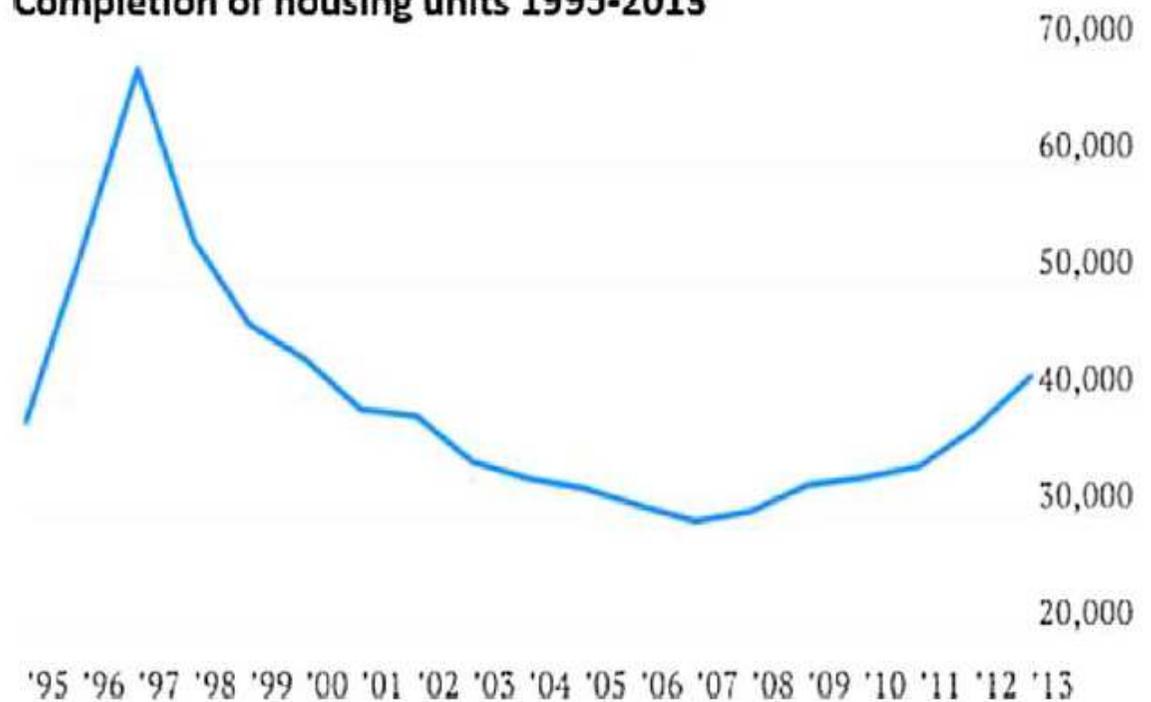
Photos: Nir Mualam

Context: Rising housing prices

Changes in home prices 2000-2014



Completion of housing units 1995-2013



Source: Central Bureau of Statistics.

