



Negev Coexistence Forum For Civil Equality

منتدى التعايش السلمي في النقب من أجل المساواة المدنية
פורום דו-קיום בנגב לשוויון אזרחי

*The Indigenous
Bedouins of the Naqab-Negev
Desert in Israel*

May 2006





A farmer holding healthy crops and a sample of crops that have been destroyed by spraying herbicide – life vs. death.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality

Arab and Jewish residents of the Negev (the southern part of Israel) established the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality in 1997. Its aim is to provide a framework for Jewish-Arab collaborative efforts, in the struggle for equal rights and the advancement of mutual tolerance and co-existence. Among the members of the Forum are leaders of the Negev Arab community and academics. The Forum is unique in being the only Arab-Jewish coexistence organization that was created in the Negev and has remained focused on the Negev population and policies.

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The Indigenous Bedouins of the Naqab-Negev Desert in Israel

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Indigenous Issues

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“We should transform the Bedouins into an urban proletariat... Indeed, this will be a radical move which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person... His children would be accustomed to a father who wears trousers, does not carry a Shabaria [the traditional Bedouin knife] and does not search for vermin in public. This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations. Without coercion but with governmental direction... this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear.”

(Moshe Dayan, Ha'aretz interview, 31 July 1963)

Abstract:

Traditionally a semi-nomadic people, the Naqab-Negev Bedouin have subsisted by farming and raising herds in the Negev desert for centuries. Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Negev desert became part of its territory, and the life of its indigenous people was dramatically transformed.

This paper will discuss the ramifications of Israeli policy vis-à-vis its indigenous Negev Bedouins population from 1948 until today. As with other indigenous minorities, the Bedouins are struggling for equality, recognition, and preservation of their culture and way of life. Dispossessed of the lands they had lived on for centuries, the Bedouins have lost their established means of livelihood and have consequently experienced a disruption of their traditional social and economic structures. Today, more than half of Israel's 155,000 Negev Bedouin citizens live in eight failing government-planned townships and another seven villages that are in a process of recognition in different stages. The remainder live in dozens of villages that are not officially recognized by the government, and receive little to no basic services, including water, electricity, garbage collection, health, education and social services. Israel's planning authorities have given little or no consideration to the Bedouins' culture, their needs or their way of life. This paper will take a critical look at the outcomes of this policy, focusing on land, health and education. Fifty-eight years after the founding of the State, the Bedouin "problem" remains unresolved and the State continues to violate the indigenous rights of the Negev Bedouin population under its control.

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Introduction:

The Arab Bedouins as an Indigenous People

In order to be designated as an ‘indigenous people’, a population has to meet certain criteria. A general definition of these criteria was presented by Erica-Irene Daes, the former Chairperson-Rapporteur of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and it designated a people as indigenous if:

- They are descendants of groups which were in the territory of the country prior to the arrival of other groups of different cultures or ethnic origins;
- They are isolated or separated from other segments of the country’s population and have preserved the customs and traditions of their ancestors; and
- They are, even if only formally, placed under a state structure which incorporates national, social and cultural characteristics alien to theirs. (www. iwgia.org)

The Arab Bedouins who live in the Naqab-Negev desert of Israel meet these criteria and can be considered an indigenous people. Traditionally a semi-nomadic people, they have subsisted by farming and raising herds in the Naqab-Negev desert for centuries. The origin of many tribes is the Arabian

There are tribes that can trace their ancestry in the Naqab-Negev as far back as the establishment of the Ottoman Empire.

