

## ISRAEL

Israel's Arab Bedouin are indigenous to the Negev-Naqab. They are traditionally a semi-nomadic people, combining herding with agriculture in villages linked by tribal and kinship systems that largely determine land ownership patterns. In the early 1950s, the Israeli government concentrated this indigenous semi-nomadic population within the so-called Siyahg, a restricted geographical area in the eastern Negev of approximately 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> (or about 10% of the Bedouins' former territory) with a promise of return to their original lands within six months. The fulfilment of that promise is still outstanding.

Today, the Bedouin community in Israel's Negev numbers 201,840 of whom 53,111 live in 35 so-called unrecognized villages. These villages do not appear on Israeli maps, have no road signs indicating their existence, and are denied basic services and infrastructure. 148,729 Bedouin are concentrated in one government-planned town, Rahat, six townships, (Lakiya, Hura, Tel Arad, Tel Sheva, Segev Shalom and Ar'ara BaNegev) and ten villages that received recognition over the last decade. The town and townships give little or no consideration to the traditional Arab-Bedouin way of life, and provide only few local employment opportunities.

Like many other indigenous peoples worldwide, the Negev Bedouin lay claim to lands they have settled on since time immemorial. They too have thus focused much of their struggle for equal rights on land restitution claims. The claims process became possible in the 1970s but many have still not been addressed by the state. Although some families do hold documents from the Ottoman or British mandate periods proving their ownership to specific lands, these documents have never yet been accepted by the courts. The claims are legally complex and leave a wide opening for state takeover of land.<sup>1</sup> Relying on a land law from the Ottoman period, most of the Negev is defined by the Israeli state as "Mawat" or dead land and as such cannot be claimed by individuals or groups.<sup>2</sup>



relocation of some 40,000 people and the destruction of a significant number of unrecognized villages. The plan emanates from an implementation committee, established in 2009 and headed by Ehud Praver,<sup>3</sup> former deputy chairman of the National Security Council. The committee, which did not include any Bedouin members, was mandated to implement the 2008 Goldberg Committee<sup>4</sup> recommendations on the same issue. The plan has two main components:<sup>5</sup>

- Resolving ownership claims and compensation for claimants' with strict criteria and enforcement mechanisms within a 5-year deadline. As recommended by the Goldberg Report, the Praver Plan also stipulates that there shall be no Bedouin settlement to the west of Route 40, an area to be reserved for Jewish settlement only.
- The plan calls for the mass demolition of existing villages and relocation of their residents to existing townships.

The major thrust of Bedouin activism in 2012 will therefore be "Recognition Now", an effort to thwart the Praver Plan's passage into law. For instance, one important counter proposal, "A Master Plan for the Unrecognized Bedouin Villages",<sup>6</sup> has been compiled in accordance with government planning laws by three Israeli NGOs: the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages, Bimkom, Planners for Planning Rights, and Sidreh-Lakiya Negev Weaving, and proposes a viable alternative that includes the recognition of all the 45 villages in their existing locations, as well as "reasonable administrative and municipal solutions for each community". Rallying to claim their basic human rights as citizens of Israel, the Negev Bedouin are lobbying and demonstrating for this as well as for other alternative approaches.

## **The Unrecognized Villages<sup>7</sup>**

The so-called unrecognized villages, whether originating within the *Siyagh* or re-established after forced relocation, are considered 'illegal' by the state and are denied building permits since the villages are not included in any government regional plan. As a result, the threat of demolition hangs over the majority of Bedouin homes in the villages, a threat all too often realised: in 2011 alone, there were over 1,000 such demolitions,<sup>8</sup> a 120% increase on 2010.<sup>9</sup> The unrecognized

villages receive little or no government services nor can they legally connect to the national electricity grid and, in some cases, not even to the water supply. Transportation and access roads, postal and sanitation services, kindergartens, adequate class-room facilities and secondary education institutions and health clinics are often sadly lacking. Restrictions on grazing have led to a decline in traditional occupations such as herding. Agriculture too is severely curtailed by land expropriation, resulting in high unemployment rates. The Government-sponsored townships provide no viable alternative. They too suffer from inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, lack of employment opportunities and poor government services. As a result of these conditions and institutionalised discrimination,<sup>10</sup> many Bedouin are marginalised within Israeli society. In spite of these difficulties, the community has produced a leadership cadre that has made a significant contribution to the life of the Negev region - academics, doctors, lawyers and community activists, while Bedouin students are a vital part of the Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

### **Struggling for land and recognition**

The year 2012 will be dominated by the struggle for recognition of the unrecognized villages, opposition to the forcible relocation of residents and opposition to home demolitions both in the unrecognized villages and in the townships. A notorious case of demolition is that of El Araqib, an unrecognized village north-west of the major city of Beersheva that has been totally destroyed 31 times since July 2010 in order to make way for a forest to be planted by the Jewish National Fund, funded in part by a Christian fundamentalist media channel, God TV.<sup>11</sup> The demolitions were overseen by huge numbers of regular and special police units, acting with great violence, and included not only the destruction of the homes of some 34 families but also the uprooting of existing trees, destruction of water tanks, expropriation of personal property and destruction of livestock quarters. The demolitions have cost the state in the region of US\$450,000 and the authorities are now claiming these costs from the villagers themselves. The villagers, however, are determined to resist and, together with Jewish-Israeli NGO supporters, have worked tirelessly time after time to rebuild the village, even if only symbolically.

The Government's plans to uproot the Bedouin from their homes, condemning them to restrictions and a life of deprivation in the townships must not be allowed to proceed. As one Bedouin leader puts it: "...we dream only of living in peace on our ancestral lands".<sup>12</sup> A modest dream indeed, and one that would take so little to make come true. ○

## Notes and references

- 1 **Dr. Tobi Fenster (nd.):** A summary stance paper on Bedouin land issues, written for "Sikkuy - for equal opportunity" Tel-Aviv University, (Hebrew).
- 2 Israel Land Law, 1969.
- 3 Recommendations of the Implementation Committee for Regulating Bedouin Settlement in the Negev, 2011.
- 4 Recommendation of the Goldberg Commission for Regulating Bedouin Settlement in the Negev, presented 11 November 2008.
- 5 **Adalah the Legal Center for Minority Rights in Israel:** *Overview and Analysis of the Praver Report*, October 2011.
- 6 A Master Plan for the Unrecognized Bedouin Villages, 2012.
- 7 **Noach, H., 2009:** *The Existent and the Non-Existent Villages: The Unrecognized Bedouin Villages in the Negev*, Pardes Press, Haifa (Hebrew).
- 8 Khalil Alamour, Presentation to UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, 14 November 2011.
- 9 **Noach, H.:** Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality and Recognition Forum, International Human Rights Day 2011, A report on demolitions of Arab Bedouin homes in the Negev pp. 11-12 (in Hebrew).
- 10 **Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality Report:** Institutionalised Discrimination against Arab Employees in Government Offices and Accessibility of Government Services to Arabs in the Negev. 21 March 2011.
- 11 See *The Indigenous World 2011*, p.371.
- 12 Khalil el Alamour, *ibid*.

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