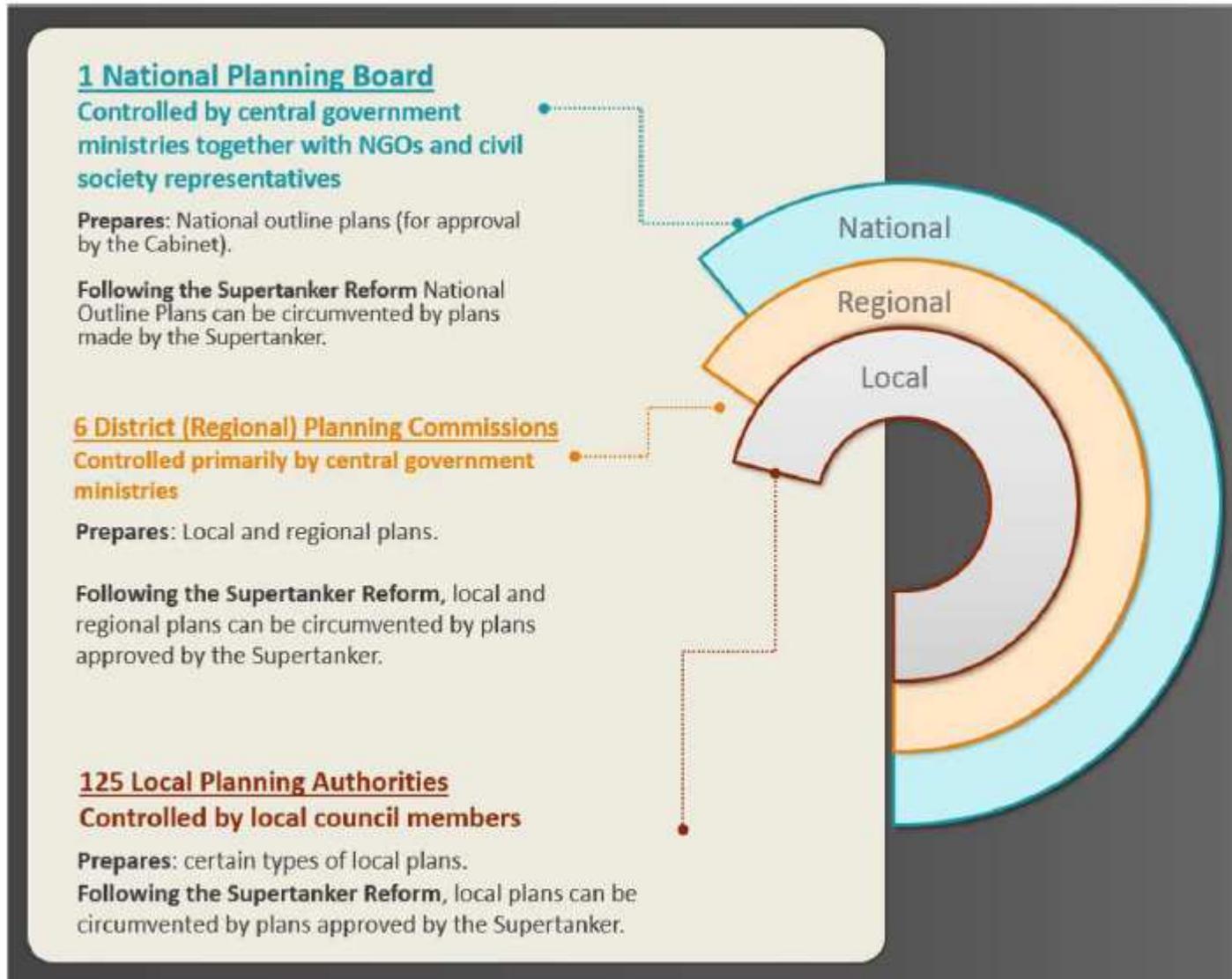
A solution (?) to the housing crisis

PM Benjamin Netanyahu:
"The suffering of those who cannot afford a home is real. Therefore we will create a Supertanker against bureaucracy. A national planning agency to uproot bureaucratic planning procedures." (2011).



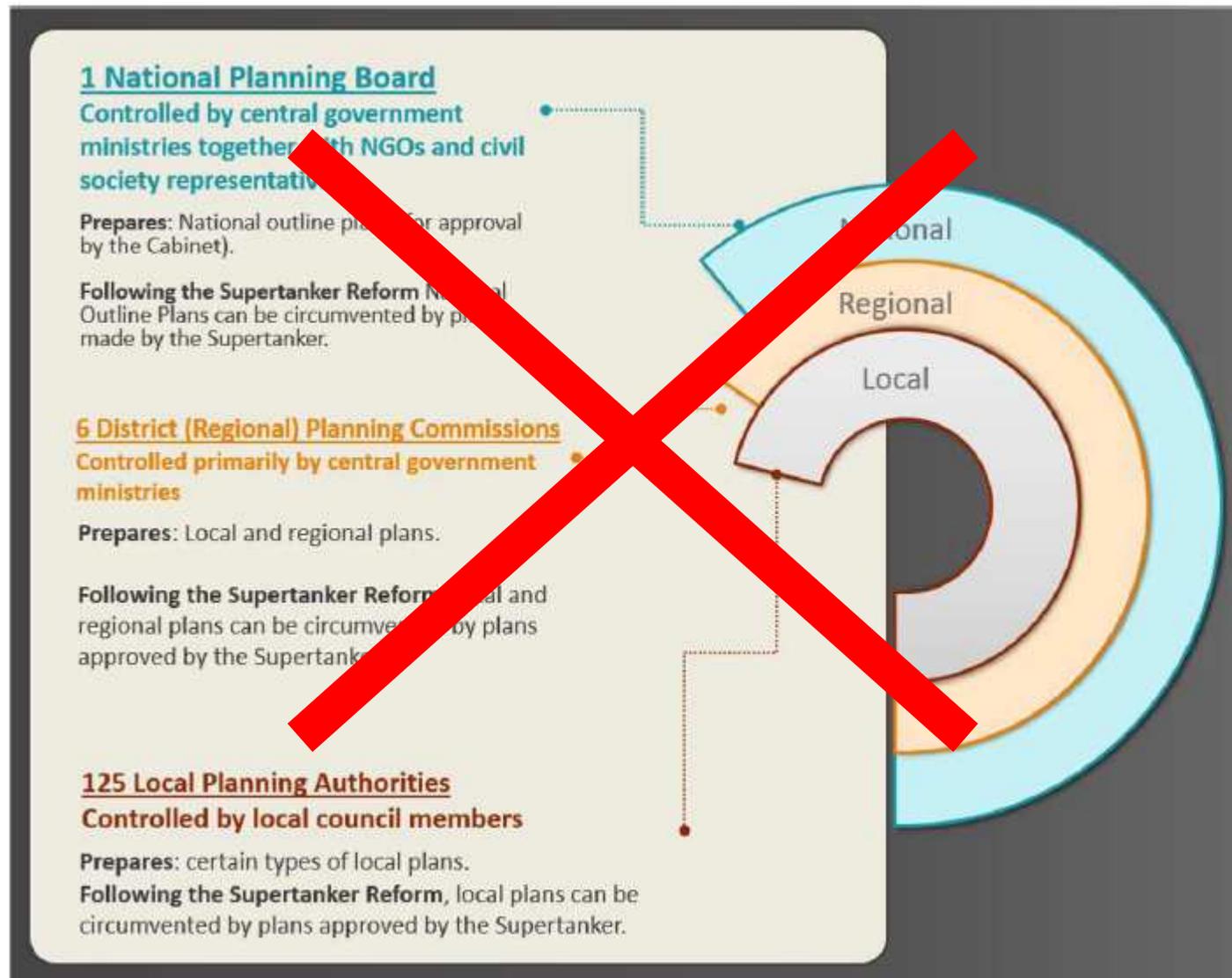
Israel Today headlines. Photo: Nir Mualam

Context: Highly centralized planning system



inners).
and.