Meir 1997

Peninsula, from which they migrated to the Naqab-Negev desert via the Sinai Peninsula. There are tribes that can trace their ancestry in the Naqab-

Negev as far back as the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. (Meir 1997). Through the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Naqab-Negev Bedouins underwent a gradual transition from a pastoral nomadic to a semi-nomadic pastoral agricultural community, with a greater emphasis on an agricultural mode of production and a shift to privatization of tribal lands (Meir 1997). Then, during the twentieth century, this population experienced a number of upheavals, culminating with the establishment of the State of Israel and their subsequent status within this nascent nation-state. While the forces of Ottoman and British colonialism and imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries certainly affected the lives of the Naqab-Negev Bedouins living under their control, the lives of these indigenous people were most disrupted and changed after the establishment of the Jewish State, with the Naqab-Negev desert as part of its territory, in 1948. Within this framework, the remaining 10%-20% of the original population of the Naqab Bedouins inside the boundaries of the new established state of Israel, were dispossessed of the lands they had lived on for centuries. Their ancestors' agricultural lands in the western part of the Naqab were Judeaized and transferred to the new Jewish settlements and villages (Noach 2004). Today thousands of Bedouin people continue to live in temporary dwellings in unrecognized settlements in the Negev, where they depend, at least in part, on their traditional livelihood. The others live in urban townships, part of a failed "modernization" policy.

The Bedouins have retained their language (a Bedouin dialect of Arabic), their religion (Islam), and their social, cultural, economic and political characteristics. They are ethnically distinct from the Jewish majority and socially distinct from the Palestinian Arab minority living in Israel. Like other indigenous peoples, the Naqab Bedouins live as citizens of a nation-state, but do

The Bedouins have retained their language (a Bedouin dialect of Arabic), their religion (Islam), and their social, cultural, economic and political characteristics.

not belong to the majority ethnicity, or “nation”. Due to this dichotomy, the Bedouins are waging two struggles: the first, to attain equality and full rights as citizens of a democratic state; the second, to preserve their culture and traditional way of life.

Background

Before 1948, it is estimated that between 65,000 and 90,000 Bedouins lived in the Negev area (Falah 1989). The main source of livelihood for this semi-nomadic population was cattle, herds of sheep, rain fed agriculture and trade (Yiftachel 2004; Meir 1997). During Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, 80-85% of the Naqab Bedouin population became refugees. Like other indigenous peoples, the Naqab-Negev Bedouins underwent forced relocation – the 11,000 that remained inside Israel’s borders were moved in the 1950s and 1960s from their ancestral lands into a restricted zone called the siyag (closure), located in the northeastern Negev and known for its low agricultural fertility (Hamdan 2005; Yiftachel 2004). This area constituted only 10 percent of the Bedouins land prior to 1948 (Abu Sa’ad 2004). Due to this forced relocation, the six tribes that already dwelled in this area were joined by twelve additional tribes from various areas of the Negev. Because no permanent building (stone or concrete) was permitted by the authorities in the siyag, most residents were forced to erect shacks and tents.

The Negev Bedouins, like the rest of the Arabs remaining within Israel’s borders, lived under military rule until 1966. During this time, Bedouins life was dramatically transformed: “From controllers of the desert region, they became fringe

The Negev Bedouins, like the rest of the Arabs remaining within Israel’s borders, lived under military rule until 1966.

dwellers of a growing, modernizing Beer-Sheva city region” (Yiftachel 2004, p. 12). With less space for agriculture and grazing, their source of livelihood was disrupted. In addition, because of restrictions imposed by the military government, they were not permitted to compete with the Jewish labor market of the new Israeli State. During these 18 years, the processes of dislocation, subsequent sedentarization and partial modernization worked to destroy the indigenous Bedouins culture and way of life. In fact, this was the Israeli policy:

“We should transform the Bedouins into an urban proletariat... Indeed, this will be a radical move which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person... His children would be accustomed to a father who wears trousers, does not carry a Shabaria [the traditional Bedouin knife] and does not search for vermin in public. This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations. Without coercion but with governmental direction... this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear”.

(Moshe Dayan, Ha'aretz interview, 31 July 1963).



