

The Bedouin Dilemma

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"Many are calling for international intervention in the Negev."

Going south deep into the heart of Israel's Negev Desert, small Bedouin villages sprout in the distance. They seem peaceful and majestic in the desert heat, cut into the landscape dotted with shacks for living quarters and tents constructed with burlap and wooden sticks not far from the 52 active military zones in the Negev. The old men in their khafeyas sit drinking Arabic coffee, stone-faced – as if they've seen this all before. The women are nowhere to be seen.

The Bedouin village of Wadi al-Na'am sits under the shadow of a chemical industrial zone. Following the dusty road off the highway, it emerges from the left, dark and oppressive, an architectural catastrophe.

4,000 people live in the vicinity of Ramat Hovav, Israel's toxic waste dump – one of 17 chemical plants in the area. Opened in 1975, it has left a trail of wreckage adding to the dire situation: high infant mortality rates, cancer and numerous other health effects from the effluent, 97% of the village population on national insurance. The electric power lines run past the village yards away connecting nobody to the grid.

Orly Almi, Project Coordinator for the Unrecognized Negev Villages for Physicians for Human Rights reports of a high proportion of abortions, heart disease at a young age, high levels of cancer and high rates of congenital defects. Added to this, the government's own epidemiological survey released after years of pressure shows that there is a high rate of birth defects and subnatal births amongst the Bedouin population.

The Ministry of Health, unwilling to expose their doctors to the health hazards from the plant does not provide health services in the village. Others disagree with that assessment and claim that the Bedouin Authority is using the denial of health services to push the villagers to move to Segev Shalom, a nearby settlement. The solar powered medical clinic hand-built by volunteers sits empty.

Many now say, exhausting all the legal options will not bring back the dead or alleviate the suffering.

This battle over land, power, government resources, culture and history is being fought through planning authorities, government ministries, the court rooms, the community leadership, security forces and at the political level.

The unrecognized villages do not appear on the official maps of the State of Israel and are not included in the figures for the Central Bureau of Statistics. These villages are not officially recognized by the state so there is no legal responsibility to provide even basic

services. The lands were classified as agricultural, rendering all buildings erected as illegal.

These land disputes originated in the forties and fifties. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 came a new regime and new priorities over land use. And everyone has a different interpretation of what happened.

This is the backdrop to the regional trauma.

Here in the desert, the Bedouin talk about time in generations and their connection to the land. They have grown old on different mythologies here – their narratives still being shaped. The world is moving faster than they have the capacity to respond. They suffer from the same discrimination as the other Arabs in Israel, but their issues are more acute, more immediate and will certainly require international attention. They are doing what they can to maintain what they have despite the numerous pressures within the culture and the influences coming from outside.

Judging from the treadmill of government bureaucrats, NGO's, members of the Knesset and international journalists making the rounds, there could be something like a genuine Bedouin revival happening – one which is being characterized in the context of indigenous rights, access to basic services like water, electricity, housing, health care, proper sewage facilities, refuse disposal, education, and recognition of cultural rights.

But some believe, these are the symptoms of tensions about to burst.

For everyone who says that the situation is headed in a better direction, there are others who are predicting a coming Bedouin intifada as Israel's liberal Haaretz newspaper characterized it recently.

Asked if one is possible, Muhammad Zeidan, the head of the Arab Human Rights Association said, "The Bedouin are peaceful, but they are human beings. I don't think they have a choice, they are being pushed to do this."

What adds to the complication is the Sharon government's plan for the Gaza withdrawal – a plan if implemented will surely mean new settlements in the Negev adding to development pressures in the region. Some of the Bedouin community are opposing these moves outright as this will inevitably mean encroachment on their traditional lands. To paraphrase this line of thinking, many are wondering, "how can the government take away our land, deny us basic rights like access to water, electricity, education and health care and continue to poison our lands with chemicals – we've been here since before 1948."

According to the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, the problem of the unrecognized villages has become increasingly aggravated since 1965 when the government approved the Planning and Construction Law as well as an outline plan in which hundreds of Bedouin villages and localities were deliberately ignored and

considered not to exist. The lands were classified as agricultural land, rendering all buildings erected as illegal.

The 1981 Removal of Intruders Law detailed the legal process for the removal of the inhabitants of “illegal” homes in Israel. The proposed amendment to this law will consolidate the body that issues demolition orders and the body that implements them – a process which will target the existing 45 unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev and streamline efforts to build Jewish settlements in their place. Many legal experts claim that the Removal of Intruders Law could affect 70,000 Bedouin citizens of Israel who continue to live with substandard services from government. The remaining Bedouin live in 7 state established towns which were given full recognition.