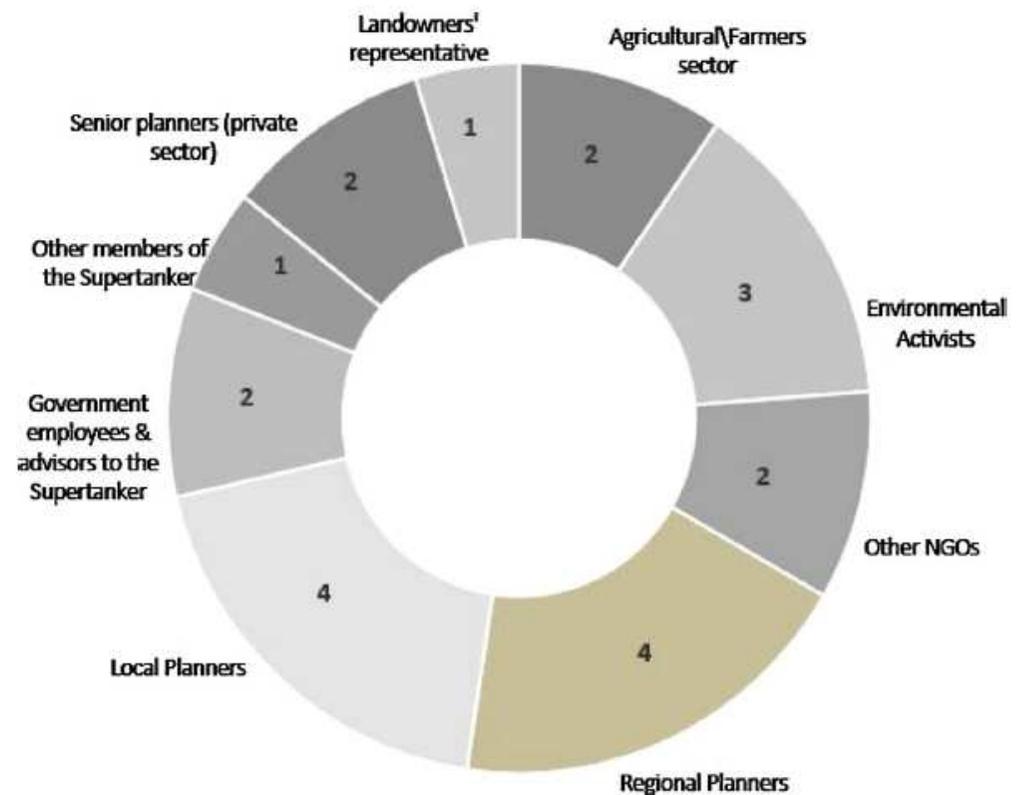
Against this backdrop: A new model for planning new neighborhoods: the Supertanker's 2014 Law



Aim: To study the new institutional reform to centralize planning powers, its motivations, and consequences.

Method:

- Analysis of a new Emergency legislation: its goals and the new powers vested in the Supertanker's hands.
- Comparison of the new planning committee with pre-existing agencies.
- Mapping of new statutory plans produced by the Supertanker.
- Interviews with dozens of stakeholders.
- **Question:** What are the goals, tools, and consequences of the new Supertanker reform, and has it lived up to expectations ?



Key informants

Why is the Supertanker interesting?

- An example of **extreme efforts** to centralize planning... contrary to devolution \ decentralization trend around the globe.
- Illustrates a **government takeover** of planning;
- The Israeli case should be interesting to wider audience because of its **context**: A lingering housing crisis, high population growth, disappointment from regional and local planning agencies, and an attack on the planning system as a whole.

A red and white supertanker aircraft is shown in flight, viewed from a low angle. The aircraft is releasing a large, dense plume of water that extends across the sky. The background shows a landscape with trees and a hillside under a clear sky.

Findings: Consequences of Supertanker reform

[.xinhuanet.com/english/photo/2016-11/27/c_135861006.htm](http://xinhuanet.com/english/photo/2016-11/27/c_135861006.htm)

2014 Emergency Law- “National Committee for Preferred Housing Plans” (NCPHP)- **Goals**

- Speeding up the provision\ supply of housing.
- Setting quotas for the provision of affordable housing in each plan.
- Cutting red-tape: shortening the time needed to plan new housing units, by:
 - (1) circumventing regional and national planning;
 - (2) creating fast-lanes for plan-approval (one-stop shop).