The unrecognized village of Al-Sdeir, June 2004

Photo by NCF

Today, the Negev Bedouins number approximately 155,000 people. This population can be divided into two groups, based on their living arrangements. Roughly 50% of the Bedouins population – about 76,000 people – live in a large number of unrecognized villages. What is this policy of unrecognition? These villages do not appear on Israeli maps

These villages do not appear on Israeli maps or governmental planning documents and are denied basic services and infrastructure ...

or governmental planning documents, they have no road signs indicating their existence, and are denied basic services and infrastructure, including paved roads, water, garbage collection, electricity, and

schools. In addition, the people living there have no municipal authority so they cannot participate in local election. It is illegal to build permanent structures in these villages – those that do so risk being heavily fined and having their home demolished. A typical village consists of between 60 to 600 families – a population of between 500 and 5000 – living in tents and shacks (Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages Report 2003). Some of these villages existed before the establishment of the Israeli State, and others were created in accordance with Military Government's orders in the 1950s and 1960s. Many residents of these villages, who received permission from the State to live in certain areas during the 1950s, are now, more than 50 years later, receiving expulsion orders and seeing their homes demolished.

The other part of the Bedouin population in Israel is concentrated in eight Government-planned townships set up since the 1960s in the siyag area: Hura, Kseifa, Laquia, Arara, Rahat, Segev-Shalom and Tel-Sheva (see map on page 25) and the new township of Tarabin (south of Rahat). While these townships were intended to create the conditions necessary to provide basic services to this population and are heavily subsidized, they

were planned without giving any consideration to the traditional Bedouin way of life. Consequently, the forced urbanization of this population has been disastrous: unemployment is high, and the Bedouin townships rank among the country’s 10 poorest municipalities. In short, “the planned towns evolved quickly into pockets of deprivation, unemployment, dependency, crime and social tensions” (Yiftachel 2004). The Bedouins no longer had the space to raise crops and livestock to support themselves, which caused further economic distress. Additionally, the Bedouins townships lack the infrastructure enjoyed by similar Jewish settlements in the Negev as, with the exception of the largest city, Rahat, these towns lack sources of employment, public transportation, banks, post offices, public libraries and places of entertainment (Abu-Sa’ad 2004).

Table 1: Local Councils and Municipalities by Socio-Economic Ranking, 2001 (0 < 210)

Locality	Rank
Kseifa	2
Rahat	4
Tel-Sheva	1
Laqia	9
Dimona (Jewish)	97
Beer-Shava (Jewish)	124
Omer (Jewish)	209

Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics

In short, because these processes of sedentarization and modernization were not coupled with the provision of necessary services and infrastructure by the Israeli government, the Bedouins have suffered in a number of areas. The most problematic issue is that of dispossession; indeed, the dire situation of the Negev Bedouins today is rooted in the Israeli land and planning policies, which are discussed in the next section.

Land

Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, both the Ottoman and British administrations attempted to keep a registry of land ownership in the region. However, much of the land in the Negev was classified as mawat – dead or uncultivated land. The 1858 Ottoman land law enabled revival of mawat land leading to partial ownership by the farmer. In 1921, The British Mandatory administration gave land holders two months to register mawat lands. After this period, land would be classified as exclusively state land (Noach 2004). There were several problems with this system. First, the British registration system proceeded from north to south, and most Bedouins' property and settlements in the Negev were not registered or marked on the map. Secondly, due to a number of factors, many Bedouins did not register their lands: a tradition of not cooperating with foreign governments; a lack of information and knowledge about the registration system; fear of taxation and military conscription based on registration records; and indifference toward administrative processes (Yiftachel 2003). Like other indigenous peoples, the Bedouins continued to use their traditional means of demarcating boundaries and ownership, and did not use the Western system of land registration and ownership.

Following the 1948 war, the Israeli authorities did not recognize the Bedouins' traditional ownership rights – only a document by a foreign power was acceptable to prove land ownership. As a consequence, nearly all

Following the 1948 war, the Israeli authorities did not recognize the Bedouins' traditional ownership rights ...

the lands previously held by the Negev Bedouins were nationalized to the Israeli State. This was accomplished through a series of legal procedures. Thus the Bedouins lands became “empty” and open for Jewish settlement. Indeed, the current legal construction of the Bedouins as “trespassers” on

their own lands is a consequence of legislation and legal practices that presuppose that the lands were empty.

