

## **A Brief History of the Negev Bedouin**

The changes of the twentieth century have brought about the destruction of many indigenous communities, as is happening today to the Bedouin community in the Israeli Negev. Today in the southern Negev desert of Israel there exist 45 Bedouin villages with a combined population of more than 70,000 people, all citizens of the state of Israel. They live in communities that appear on no official maps, and receive no basic and essential services from the Israeli government, such as electricity, water, sewage, paved roads, and inadequate medical services. These 45 villages are referred to as unrecognized.

The Bedouin people are the indigenous inhabitants of the Negev desert, arriving in waves from the Arabian Peninsula over the last hundreds and thousands of years. Since that time, the Bedouin population has been residing in the region in semi-nomadic communities, depending primarily on their livestock as a means of survival, and developing a culture distinct from other Palestinian communities in the North.

One can divide modern Bedouin history into four distinct periods, and with each period came erosion of this autonomy and land rights, ultimately culminating in the situation we have today. They are, respectively, the Ottoman period, the British mandatory period, Israeli rule from 1948-1966, and Israeli rule from 1966 to the present. During the later part of the Ottoman period, many of the Bedouin began cultivating land, and consequently a private land ownership system was established and regulated by the Bedouin courts. When the Ottoman Land Law (1858) came into effect and required all subjects to register their land and pay the necessary taxes on it, many Bedouin ignored the law. The reasoning was that land ownership was already recognized by the Bedouin community, so there was no need to claim it on paper. However, this decision came back to wreak havoc on Bedouin rights to land, almost a hundred years later. With few Bedouin still possessing an original Tabu, or Ottoman land deed, the Israeli authorities could argue that no land claim ever in fact existed.

With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I the Bedouin welcomed a brighter future, having fought on behalf of the British and believing British promises of Arab autonomy. The colonial secretary issued a statement recognizing Bedouin land claims in the Negev according to Custom Law, and in fact this statement is used as precedent when advocating for Bedouin land rights.

During the 1948 war, as the State of Israel was created, most of the Bedouin either fled or were driven out of the Negev to neighboring countries. Of about 70,000 Bedouin before the war only 11,000 remained, typically those tribes who were loyal to the new state. Despite these promises of citizenship during the 1950s, the Bedouin who remained were concentrated into an enclosed triangular region known as the Siyag, or enclosure in Hebrew, with today's towns of Arad, Yeruham and Rahat forming the points of this triangle. This created two types of villages: those who were in the Siyag area before 1948, living on their traditional lands, and newcomers, in villages now created by the state, living as 'guests' on the local Bedouin lands. During this period more than 85% of Negev land was declared state land, effectively confiscating the land from the Bedouin.

In 1965 Israel passed the Planning and Building Law, which regulates the process of applying for building permits. This law ignored the existence of the Bedouin community, not recognizing their villages as formal entities, thus making it impossible to receive building permits in the villages they were residing. This is the state of affairs until this day: still there exists no method of attaining a building permit for a Bedouin village, and so all houses in the villages are ruled illegal and are under constant threat of demolition.

### **Urbanization**

Military rule ended in 1966, and a new policy towards the Bedouin was adapted: coerced urbanization. This plan came into action with newly-created towns with dense urban planning. The townships, in addition to focusing a large number of Bedouin on a small amount of land, also contributed to a breakdown of traditional Bedouin social structure by combining many different tribes and clans in one city. Further, there is no room inside the city for livestock, considered essential to Bedouin livelihood and identity. The largest of the townships, Rahat, was founded in 1972 and declared a city in 1994, and is the only Bedouin city in Israel. Of the 180,000 Bedouin currently living in the Negev, about half live in these “concentration” towns.

The concentration of Bedouin in townships was presented in a carrot-and-stick arrangement: on one hand, the townships offered cheap land for housing and services such as electricity, water, and roads. Further, it presented an opportunity for the Bedouins who were still uninvited guests on others’ lands in the Siyag to move to unclaimed lands. On the other hand, the unrecognized villages had no services and were subject to the threat of demolition of property. Many Israeli officials therefore declared, and continue to declare to this day, that living in the unrecognized villages is a choice, and that ample opportunities have been provided for the residents to improve their situation.

### **The day-to-day meaning of non-recognition.**

An unrecognized village is a village that does not officially exist, as such does not have a local building plan, which is a prerequisite for any infrastructure. No infrastructure means there are no water pipes to the homes, electricity is not supplied from the national grid, there are no phone lines, and it is illegal to build any roads. Further, as these villages do not officially exist, there is no imperative to provide medical clinics in the villages. The worst, however, is that there is no way in which to acquire a building permit, thus all homes are rendered illegal and are under the threat of demolition.

The homes are typically built of corrugated iron; In addition the government is more likely to demolish a more enduring structure, so for fear of demolitions, the population lives in tin homes. Further, since many homes are demolished, the cheapest building material allows families to re-build in the case of home demolitions. In 2007 alone the Government of Israel demolished 228 homes in the unrecognized villages. These tin homes become extremely hot in the summer and very cold in the winter, harming the health of the families.

*Adapted from original article by Dr. Yeela Raanan*

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I was born and brought up in the Israeli Negev, an Israeli Jew. I received my Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Utah (USA). I have been involved in the Arab-Bedouin struggle for civil, human and indigenous rights since the completion of my studies and my return to Israel ten years ago. As a resident of the Negev, for me, as long as my Bedouin-Arab neighbors suffer from violations of their rights, I cannot feel free to enjoy those privileges provided for me as one of the dominant group – the Jews in Israel. For more information: Dr. Yeela Raanan. [yallylivnat@gmail.com](mailto:yallylivnat@gmail.com)