2014 Emergency Law- “National Committee for Preferred Housing Plans” (NCPHP)- An all powerful planning agency

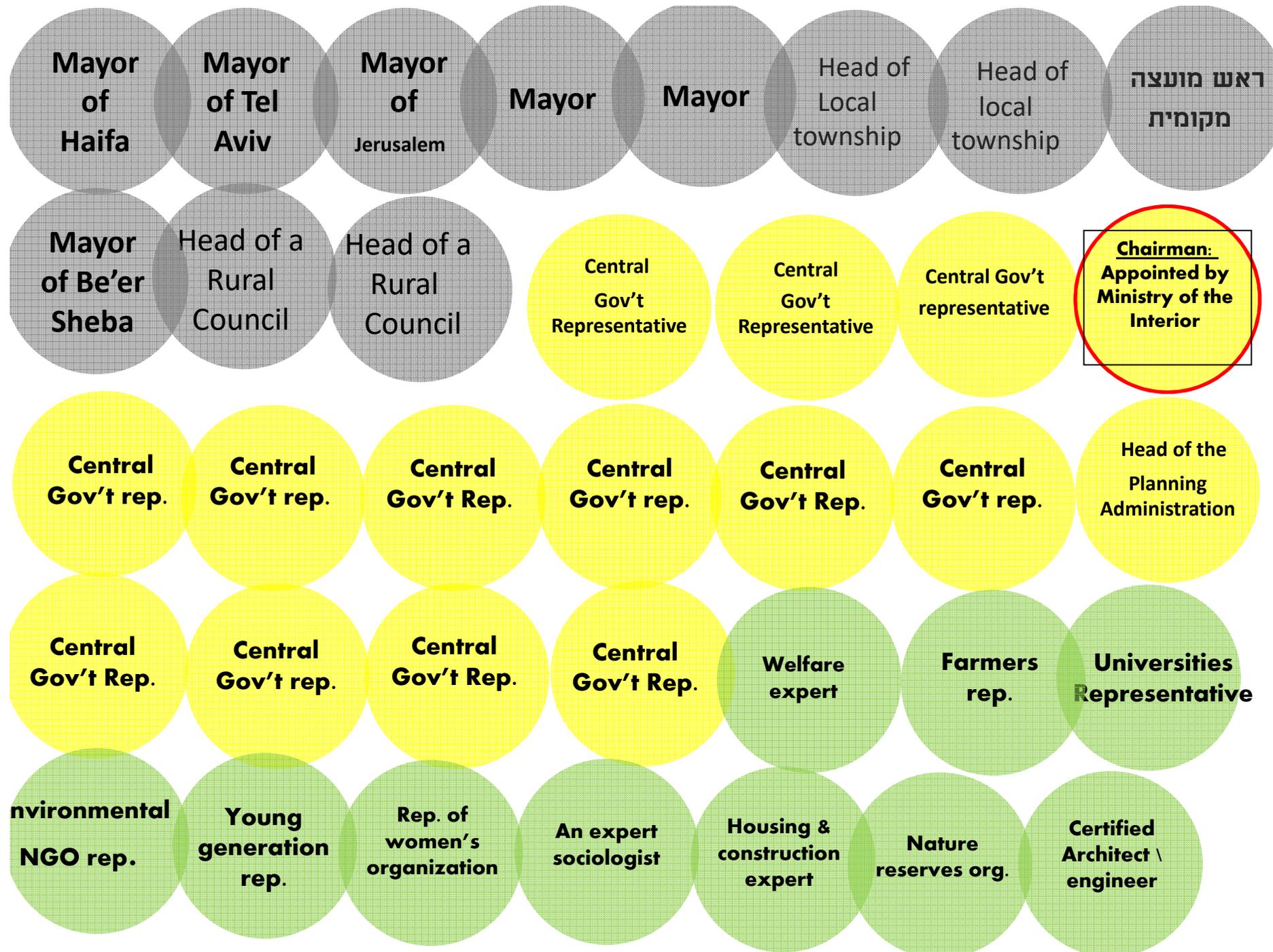
- Can trump local, regional, and national statutory plans.
- Supertanker decisions may overwrite \ circumvent those of mayors, local and regional planners.
- Can build on nature reserves, national parks, agricultural land.
- Can issue planning permits for thousands of units in a single stroke.
- Can force expropriation of agricultural land.
- Quota: Supposed to plan a minimum of 30% of housing units as 'affordable' housing.
- A minimum of 750 units have to be included in each plan.

Some Consequences: Government control over planning

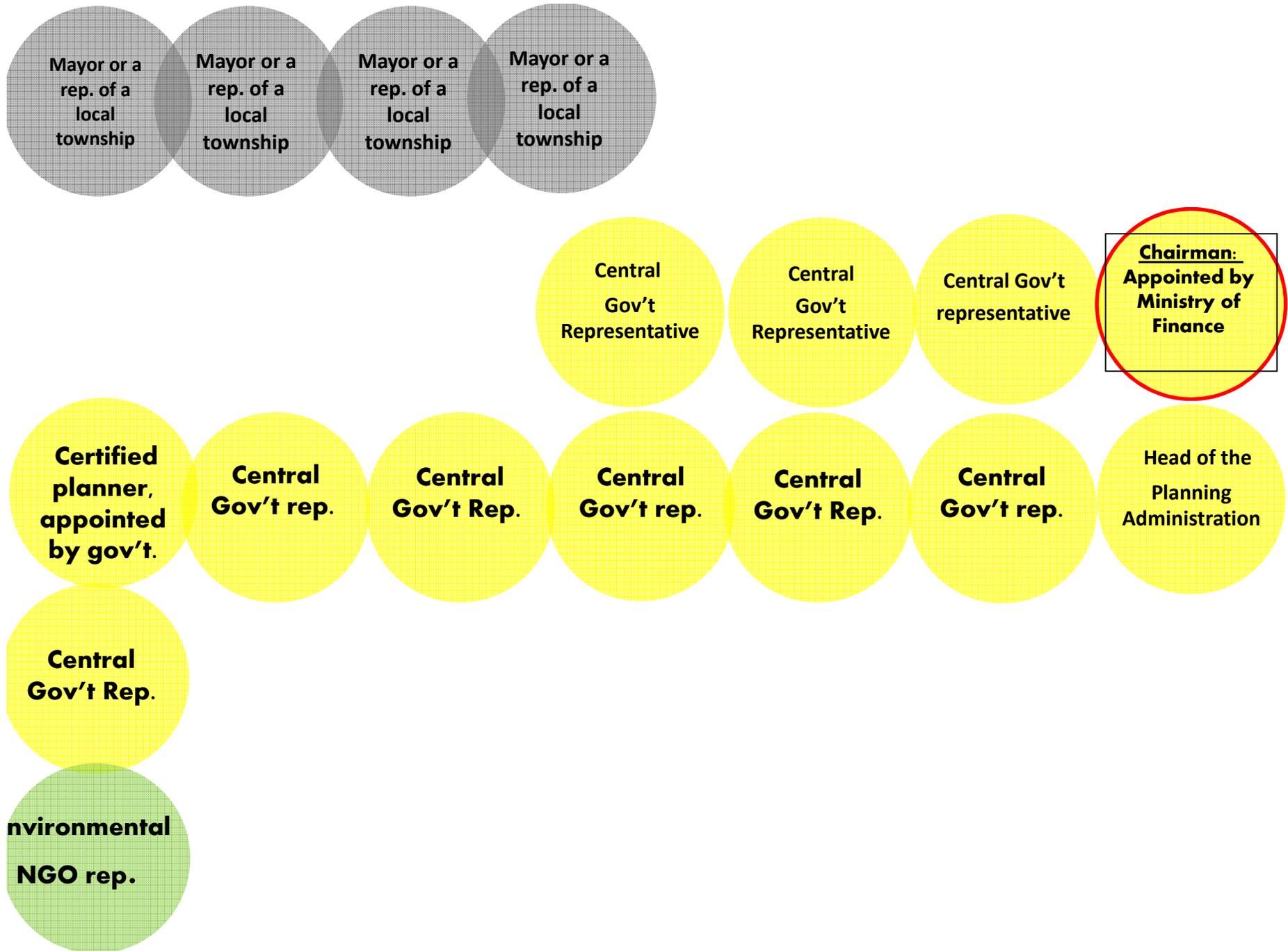
- Government grip on planning tightens.
- More power to central government ministries.
- Streamlining planning by eliminating inner oppositions.
- Less representation of civil society in the planning process.
- But still- ability for any aggrieved citizen to file an objection to a plan. Action groups have been forming around new proposals.



