

# The Bedouin of the Negev: a forgotten minority

by Kathrin Koeller

**The barrage of news on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict obscures attention from the Arab population living as internally displaced Israeli citizens on Israeli territory. Particularly forgotten are the approximately 186,600 Bedouin of the Negev in southern Israel who constitute 12% of the country's Arab population.**

Before the establishment of the state of Israel, the Bedouin of the Negev – who are culturally distinct from the Bedouin of the Galilee – were the vast majority of the population of the region and lived as nomadic pastoralists in the desert. During, or in the immediate aftermath of, the 1948 conflict, most Negev Bedouin either had to flee or were expelled and displaced. The Negev became an integral focus for Jewish settlement. The Bedouin lost access to almost all their rangeland and were given little choice but to settle and give up large parts of their traditional way of life.

The remaining tribes were rounded up and driven into an 'Enclosed Zone', an area in the north-east of the Negev which covered only 10%

of their former territory and which remained under military law until 1966. All movement in and out of the zone depended on written permission from the Israeli military. Israel appointed 19 sheikhs and officially recognised their tribes. In order to acquire Israeli citizenship, each Bedouin had to affiliate with a recognised tribe regardless of their original genealogy. They have subsequently been forced to sedentarise and relocate to seven officially-sanctioned state-planned townships. The Bedouin are offered subsidised plots of land, access to water, electricity, roads, medical facilities and schools – under the condition that they agree to locate to the approved townships and abandon claims to land elsewhere in the Negev.

Despite these intense pressures only half of the Bedouin population have agreed to move into the towns. The rest remain in 'illegal' settlements in the Enclosed Zone, which are not recognised by the state even if they already existed prior to 1948 and/or are inside an area formerly designated for Bedouin use. Residents of these villages face the permanent threat of house demolition and prosecution for 'illegal' use of state land. Access to public services such as water, electricity, roads, infrastructure, education and health care is highly restricted. As they reside in areas not under municipal jurisdiction they are unable to apply for construction permits. Even though in 1998 the development plan for Beer Sheba (now Israel's sixth largest conurbation) defined the city and its hinterland as a 'binational metropolis', there are no plans for future development for those Bedouin villages. Their areas are either left blank on maps or 'over-zoned' with other settlements planned on top of the existing villages.



Sedentarisation and the surveillance of illegal settlements are further promoted by an environmental paramilitary unit established by Ariel Sharon in 1976. The 'Green Patrol' has a mandate to pull down 'illegal' Bedouin tents, tightly control herd sizes and grazing areas, seize flocks, destroy crops planted without the appropriate permit as well as impose fines and evict inhabitants of 'illegal' settlements. Green Patrol raids have resulted in substantial damage to property and led to fatalities on several occasions. When aerial surveillance identifies unauthorised new construction, owners may be served with a demolition order. If they fail to comply – and many do – they may be prosecuted. Homeowners are turned into criminal defendants, fined and forced to reimburse the state for the costs of demolition. According to the Association of Forty, there are currently 22,000 unrecognised houses in the Negev. All are at potential risk of demolition.

The plight of those living in recognised towns is almost equally difficult. They are amongst the poorest in Israel and face enormous social and economic problems – high unemployment, crime, drug abuse, social disintegration and low education levels. Infrastructure such as street lights, pavements or sewage systems is incomplete in almost all the towns. Israeli planning authorities have given little consideration to Bedouin cultural needs, particularly their preference for grouping the extended family together in order to retain traditional kinship structures in a settled environment, sharing resources and responsibilities as well as regulating conflict and exercising social control. Future expansion of the houses is virtually impossible as not enough land was set aside to accommodate population growth. Today the average annual Bedouin birth rate of 7% per annum is amongst the highest in the world. Tents and additional structures built behind the houses for social gatherings, housing guests and outdoor kitchens are commonplace. Sections of the houses are converted into shops and used for keeping livestock. Israeli authorities regard this as a violation of zoning regulations prohibiting commercial activity in residential neighbourhoods. For

many Bedouin families, however, this is the sole source of income.

"We should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat in industry, services, construction and agriculture ... the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on... The children would go to school with their hair properly combed. This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations ... this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear."

*General Moshe Dayan, 1963*

Assimilationist and sedentarist projects have been inflicted on pastoralists throughout the world. The sedentarisation programme and the general Israeli attitude towards the Bedouin can be viewed as part of this wider trend. Israeli identity is to a large extent constructed in (hierarchical) opposition to the Arab population within and surrounding the country. Being Israeli carries connotation of being 'Western', democratic, modern, rational and educated – while Arabs, and particularly Bedouin, are pre-modern, autocratic, emotional and undeserving of a place in the modern state of Israel unless they show willingness to be 'reformed'. This sedentarisation/modernisation of the Bedouin is thus central to Israel's self-image as a 'modern democratic' state in an 'under-developed' region. Less overtly articulated is Israel's determination to accumulate as much land as possible for the exclusive use of Jewish residents of Eretz Yisrael.<sup>1</sup>

In order to acquire the maximum amount of Arab land for Jewish settlement of the Negev, Israel has denied almost all pre-existing land rights or ownership. Israel regards the Negev as a vacuum domicilium or terra nullius, an empty space yet to be used for settlement. The Bedouin are seen as rootless nomads without territorial connection or rights. Similar legal tools used to justify the internal displacement of indigenous populations and invalidate traditional land ownership are found in other settler states. Israel justifies its acquisition policies by selective interpretation of historical land laws. Israel argues that all desert

land belongs to the state by virtue of the *mawat* ('dead') category of land title introduced in 1858 by the Ottoman authorities. Israel will only acknowledge land ownership in the Negev if a landowner can present a document issued by the British mandate administration in 1921 – a period when hardly any Bedouin registered their landholdings due to a combination of traditional reluctance to cooperate with external authorities, fear of taxation and lack of concern that anybody would pose a challenge to their continued use of the land.

A recent survey conducted in the Negev shows that the overall experience of settlement and urbanisation is described by the Bedouin as negative and unsatisfactory. Bedouin are dissatisfied with the settlement incentives they have been offered, the paucity of opportunities for education and democratic governance and the persistent denial of equal access to health, education, housing and other services of a kind enjoyed by their fellow Israeli citizens. The protracted struggle for control of the Negev and for democratic freedoms has consequences not only for the livelihoods but also the very essence of modern Bedouin identity. The future of the Bedouin of the Negev remains uncertain and problematic.

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For further information, see:

- Centre for Bedouin Studies and Development, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev: <http://w3.bgu.ac.il/bedouin>
- Mossawa Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel [www.mossawacenter.org/en/about/about.html](http://www.mossawacenter.org/en/about/about.html)
- Negev Coexistence Forum <http://dukium.org>
- Arab Organisation for Human Rights [www.arabhra.org/factsheets/factsheet3.htm](http://www.arabhra.org/factsheets/factsheet3.htm)
- Association of Forty [www.assoc40.org](http://www.assoc40.org)

1. Hebrew for 'the land of Israel'