Through these discriminatory land and planning policies, Jewish settlements in the Negev have proliferated; while the Negev Bedouin townships remain the most disadvantaged and under served localities in the State. For example, Segev Shalom, one of the recognized townships, has no developed industrial area (Baruch 2004). All the recognized Bedouin settlements lack of areas that have been designated for residential use, limiting their prospects for future development and growth. Although the Bedouins make up approximately 27% of Negev citizens, there are only eight recognized Bedouin villages out of 225 Negev settlements (Hamdan 2005).

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The Bedouins have submitted over 3,600 legal claims for the disputed land but, to date, most of these claims have not been settled (Yiftachel 2004; Noach 2004). Since 2004, the ILA has been filing counter land claims against land claims made by Bedouins. Up until June 2006 “The State has filed 170 counter land claims (regarding more than 110,000 dunams), and in every case where a ruling has been handed down by the court, it has ordered the land to be registered as state land.” (ILA website: www.mmi.gov.il). Many Bedouins who moved to the recognized townships continue to hold claims to land. However, the Israeli government withholds services as a tool of coercion against those Bedouin who refuse to relinquish their presence on their lands. Because of this, most of the Bedouins who moved to the recognized towns were landless farmers who had lived under the protection of other tribes for generations. This disruption to the social hierarchy deepened the tensions within the Bedouins community.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – of which Israel is a party – states that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind...” (Article 2). However, because the Israeli State chooses to use the provision of basic services as a bargaining chip in the ongoing land dispute with the Bedouins, basic human rights such as the right to health, housing, education and other rights have been and continue to be compromised while the deadlock persists.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind...”



Gathering

Photo by A. Seri

خارطة القرى العربية البدوية غير المعترف بها في النقب

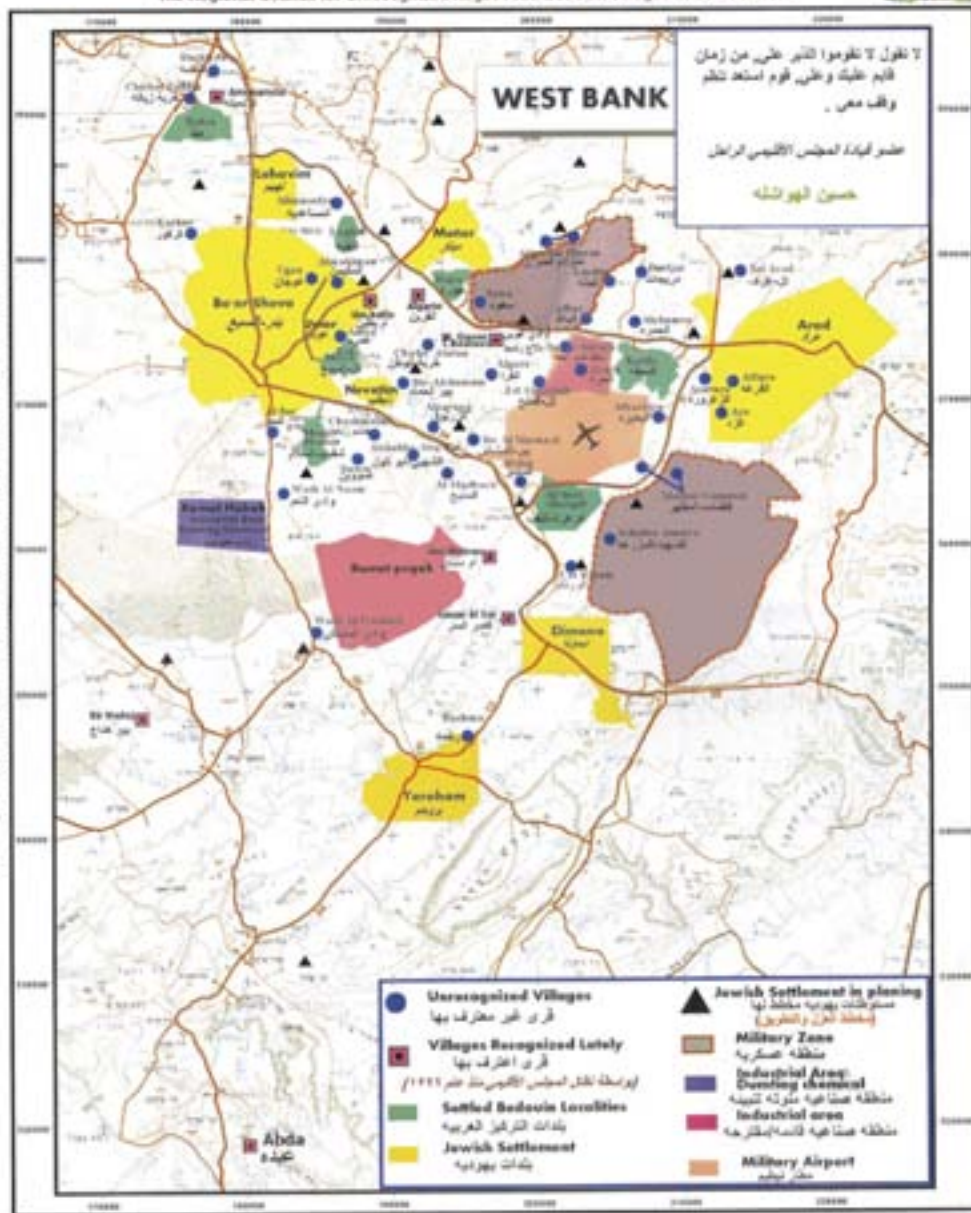
Map of Unrecognized Negev Arab Bedouin Villages-in Israel.