PM Netanyahu's construction projects
Source: Calcalist



Composition of the Israeli National Planning Committee



Composition of the Israeli Supertanker

Some Consequences: Annihilation of forests and agricultural land

- Data suggests that 60% of land area, included in Supertanker plans, is designated as agricultural land.
- Mostly, agricultural land in Northern Israel (Haifa Metro.) is under threat.
- Urban expansion instead of renewal and increasing densities.



City of Afula. Source: Zanzuri & Ben David 2017

Some Consequences: Suburban type of anti-urban development



∞ Towers in the Park' model of development. ∞ Highrise enveloped by roads and parking lots. ∞
Mono-use, mono-rational ∞ Le Corbusier's dream city ∞ "housing containers"? ∞ Quality of life?

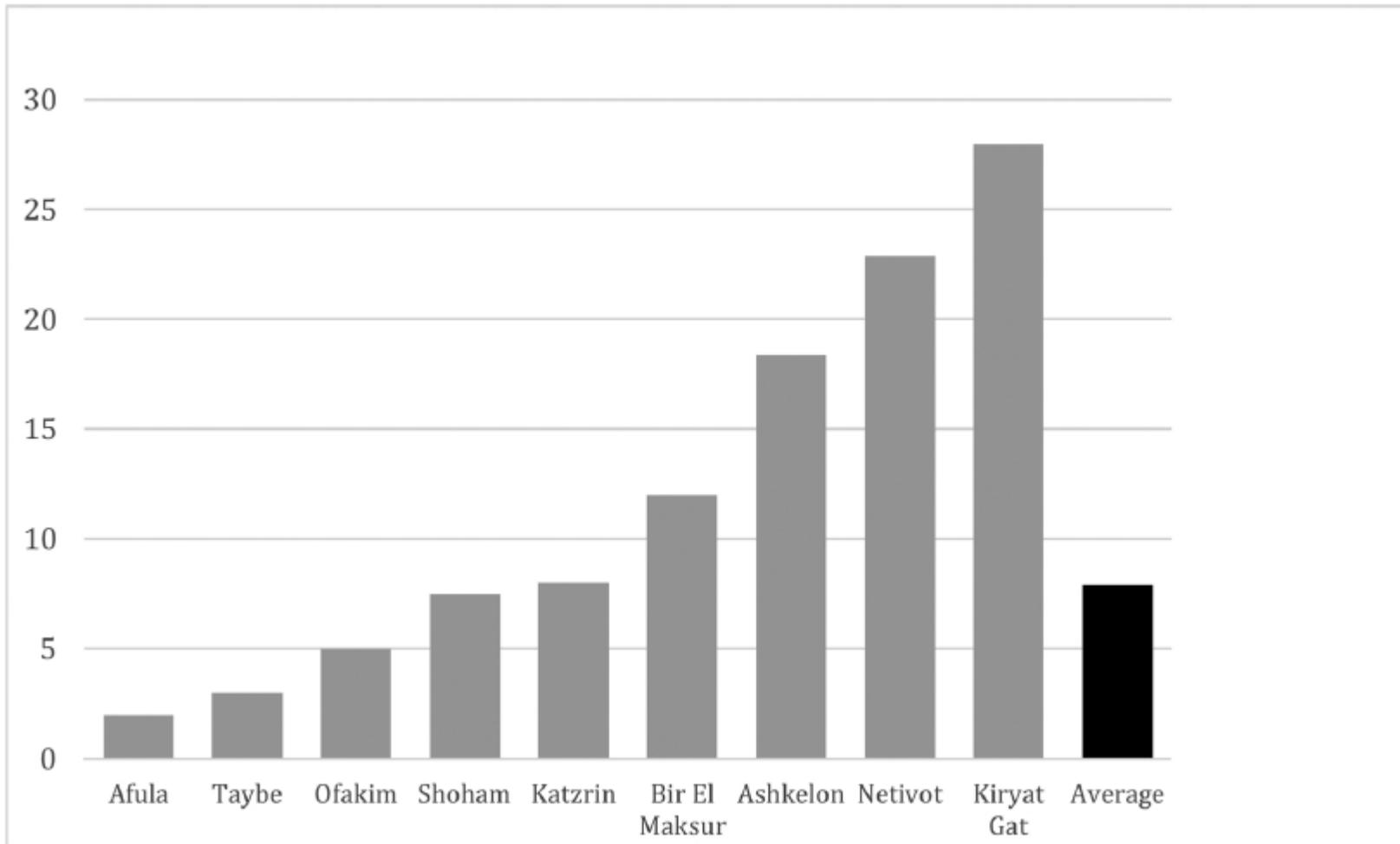
Some Consequences: Rapid expansion of existing towns



Expansion of the City of Orr Yehuda (2400 dwellings). Source: YNET

- ∞ Thoughtful or destructive interventions in the built fabric?
- ∞ Continuous development or detached suburban layout?