“We want the government of Israel stop this hypocritical and outrageous policy of the systematic removal of the Bedouin community from their traditional lands while they aid in the construction of new Jewish settlements in the Negev. We call on the international community and the Jewish leadership to express their outrage to Israel,” says Jafar Farah, Director of the Mossawa Center, one of the 29 organizations that form the Together Forum, which advocates for Bedouin rights. Farah has already raised the issue with the U.S. government.

Under Sharon’s Negev Development Plan, the government intends to turn the six largest unrecognized villages into official recognized towns to place all the remaining Bedouin. This is unacceptable to the Bedouin since in their view it does not give full consideration to their historical claims to the land.

There is even talk of constructing a hippodrome – some are already joking that the characters at the horse racing track will have more rights than the Bedouin.

In January of 2004, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Minister of Industry and Work Ehud Olmert declared in a meeting with the Head of the Council of the Arab Unrecognized Villages, Jaber Abu Khaf, that the government will start to implement their plan to transfer 38 villages. Following this meeting, the Minister of Housing participated in the establishment of a new Jewish village on the lands of the Al-Ukbi tribe by moving in mobile homes in the middle of the night.

Almost 38 % of the governmental funds for the Arab Bedouin communities in the Negev will be allocated to implement land confiscation policies of the government especially in the unrecognized villages. Over 150 homes have been demolished and 30,000 dunams of crops were sprayed and destroyed in the Negev since 2002. There is general agreement amongst the Bedouin leadership that the government’s plan does not take into consideration the cultural sensitivities of indigenous Bedouin culture.

Abu Afash Labad, one of the village council members, addressing a group says, “our true identity is the land.” He says that he is not relying on his citizenship to gain his rights because the state does not treat him as a citizen. He says the state is using the denial of basic services as an instrument of power to evacuate the Bedouin from their lands. Just

last month, twenty three people of the Abu Elkian tribe including a ninety year old grandfather was injured when security forces arrived to demolish seven homes.

According to Ariel Dloomy of the Negev Coexistence Forum, as a Jewish citizen he has the right to live wherever he wants to. But Bedouin citizens don't have a choice – they can either stay illegally where they are or move to seven settlement towns that have among the lowest socio-economic indicators of any village in Israel. The Negev Coexistence Forum was initiated by Jewish and Bedouin citizens to promote issues of coexistence and mutual understanding and to raise Bedouin issues to the Jewish population such as the underfunding of the new regional council which was set up to implement workable solutions on land use in the region. “We are calling on the government to start negotiating with the Bedouin and to treat them as equal citizens, not second class citizens,” says Dloomy.

Compounding the tensions is the use of aerial spraying of chemicals by the Israel Land Administration office for the purposes of destroying the crops of the Bedouin which are predominately barley and wheat. Roundup, the chemical being used in the spraying associated with genetic defects and possible carcinogenic effects. The central production plant belongs to the Monsanto company in the United States and in Israel is produced by Agan Chemicals of Ashdod.

Although there are a number of substances that would be considered harmful to humans, the possible long term effects of the main ingredient glyphosate is associated with renal damage, impaired fertility and an increased risk of non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. Arab legal organization Adalah has taken the government to court to stop the spraying.

A few weeks later, Nuri Al-Ukbi is holding court with a group of journalists on a beat up wooden table in one of the back rooms of the Writer's House in Tel Aviv. You get the sense this isn't just a press conference for him, this is his life. As Chairman of the Association for the Support and Defense of Bedouin Rights in Israel, he says that the Arab-Bedouin population is entitled to the same rights as any other sector in the country.

In January when the ten new homes were constructed in the new Jewish settlement of Giv'ot Bar on the land of Elarakib in the middle of the night between the cities of Be'er Sheva and Rahat, the ancestral lands of the Al-Ukbi tribe, the government also sprayed 4,000 dunams in three separate villages and the homes of 50 Bedouin families, poisoning wheat fields in the process. The new village was constructed while the government plans to demolish a number of Bedouin villages in the Negev under Sharon's Negev Development Plan.

The Al-Ukbi tribe are not opposed to Jewish settlement in the Negev – they want the authorities to provide a suitable settlement solution for them and the other Bedouin in the Negev. The last appeal of the Association for the Support and Defense of Bedouin Rights in Israel over the Giv'ot Bar development was on June 29th in Beer Sheva district court where the Judge rejected the appeal of the association in conjunction with the Local Committee of the Al-Ukbi tribe.

So for now, Nuri Al-Ukbi will continue to talk about the swindle of the 1951 planting season when his tribe was originally moved for ‘security’ reasons. He has a whole tribe to answer to. He knows that these land disputes have gone on for generations and they will take generations to solve. For now, he’s not going anywhere. He’ll still be here – a fixture in the desert.

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