المجلس الإقليمي للقرى العربية البدوية غير المعترف بها في النقب ٢٠٠١/١٢/١٥

The Regional Council for Unrecognized Negev Arab Bedouin Villages-in Israel 15.12.01



The Regional Council for Unrecognized Negev Arab Bedouin Villages-in Israel 15.12.01



1:250000

Prepared by:
 Dr. Amer Al Hozayel _ strategic planner
 Mr. Abu Sammur Sa'ad _ Geograph

٢٠٠١ :
 د. عامر الحوزيل _ مخطط استراتيجي
 سعيد ابو سمور _ جغرافيا



**Wadi-El-Naam (unrecognized village),
visit after house demolition, July 2003**
Photo by NCF



A Bedouin man stands by his demolished house
Photo by A. Seri



**Jewish and Arab-Bedouin volunteers
building a bridge in Qatamat**



**A new house rebuilt after demolition,
Qatamat 2003**



**Jewish and Arab-Bedouin volunteer building a bridge
together, Um Al-Haran, April 2005** Photo by NCF



Wadi-El-Naam (unrecognized village), visit after house demolition, July 2003 Photo by NCF



**On the ruins of their house
Wadi-El-Naam (unrecognized village)
July 2003**
Photo by NCF

Water Convoy to Sawawin (Unrecognized village) 2003
Photo by NCF



Joint rebuilding of a kindergarten, September 2005
Photo by NCF

Health and the Environment

The transition of this traditional, semi-nomadic people into sedentarization and the modern, industrial age has negatively impacted the environment in the Negev and consequently, the health of the Negev Bedouin population. In the case of the Negev Bedouins living in the unrecognized villages in particular, this crisis has resulted in an increased rate of illnesses and resulting fatalities.

There are several basic health and sanitation problems in the unrecognized localities. There is no waste management infrastructure and as a result, waste accumulates outside of the residents' dwellings. These garbage piles are home to disease-carrying pests,



Dirt clogging the sewage passage at the entrance to Um-Batin

such as mosquitoes, flies, wasps, dogs, snakes, rodents, and cockroaches. Many residents choose to burn their solid waste and because they burn organic and inorganic wastes together, a range of potent toxic chemicals are released into the air. This causes an elevated prevalence of respiratory diseases in these villages (Almi 2003). These villages also lack a sewage system, and consequently residents have resorted to using cesspits a short distance from their homes.