Some Consequences: Rapid expansion of existing towns



∞ Total area coverage of select Supertanker plans (%), compared with land-area of the respective township (source: author)

Some Consequences: Privatization and sale of government-owned land

- Most supertanker plans are on government land.
- Private developers can initiate but they must gain approval of most landowners → Land assembly issues.
- Wholesale transfer of wealth to developers, or an equitable redistributive act?
- Government land turns private. Commodity? or essential resource to help the middle \ lower classes?
- Government tries to correct 'government failure' by profiting from the sale of land?



Government Failure.
Source: Chad Crowe: wall street journal

Some Consequences: Removal of farmers from leased land

- The emergency law allows quick expropriation of land, including government land which is leased by farmers, who have been cultivating it for decades.
- Quicker eviction procedures, and quicker compensation for farmers who cooperate.

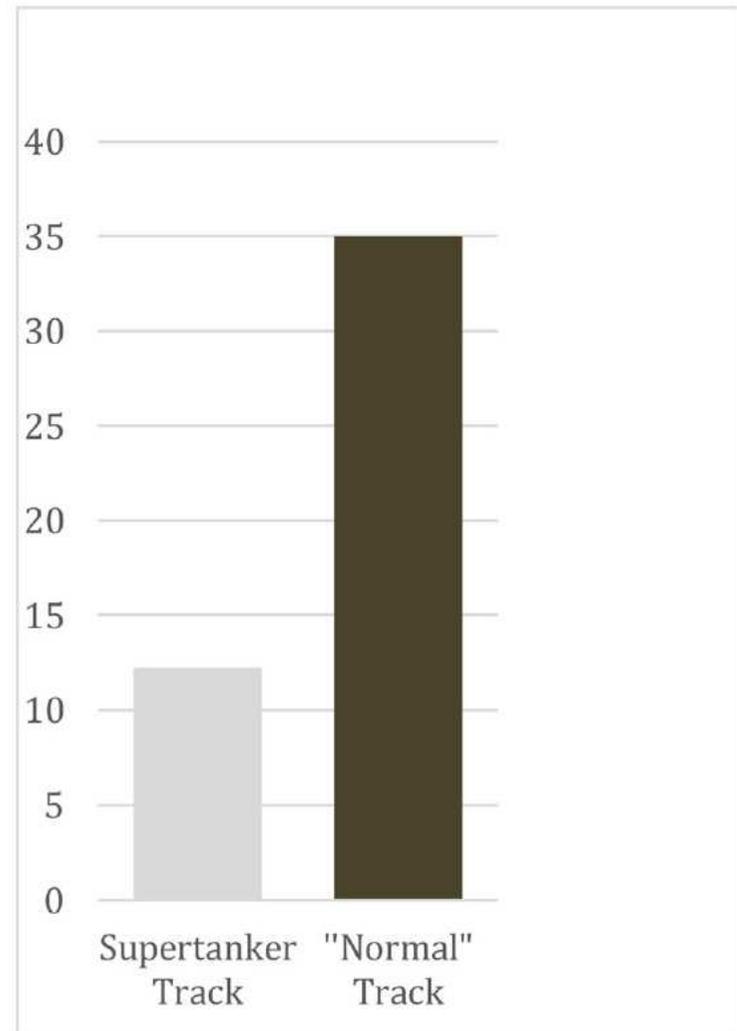


Farmers in the village of Zufit, protesting against Supertanker plans to build 7000 apartments in their quite village.

Source: <http://mynektfarsaba.co.il/article/318232/7>

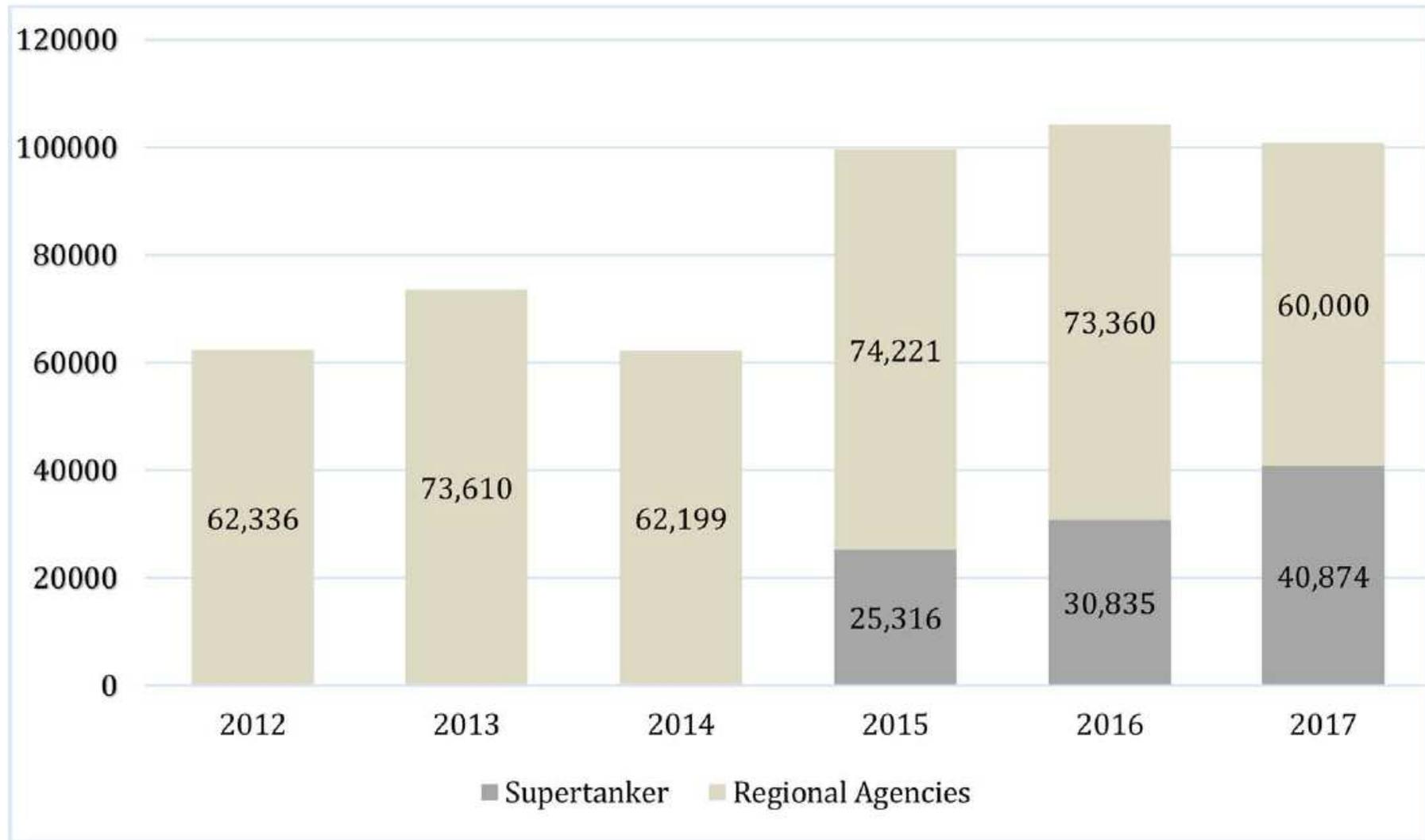
Some Consequences: Shortening the time for plan-approval

