

## ISRAEL

Approximately 190,000 Arab-Bedouins (or 2.6 percent of Israel's overall population) live in the Negev desert of Israel. During the 1948 war, some 65,000 of the Naqab (Negev) Bedouin fled to Gaza and the West Bank, leaving only 12,000 within Israeli borders. In the early 1950s, the Israeli Government concentrated this indigenous semi-nomadic population within the so-called *Siyag* (*Siyaj* in Arabic), a restricted geographical area in eastern Negev of approximately 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> (or about 10% of the Bedouins' former territory). Today, half of the Bedouin population lives in villages unrecognized by the state of Israel. These villages do not appear on Israeli maps, have no road signs indicating their existence, and are denied basic services and infrastructure, including paved roads, running water, garbage disposal, electricity, and proper schools and clinics. It is illegal to build permanent structures in these villages. Those that do so risk heavy fines and home demolitions. The other half of the Bedouin population is concentrated in seven government-planned townships, built between the late 1960s and early 1990s in the *Siyag* area as urban centers, giving little or no consideration to the traditional Arab-Bedouin way of life, and without providing possibilities for local employment.

**B**y all accounts, the Naqab Bedouins are the most disadvantaged citizens in Israel.<sup>1</sup> The unrecognized villages have been struggling for their rights to land ownership, equality, recognition and pursuit of their distinctive way of life for years. The townships rank among the country's eight poorest municipalities. This situation did not improve in 2010 and, whilst waiting for the adoption of the Praver Plan, the future looks grim.

## **The Praver Commission**

For over a year, the Naqab Bedouins have been waiting for the outcome of the Praver Commission. This commission, headed by Ehud Praver from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), was established in early 2009 to translate the recommendations of the Goldberg Commission<sup>2</sup> into an operative plan of action for resolving the issue of the unrecognized villages and the Bedouin community's land claims. Submitted to the Prime Minister in mid-2010, the plan is awaiting his approval before being presented to the government and the public.

Neither the Bedouins nor the NGOs working with their community have been involved in the Commission's work and, even today, there is no clear indication of what awaits them. However, according to anonymous governmental sources, the plan involves the partial recognition of some of the 45 villages defined as "unrecognized" – and the mass eviction of the remainder to government-designated townships.<sup>3</sup> Villages will be recognized according to specific (and harsh) criteria, such as a minimum of 2,000 residents; land claim holders will be given the option of foregoing their claims in exchange for an allotment equal to approximately 20% of their land claims in a location to be decided by the Israeli authorities, plus some small monetary compensation. If the land claim holders refuse this offer, they could go to court but, so far, no Bedouin land claim holder has ever been successful in the Israeli court system.

## **PMO blocks recognition**

In July, in an unprecedented step, the Prime Minister's Office blocked the National Planning and Building Council's recognition of two villages, Attir/Im al-Hiran and Tel Arad, requesting instead an expedited discussion with "new evidence".<sup>4</sup> The PMO thus overturned a democratic process that had taken the Bedouin community 15 years to achieve after it had found out that Bedouin villages were not mentioned in a new Metropolitan Plan for Beersheba. This process has included obtaining a ruling from the Supreme Court (1995) on the inclusion of Bedouin communities/villages in the National Planning and Building Council's plan, and submitting an official appeal in 2009 to this same Council after it turned out that a new development plan only included 11 newly recognized villages, leaving out 34

unrecognized villages. The Council responded by appointing an investigator, whose recommendations it subsequently adopted in July 2010.

These recommendations included minimal recognition of an additional 16 as yet unrecognized villages, at times not as independent villages but as extensions to an existing township, or a newly recognized village. As has been pointed out,<sup>5</sup> this will entail “inappropriate removal and transfer of populations among the villages in order to align them with other state development plans, such as roads. The recommendations ignore the historical bond between the local inhabitants and their specific plots of land, and rights groups have responded by saying that many of the recommendations may be doomed to failure if the local population is not fully included in the planning process. More significantly, activists speaking to government authorities have concluded that any villages *not included* in the definitive plan for the future of the Bedouin ...will be evacuated, destroyed and their lands transferred to state hands for development of Jewish towns, roads and farms.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Village eradication: the case of Twail Abu-Jarwal and Al Araqib**

2010 saw a marked increase in raids against unrecognized villages as the Ministry of Interior, the Israel Lands Administration (ILA)<sup>7</sup> and the southern district of the Israel Police jointly resolved in February to triple the rate of house demolitions.<sup>8</sup> The violence used during these raids also escalated.