Another factor in the health crisis affecting the Bedouins living in unrecognized villages is that they are not connected to the water supply. Many residents of these localities suffer from dehydration or stomach infections from using unclean water. Some Bedouins collect their water

in storage containers, which they have to refill from water-outlets some distance from their residence'. Others absorb the cost for independent connections (Almi 2003). Conditioning water on residence is a clear violation of the human right to health, and in the Negev desert it can prove fatal. Indeed, records from Soroka Medical Center show that each August, the hottest month of the year, about 16,000 Bedouin children are hospitalized compared to 5000 Jewish children, even though the Bedouins are the minority of the Negev population (Almi 2003).



Giving a hand to pull a drinking water pipe line to an unrecognized village.

Table 2: Water Consumption, 2003-2004

Locality	Annual Consumption [Cubic Meter per Person]
Israel, Total	82.0
Rahat	49.6
Kseifa	46.2
Hura	63.2
Unrecognized Villages	24
Lehavim (Jewish)	123
Omer (Jewish)	151

Source: Negev Center for Regional Development, PHR

The Bedouins living in these unrecognized villages are also denied connection to the national electricity grid. Residents often purchase generators at their own expense, which are operated in the evenings. Many homes do not have refrigerators or most types of electrical devices (Almi 2003). This is particularly problematic for Bedouin women, many of whom are confined to the home with an average of 8 children (Almi 2003), and must perform household chores without the help of modern electrical devices.

There are also environmental and health problems caused by industry. Several of the Bedouin villages are located in close proximity to Ramat Hovav, Israel's major chemical industry center, and the toxic waste from this facility has caused major health problems for this population, including cancer and birth defects.

In addition to these health problems, in 2002 the Israeli authorities began aerially spraying pesticides on Bedouins

In 2002 the Israeli authorities began aerially spraying pesticides on Bedouins crops located on what they claimed to be illegally cultivated land.

crops located on what they claimed to be illegally cultivated land. Not only does this further destroy the Bedouins' livelihood, there are documented cases of planes spraying pesticides near homes and schools. In many of these cases residents were given no prior warning (Almi 2003). Fortunately, the practice of aerial spraying was discontinued due to a temporary injunction of the Israeli High Court of Justice.



Waiting for the tanker to fill with water.
Photo by A. Seri

The results of the combination of factors listed above have been disastrous for the Bedouins population. They have the highest rate of infant mortality in Israel, a high incidence of respiratory diseases and a large percentage of Bedouin children are hospitalized each year (Almi 2003). Unfortunately, there are not enough medical clinics to serve this population (less than 10 clinics serving 76,000 people), the unrecognized villages have no pharmacies, no medical specialists, and ambulances do not enter them (Almi 2003). A lack of public transportation, as well as economic and cultural factors, further impede the ability of residents to receive adequate medical care. It is important to note that this health disaster is occurring in a modern, fully developed country. Only the indigenous Bedouins population that continues to maintain a presence on their lands is under served by the Israeli infrastructure.



Water Convoy to Sawawin (Unrecognized village) 2003

Photo by NCF

Education

Education is one of the tools that could help the Bedouins integrate successfully into Israeli society and offer opportunities for advancement. Unfortunately, the State has chosen not to invest adequate resources in the Bedouins' education system. Because of geographic, linguistic and religious differences, most Arabs in Israel, including the Bedouins, attend school separated from Jewish citizens. While these separations are legitimate under international law, the disparate amount of resources the Bedouins schools receive is a clear violation of their rights (Human Rights Watch 2001). This discrimination has had an effect: the Negev Bedouins have the highest dropout rate in the country (37%) and the lowest scores on their matriculation examinations (Ministry of Education and Culture 2004).

Education is one of the tools that could help the Bedouins integrate successfully into Israeli society ... Unfortunately, the State has chosen NOT to invest adequate resources in the Bedouins' education system.