- No lengthy consultations.
- All of the consultants (water, sewage, roads, antiquities etc) are housed in a 'one stop shop'.
- Government representatives in the Supertanker Committee are expected to commit themselves to a less bureaucratic process.
- Most objections filed by citizens are heard and rejected.



Time needed for approval of statutory plans (months, average).

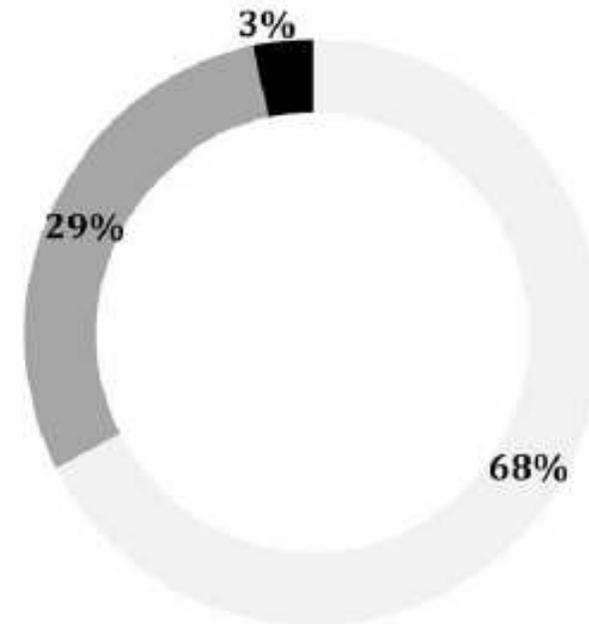
Other Consequences: Increasing production of housing units.



Housing production by the Supertanker track vs. by Regional Planning Agencies

Some Consequences: Affordable housing provision

- The target of 30% affordable housing units is met.
- Diversifying the housing stock.
- At least on paper.



- Free Market (for sale)
- Affordable/Small Apartments
- Housing for the Elderly \ Students \ Special needs

Type of housing unit produced by the Supertanker 2014-2018

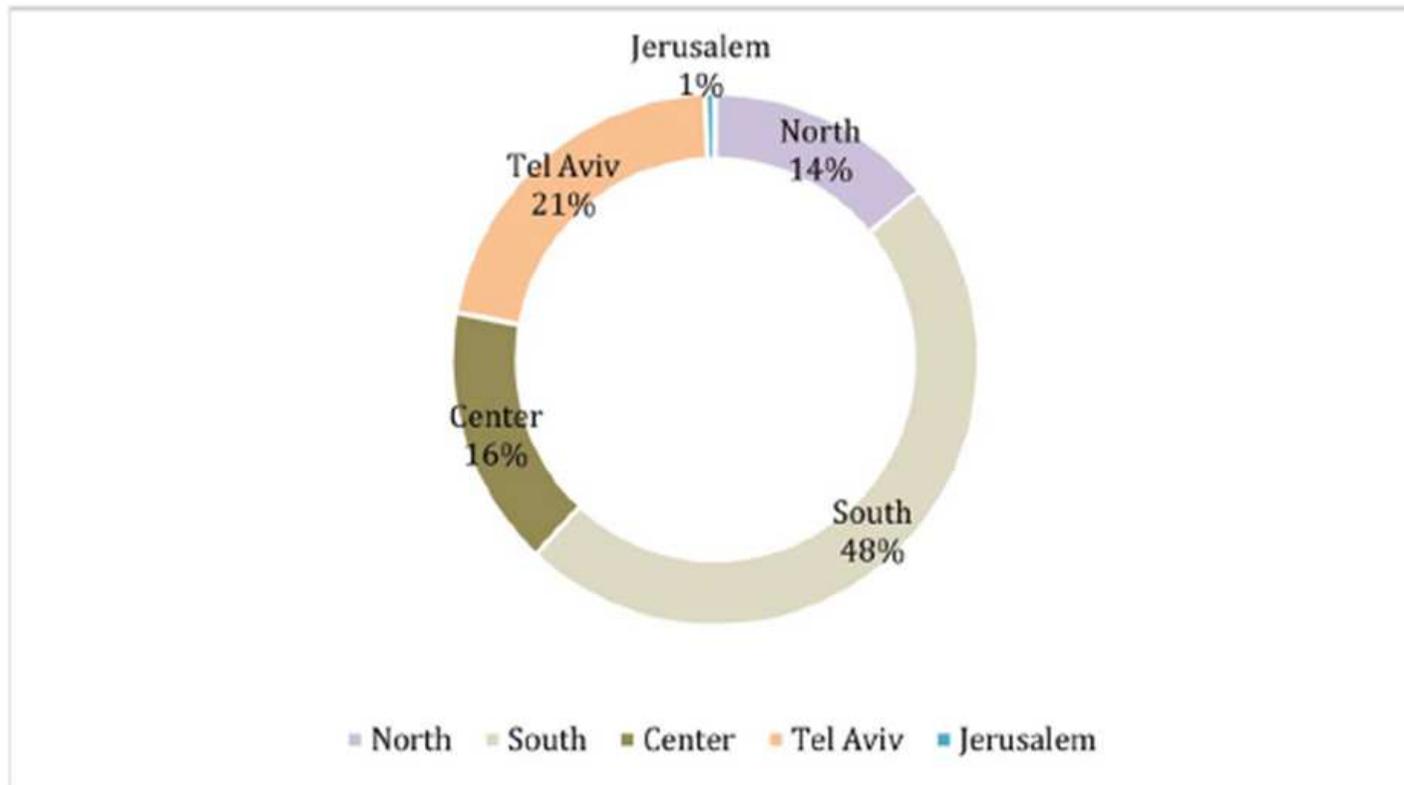
National deployment of approved 'Supertanker' plans (up to-12.2017)

