

A New Settlement Policy for the Negev Bedouins

For centuries prior to 1948, the year the State of Israel was established, the Bedouin nomads had been the Negev's almost exclusive residents. The size of the community, in 1947, was approximately 90,000, whose members belonged to about 90 tribes. By 1948, the majority of the population was already occupied in agriculture. Only a small minority continued to be engaged solely as shepherds, roaming with their flocks along rather limited perimeters from their settlements.

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Historically, the Bedouins have shared clear concepts regarding their property rights, including access to land, water, and pasture, which were allocated among the tribes and mutually recognised by them. However, given that the Negev had yet to be thoroughly mapped prior to 1948, and that no arrangements for registering real estate had been made for the region, no tribal property was entered in any official real estate registries. Bedouin rights were nevertheless respected or at least tolerated by the Ottoman and then British authorities.

During the course of Israel's War of Independence (1948-1949), nearly two-thirds of the Bedouin population either fled or were expelled to Jordan or to the Gaza Strip; the remaining 30,000 were placed under Israeli military rule. By 1951, the 11 tribes dwelling east of Beer-Sheva were removed to a restricted area or "reservation" north-east of Beer-Sheva, where other tribes were already living. The restricted area

covered about 10% of the original territory used by the Bedouins before establishment of the state. At the time, the tribes were assured that this transfer, initiated for “security” reasons, was a temporary arrangement. However, despite the promises, the government expropriated the land through a number of legal measures.

With the lifting of the military regime in 1966, the Israeli government decided to concentrate all the Bedouin tribes within five (later seven) townships in the Beer-Sheva area. These townships currently provide homes for about half of the total Bedouin population of 100,000. From the very beginning, this forced sedentarisation was alien to the traditional Bedouin lifestyle based, as stated above, on small-scale agriculture and the raising of livestock on land informally distributed among the separate tribes. In consequence, Bedouin culture was stifled. Furthermore, as no reasonable agricultural or industrial infrastructure was established in the vicinity of the townships, the Bedouins were provided with no employment options other than working as minimum-wage, unskilled labourers in the neighbouring Jewish communities. The level of unemployment among the Bedouins eventually became one of the highest in Israel. Finally, despite the fact that the townships were a government initiative, few have managed to formulate an orderly site plan; hence, formally speaking, the majority of structures in the seven townships lack legal building permits.

The remaining 50,000 Bedouins currently living outside the townships reside in officially “unrecognised” or unauthorised villages on land they had either inhabited in the past or were transferred to before 1966. These settlements obviously lack site plans and building permits. Nonetheless, approximately 7,000 residential structures that have been built there. According to the terms of Israel’s Planning and Construction Law, in the absence of those plans and permits, these structures are also considered illegal and liable for demolition after judicial authorisation of the appropriate orders.

During the course of 1998, it is expected that about 600 requests for approval of housing demolition orders will be presented to the courts. At that rate, we anticipate that all the

Bedouins remaining in the unauthorised settlements will be forced into the townships within five years.

The degree of official discrimination against the Bedouins is reflected in the following facts. A comparison of the data concerning the Negev's Jewish rural population with those for the Bedouins indicates that 40,000 Jews reside in 104 recognised townships and cultivate 1,260,000 dunams of land; they are allotted 300 million cubic meters of water for agricultural purposes. An additional 12 Jewish settlements are being planned. In contrast, 100,000 Bedouins live in seven townships and an unknown number of small, unrecognised villages, some of the which still have no running water suitable for human consumption. The entire community cultivates approximately 400,000 dunams.

Current policy should be revised so as to recognise the rights of the Bedouins in the Negev to continue to live in their current settlements. At the same time, these settlements should be developed according to a model of agricultural villages resting on small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry (and perhaps tourism) that permits preservation of the Bedouin tribal structure and way of life. This policy should be implemented with the consultation and co-operation of the Bedouin residents and their tribal institutions.