The first schools for Bedouins were established under the British in the mandate period, but very few Bedouins had access to these schools, and their nomadic way of life did not necessitate formal education (Abu-Saad

1995). In 1949, one year after the declaration of the establishment of the state of Israel, the new Israeli government passed the Compulsory Education Law. This law required free elementary schooling and compulsory education for children between six and thirteen. However, there were very few schools in the Negev at this time and this law was not enforced in terms of the Naqab-Negev Bedouins communities. Some Bedouins sent their children to secondary schools in the north (before 1969 there were no secondary schools in the Naqab), but the costs involved in doing so along

with the lack of freedom of movement for Bedouins prevented most of the population from attending (Abu-Rabi'a 2001). Traditional female roles also kept most girls from attending school.

The Bedouin who were resettled in the recognized townships from the late 1960s onwards, would then attend the schools in their localities. However, these schools suffer from classroom shortages, poor maintenance and a general lack of facilities (Human Rights Watch 2001). In addition, the State has chosen to use education as a means of pressuring Bedouins living in the unrecognized villages to move into the urban townships. The children living in these areas are served by sixteen "temporary" elementary schools, located in tin, wooden or cement buildings (that are generally not connected to water or electricity). There is not one high school serving these localities. Because of the lack of infrastructure, children have to travel great distances – on unpaved roads – to reach the schools. This is one of the reasons many Bedouin children do not attend school regularly.

Negev Bedouins are required to learn the curriculum created by the Bedouin Education Authority, which was established by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1981. The head of this authority is a Jewish person ...

Lastly, Negev Bedouins are required to learn the curriculum created by the Bedouin Education Authority, which was established by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1981. The head of this authority is a Jewish person, and Negev Bedouins

are under represented in the administrative decision-making positions in the educational system generally. The lack of quality education continues the cycle of low employment and makes many Bedouins dependent on the State.

This situation mirrors that of other indigenous groups, who, after being dispossessed of their land and livelihood, effectively became the wards of the State. Fortunately, as segments of the Bedouins community have become more educated, they have started to fight discrimination and have formed associations dedicated to developing this sector. However, this pervasive and systematic discrimination continues to harm the Bedouins population and limit their opportunities to develop.

Violation of Indigenous Rights

In 1994, the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities adopted a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Israeli State has violated a numbers of the rights of the indigenous Negev Bedouins as accorded to them by this document. There are several articles worth mentioning as they pertain to the case of the Negev Bedouins.

First, Article 10 states that “Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return.” In addition, Article 26 includes the right to “full recognition of their laws, traditions and customs, and land-tenure systems”. However, not only were Naqab-Negev Bedouins expelled from their native lands, they have no recourse for this dispossession, which is their right according to Article 27.

Another pertinent issue is raised in Article 19: the right of indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making in matters which affect them through their chosen representatives. In clear violation of this right, the Israeli government established a “Bedouin Development Authority” (made up of Jewish Israelis), which maintains control of almost all aspects of the lives of the residents of the unrecognized villages. While the unrecognized villages set up a regional council in 1997, the State authorities do not negotiate or require the consent of these representatives before implementing their decisions.

There are several articles pertaining to the health of indigenous peoples. Article 22 notes that indigenous peoples “have the right to special measures for the immediate, effective and continuing improvement of their

Indigenous peoples “have the right to special measures for the immediate, effective and continuing improvement of their economic and social conditions ...”

economic and social conditions, including in the areas of housing, sanitation and health”. In addition, Article 24 states that they have “the right

of access, without any discrimination, to all medical institutions, health services and medical care.” However, the 2003 Physicians for Human Rights Report cited in the health section of this report documents that the Negev Bedouins are denied basic health provisions (water, waste disposal, electricity) as well as services (clinics and ambulances).

As for education, Article 15 notes that indigenous children have the right to state education, as well as the right to establish and control their educational systems. While Bedouin children do receive instruction in their native language (Arabic), the curriculum, much of which is dedicated to learning about Jewish values and culture, is dictated by the government with little time allotted to educate the Bedouins about their own culture. Many of the articles in this draft pertain to indigenous groups that want political or cultural autonomy. In many cases, nation-states feel threatened by such groups. However, the Naqab-Negev Bedouins do not challenge the sovereignty of the State. They are simply seeking recognition of their land claims and villages, as well as equal access to State infrastructure and resources. In short, they are seeking equal citizenship in the State of Israel – a more than reasonable demand.