Year of approval
 ● 2015
 ● 2016
 ● 2017

Number of dwelling units
 ○ 0-1,200
 ○ 1,201-2,999
 ○ 3,000-9,000
 ○ 9,001 and above



Where: Plan approval in the periphery of the state (where demand is lower).



A breakdown of approved housing units (2014-2017), arranged by districts

2014 Law- A summary of consequences

according to expert informants

Positive

- Creating a 'one-stop-shop' for planning by ministerial representatives.
- Replacing the older plan-making process with a more focused procedure controlled by central government.
- Streamlining planning processes thereby shortening the time needed to approve statutory plans.
- Increased production of new housing units including affordable housing.
- Selling, de-freezing, and marketing government land.
- Helping local planning agencies to 'get things done' despite the 'shackles' of regional planning.

Negative

- Creating a bypass over strategic goals and policies while overlooking long-term impacts. Circumventing local, regional, and national planning agencies. Leapfrogging over formerly approved municipal, regional and national plans and policies.
- Quality issues: Creating new neighborhoods without sufficient infrastructure or the ability to sustain new urban extension.
- Neglecting urban centers- not encouraging urban renewal.
- Building on agricultural land, forests, and in other environmentally sensitive areas.
- Approving plans in Israel's peripheral areas, where demand is lower.
- Approving housing 'on-paper' without issuing planning permits.

Discussion 1:

**Silo planning \
topic specific...**

Top down intervention underway.

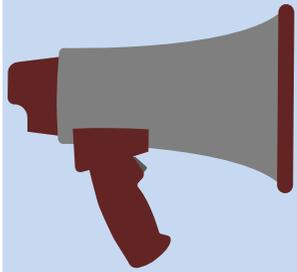
- Centralization overshadows devolution.
- Spatial planning is perceived as the problem, not the solution.
- In this new experiment, the entire planning system is being remodeled to include faster, although less democratic planning initiatives.
- Pros and cons, yet not a single neighborhood built yet.
- Goals achieved (?) but at what price?
- Increase in supply, yet no dramatic change in housing prices.
- A quick-fix panacea? Or future tragedy?

A solutionist approach

Getting things done. Pragmatism. Less strategic.

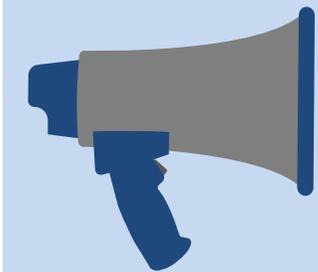
"the Supertanker does not take into account the day after planning...it considers primarily how many apartments are approved in its plans but I fear it does not look at the infrastructure which envelopes these apartments..." (interview 10/1/2017).





Slow is the essence of planning?

“We prefer planning agencies that work in tune with the rhythm of planning. We are a ‘slow’ profession, there is nothing to be done here, and this is how decisions should be made. But then comes public pressure and this is the abysmal result. If the Supertanker is gone, we will get another super-committee.... [Instead] planning begins and ends in thinking comprehensively about matters, and from there it is possible to plan in small doses. We should not try to fend off problems by sticking our finger in the floodgate, because the gate is much more complex than the finger” (interview 1.1.2017).



Shaking the planning system:

- The perceived negative consequences of the Supertanker reform, do not lead to the conclusion that centralization is illegitimate in times of crisis.
- Some local planners welcomed the Supertanker because it helped them break the shackles of regional planning.

Discussion 3

Supertanker model as a lab

Countries that are dealing with lingering housing crises, and jurisdictions that consider centralization of planning powers, may gain interesting insights while the Israeli experiment unfolds.

The evaluation of the Supertanker opens the hatch for researchers around the world to inform others of similar efforts and their consequences.

These studies, in turn, can contribute immensely to the understanding of centralization and its impact on the supply of public goods and services.

Do you know of similar planning agencies \ (re)centralization processes around the world?



Thank you !! ...

Haven't had enough? *See:*

Nir Mualam. (2018). *Playing with Supertankers: Centralization in land-use planning in Israel. Land Use Policy, 75: 269-283.*

