

Burying the Hatchlings Alive: Israel Continues To Demolish Bedouin Homes and Livelihoods

By Isabelle Humphries

AMERICAN MEDIA may well have covered some aspects of Israel's latest attacks on Gaza, but one is unlikely to have seen coverage of its continuing demolition of the homes of the weakest and most vulnerable Israeli citizens: the Bedouin Arabs of the Negev (Naqab) desert.

On May 8, the entire village of Twail Abu-Jarwal—30 tents and huts, home to over 100 people—were destroyed on Israeli government orders. The Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev (RCUV) reported that at 9:30 a.m.—a time they knew village men would be at work—two bulldozers and dozens of armed Israeli police accompanying demolition workers entered the village. Police intelligence also would have been aware of the fact that many villagers were away attending a wedding in Jordan.

When the destruction was complete, nothing was left standing: water containers were trashed, and some dove hatchlings were even buried alive. A broken-down van which elderly villagers used as shelter from the sun had been pulled down.

Villagers who refused to move were physically dragged from their homes. When the son of one elderly man picked up fabric and a tent pole off the ground to create a new shelter for his father, he was arrested by police, who claimed he was about to attack them. RCUV's accusation that the government had hired young workers from West Bank settlements, known for racist, anti-Arab zeal, adds a further vindictive twist to the saga.

For years the residents of Twail Abu-Jarwal, an unrecognized village close to the government-created township of Laqiya, have been struggling with Israeli authorities for residency rights. Approximately 70,000 Bedouin in the Negev are living in villages which Israel fails to recognize. As a result, the government rejects applications for building permits and denies residents access to official state services such as roads, utilities and piped water which, as Israeli citizens, they should be entitled to receive. Laqiya is one of several settlements Israel has built in an attempt to contain Bedouin, cramming them into tiny overcrowded areas, denying them a traditional agricultural lifestyle and failing to provide adequate alternative sources of income.

Israel's displacement of the villagers of Twail Abu Jarwal and other Bedouin villages in the Negev is not a new phenomenon, but dates from the forced transfer of Arab populations in the 1950s under the military government of the then-new Israeli state.

“This is the eighth time in the last two years they have come to demolish,” reported one villager. “It is the fourth time that they have flattened it out completely.”

Village Council head Aqil al-Talaqa has sat many times with various Israeli authorities from the Ministry of Interior, the Authority for the Advancement [sic] of the Bedouins, and the Israeli Lands Authority (ILA). It was suggested to him that the villagers move to another “temporary” location while the government “contemplates” what to do with them, but al-Talaqa refuses, suspicious of temporary solutions. As the RCUV points out, Bedouin were told that the original displacement of 1952 would be temporary, and they have been pushed around for the ensuing half-century.

Reporting the demolition, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* sought a response from the ILA, and was told that the Authority had merely “evacuated” Bedouin “invasions.” “These invasions have taken place for the seventh time this year, to the same place,” said an ILA spokesperson. “The invaders have homes in Laqiya.”

According to the RCUV, however, despite sheltering in the vicinity of Laqiya, the Bedouin families have not received building permits since originally being allocated plots back in 1978.

Back in Twail Abu-Jarwal, the RCUV’s Yeela Raanan sat with the newly redispossessed. “We sat quietly, staring at the ruins of the homes, listening to the sheep as they strolled home,” she told the *Washington Report*. “Yunis broke the silence: ‘But the little hatchlings, why did they have to bury them alive?’”

Their homes demolished, the families were forced to use anything available, including crooked tin plates, to rebuild. Because of the recurring demolitions in this particular village, no one expects even a tent to survive long enough before the next round of burying and bulldozing begins.

Two weeks later, on May 21, the Israeli government gave the go-ahead for the destruction of four properties in the village of Attir, north of the township of Hura, in an area of the Negev currently scheduled for another Jewish-only settlement. As hundreds of Israeli police arrived with bulldozers and even helicopter cover, members of the Abu Alqian family were trapped by checkpoints and forced to witness the destruction of their homes, powerless to do anything to stop it.

As with other Bedouin tribes in the Negev, the family was moved to the area back in the 1950s, but the Israeli government insists that they must reside in the impoverished urban area of Hura township, and not live a rural agriculture life outside its tiny boundaries. Ahmad Alqian built his home in Attir in the 1990s. Despite wishing to retain his family’s traditional rural livelihood, he had agreed to move with his extended family to a new location selected by “Authority for the ‘Advancement’ of the Bedouins.” Two final legal issues remained, however, before the family would move voluntarily: first, that the government would give permission to male members of the family over the age of 18 to buy land for homes—the Authority had stipulated that only those over 23 were eligible.

The family was particularly concerned as this would be a one-time-only offer, meaning that younger sons could not purchase land later, when they reached 23. The second point of contention was the compensation offered by the government, which would cover only the cost of purchasing new land, not the cost of building new homes.

Apparently the government got fed up with the legal route, however, and decided to just go ahead with demolition before a final settlement—even though the families had made it clear they would move of their own free will under certain conditions. Asked the RCUV: “Was it really less expensive to employ a helicopter, eight buses full of police who were brought from the center of Israel, five bulldozers, scores of large cars full of more police...rather than agreeing to the requests for more fair compensation?”

After their homes were demolished, one of the families in Attir moved in with the grandmother. Another family with 13 children, including a 2-month-old baby, cleaned out a tin sheep shack and is living there. The families have far fewer possessions, of course, since the police buried furniture and even gold in the process of demolishing the homes.

An Ongoing Story

These cases are but the latest examples of Israeli government dispossession of the Bedouin community. Moreover, a look at the wider context and patterns of Israeli policy over the years toward other Palestinians—whether citizens of Israel in the Galilee or Triangle areas, or Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza—indicates that government policy toward the Bedouins is more than just neglect, it is a deliberate strategy choice. There is not a single Arab locality in Israel designated as a development area and thereby eligible for development funding. Israel has consistently implemented plans intended to divide and shrink any areas heavily populated by Arabs—many of which date back to David Ben-Gurion’s declaration for the need to “Judaize the Galilee.”

Although the world may disagree, Israel simply does not consider developing land for Jews only as an apartheid policy. A telling irony is that while one of Israel’s justifications of higher levels of spending in Jewish municipalities is a reward for army service, many Bedouin actually choose and are allowed to serve in Israeli army and police forces.

Earlier this year, Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights, called upon Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his deputy, Shimon Peres, to abandon “Negev 2015: The National Strategic Plan for the Development of the Negev (Naqab)”, accusing the government of discriminating against Arab Bedouin citizens and basing its plans for the region on illegal governmental policy.

Adalah, the leading legal lobby among Palestinians in Israel, demanded that a restructured plan include development for Israel’s Arab citizens, “based on the principles of equality and justice in resource allocation.” The current government plan claims to promote development and growth in population, employment and education for citizens of the Negev, and a budget of \$80 million has been set aside for 2007. However, almost

all the 75,000 planned housing units are designated for Jewish towns and communities, further marginalizing Israel's Bedouin citizens.

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