Demolished house in the unrecognized village of Bir Hadaj, February 2003
Photo by NCF

Prospects for the Future

Fifty-eight years after the founding of the State, the Bedouin “problem” remains unresolved. Specifically, the tension between the commitment of the Zionist ideology to an ethnically specific use of land and other resources, on the one hand, and the ethical imperatives of a partially democratic system based on equality, on the other, have forced the planning authorities and subsequent government administrations (both

The Negev Coexistence Forum has documented hundreds of home demolitions and thousands of dunams of crops destroyed.

left-wing and right-wing) to avoid addressing the needs of the Bedouins. Thus, the State does not provide full services to the planned villages and allows almost half of the

Bedouins population to live in “unrecognized” villages, while officially rejecting them as “squatters” and “trespassers” (<http://www.adalah.org/eng/intl06/un-i6-naqab.pdf>). This population is subject to frequent house demolitions, fines for illegal building, destruction of agricultural fields, and systematic harassment. In the past two years alone, the Negev Coexistence Forum has documented hundreds of home demolitions and thousands of dunams of crops destroyed. The government continues to put pressure on this population to move to the urban settlements, mainly through punitive measures. In January 2005, the Knesset authorized an amendment to the Public Land Law (Expulsion of Invaders) that increases the fine and sets a prison sentence for the invasion of public property, and allows the Israel Land Administration to demolish homes without having to go through judicial review. Once the order is issued, the burden of proof shifts from the ILA to the individual citizen who is in possession of the land, who in many cases does not have any formal documentation and has no knowledge of the legal or bureaucratic procedures governing the issue.

In early 2003 the government announced the Sharon Plan for the Negev Bedouin. As part of this plan a five-year NIS 1.175 billion budget (about \$265 million) was allocated to deal with the Bedouin sector in the Negev. While this is certainly an ambitious plan, it falls short of solving the problems facing the Bedouin population. There are not enough funds to both develop the infrastructure and the health, educational and industrial sectors in the seven state-recognized villages and to fund the planning of seven recently recognized Bedouins towns (only 63% of the budget of this plan is designated to fund these two goals (Hamdan 2005)). The remaining funds of the plans are designated to accelerating the process of land registration and enforcement of state planning and building laws. In practice, the government has continued and even increased issuing orders for evacuation and home demolitions in “illegal” unrecognized Bedouins villages on State land. There was also a recent government decision to establish and recognize eight additional Bedouins townships, although this solution still runs along the traditional Israeli lines of concentrating the Bedouins in urban settlements.

However, it is clear that despite the Israeli government’s goals and pursuant policies, the Negev Bedouins are not going to disappear, nor are they going to drop their claims to their land. However, the Negev Bedouin people have been irreversibly altered. We cannot simply go back in history and look at the Bedouins frozen in time, divorced from the modernization process and transformations they have undergone. Solutions must address the current needs of the population – not only by giving them full access to services and infrastructure and ending the discrimination against them in land and planning policies, but also providing a way for them to preserve their indigenous culture. Such a solution would need to address the multiple

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needs of the Bedouins in different situations. Those tribes indigenous to the siyag region want their localities to be recognized so that they can maintain their rural lifestyle and still have access to basic services and infrastructure. Tribes forcibly removed from their lands – many of which now contain Jewish settlements – would like compensation and relocation to rural settlements that allow them to continue their traditional way of life. Those living in the recognized townships would like to receive the same resources and budget allocations as their Jewish neighbors.

While the indigenous Negev Bedouins have suffered in a number of areas since the establishment of the State, there is hope. Within the Israeli system, it is possible to create and interpret laws that would address the needs of the Bedouin population – the Israeli government and legal system have the tools to meet the needs of the Bedouins in compliance with the relevant international norms. The Bedouins, along with concerned populations and groups in Israel like the Negev Coexistence Forum, will continue to work to pressure the State to find an appropriate solution. We can only hope that international forums of the U.N. will publicize the plight of the Negev Bedouins and increase international pressure as well.

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