Thirty villages have now been affected by such actions, and even the township of Rahat experienced a much publicized demolition of one of its mosques in November. The cases of the unrecognized villages of Twail Abu-Jarwal and Al Araqib are, however, particularly outstanding. Twail Abu Jarwal has, over the past three years, been destroyed more than 40 times, eight of them this year. In order to wear down the villagers' ability to resist and re-build their homes, arrests are now part of the procedure. By early December, eight of the 18 people arrested in June were still in jail awaiting trial. Since the arrests, the village has all but disappeared as several other villagers have received restraining orders preventing them from entering their village lands. The arrests have also entailed a serious financial loss for the families, both in fines (bail) and in loss of the young men's salaries.

Al Araqib was razed to the ground on 27 July, when 1,300 armed police officers in riot helmets and shields entered the village at 4:30 a.m. The force included mounted cavalry, helicopters, inspectors from the ILA and demolition crews with bulldozers. The crews forcibly removed the villagers—mostly children and elderly people—from their homes before the demolition operation began, leaving 300 people without shelter or water in the height of summer in the desert. In total, 46 structures (including 30 homes) were completely destroyed along with sheep pens, chicken coops, orchards and olive groves—the source of the villagers' livelihood. More than 1,000 trees were uprooted and discarded. Residents were given no time to recover their belongings, and assets such as generators, cars and tractors were seized.<sup>9</sup>

It is the first time the government has used such a large force in its battle against the residents of an unrecognized village. This mass destruction did not, however, deter the villagers from rebuilding their village with tents. These 15 tents have since been destroyed more than seven times, and have been re-erected each time after having been bulldozed. During these raids, people who support Al Araqib's struggle have been brutally assaulted and temporarily arrested. A particularly vicious event was when Ms Haya Noah, a 50-year-old Jewish activist, was beaten to the ground and kicked because she asked to see the police's demolition orders.

## **The role of the JNF and GOD TV**

The issue at hand for Al Araqib residents is that not only has their land been designated in the Beersheva Metropolitan Plan as an area for "forest and forestation", it is also an area in which, as stipulated by the Goldberg Commission, Bedouins will receive no land compensation.

Al Araqib existed before the creation of Israel (1948). The people were evicted in 1951 but continued using their lands for agricultural purposes (albeit with their crops regularly destroyed by the government) and burying their dead in the village cemetery. In 1998, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) started planting trees on their lands. Afraid their land would be turned into a forest, making any agricultural or building activities impossible, the villagers returned to defend it from the JNF afforestation activities.

The JNF claims that it is only implementing the government's policies. These policies, however, are discriminatory and intended to make sure that the Bedouin

villages cannot survive and that their residents will be displaced and relocated. In order to implement them, the JNF is utilizing funds it raises from the Jewish community world-wide. However it is also using donations coming from an international evangelical television channel - GOD TV - which claims to have received "instructions from God ... to prepare the land for the return of my Son ... Plant a million trees."<sup>10</sup> It is somewhat ironic that a Jewish organization that is "redeeming land for the Jewish people" is supported by an evangelical ministry that wishes to utilize Israel and the planting of trees to bring about the return of Christ (and thus inherently the conversion of all Jews). ○

## Notes

- 1 See Shadow Report submitted by the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality et al.: "Response to the Report of the State of Israel on Implementing the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)", October 2010, at <http://www.dukium.org>
- 2 The Goldberg Commission (2007) was tasked to formulate a new policy and regulations regarding the Naqab Bedouin settlements. For further details see *The Indigenous World 2010*.
- 3 *Jnews*, 28 July 2010. See <http://www.jnews.org.uk/news/rumours-of-displacement-plans-for-the-bedouin-of-the-negev-desert>
- 4 See *Haaretz* website: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/pmo-blocks-recognition-of-bedouin-villages-1.325080>
- 5 *JNews*, 28 July 2010.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 The ILA is the government agency responsible for managing the 93% of Israeli land owned by the State.
- 8 See Negev Co-Existence Forum website: <http://dukium.org/>.
- 9 **Human Rights Watch Report, 2010:** at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/08/01/israel-halt-demolitions-bedouin-homes-negev> and background paper on Al Araqib at <http://www.dukium.org>
- 10 See their video on <http://www.god.tv/excavation> according to which half a million trees have already been planted in the Negev. A sign reading "God TV Forests" has been placed next to Al Araqib (see <http://www.redress.cc/palestine/ngordon20101204>).

***Dr. Yeela Raanan was born, grew up and lives in the Negev. For the past two decades she has been active in working with the Bedouin-Arab community in an attempt to promote their civil and human rights. She heads the board of directors of the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions (ICAHN – [www.icahd.org](http://www.icahd.org)).***