

Bedouin - Minority Rights Group

Profile

The Bedouin are an indigenous people of the Negev desert in southern Israel, referred to by themselves as the Naqab. They are a semi-nomadic community that historically engaged in animal herding and grazing and agriculture. They mainly identify as Palestinian Arabs but use the term Bedouin to refer to their nomadic way of life.

Out of the 92,000 Bedouin living in the Negev in 1947, only 11,000 remained after the foundation of Israel. The others were never fully accounted for. Those who remained were treated particularly harshly, uprooted time and again and forced to live in reservations. Currently there are around 200,000 Bedouin in Israel, including some 80,000-90,000 living in 35 'unrecognized villages' at constant threat of eviction or forced displacement by authorities.

Israel has emphasized their distinctiveness and allows Bedouins but not other Palestinian Israelis to serve in the military. In socio-economic terms there is no doubt they were in many respects different from the peasantry in 1947, but state transformation of both communities into a subordinate landless rural proletariat has eroded such differences.

History

Prior to the formation of the Israeli state in 1948, over 92,000 Bedouin lived in the Negev and owned land under a clearly defined traditional system of individual and communal land ownership. Since 1948, the Israeli government has implemented a series of policies designed to take over Bedouin land. First, the government forced Bedouin into a smaller territory in the Negev known as the 'Siyag', meaning 'the fence' in Arabic. Some Bedouin families already lived in this designated area and the arrival of displaced people caused confusion and friction within the community. The Siyag is an area of approximately 1.5 million dunams, compared to the territory of 13 million dunams in which the Bedouin had originally lived.

During and immediately after the 1948 war that followed Israel's declaration of independence, most Bedouin were expelled or fled their homes and moved to Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. As a result, the Bedouin population in the Negev shrank from 92,000 to 11,000, representing just 19 of the original 95 tribes that lived in the area.

Between 1948 and 1966, the Israeli government passed laws that enabled the state to confiscate vast areas of Bedouin land for agricultural use, and to create nature reserves and military zones. For example, the 1953 Land Acquisition Law gave the state the right to register previously confiscated land in its name if the owner was not in possession of the property at the time. As Israel had by this time forcibly removed people from their traditional homes and/or into the Siyag, large amounts of Bedouin land were registered as state land under this law. Many people only discovered that

they had lost their land when they attempted to return.

In 1965, Israeli authorities created a master plan for the development and urbanization of the Negev through the Planning and Building Law. No Bedouin representatives participated in this planning process. This plan did not recognize Bedouin land ownership but declared most of their land as state-owned property. Houses or other structures built on these lands were deemed illegal. The law also ruled that unlicensed buildings could not be connected to facilities such as water and electricity.

During 1960s the government moved Bedouin into planned townships in the Negev. The first three townships established were Tel Sheva, Rahat and Kseif. Subsequently, seven townships in total were constructed. The authorities used different tactics, in some cases coercion, to move people into these townships, which are the poorest in Israel. The majority of Bedouin who opted to live in these townships were families that had been internally displaced by the creation of the Siyag.

The Bedouin of Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank have been subject to a series of human rights violations, including forced displacement, since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. They have been classified as a 'security threat' and branded as 'squatters' on state lands. Successive Israeli governments have sought to expropriate their land and concentrate them into townships. The Israeli authorities refuse to recognize them as an indigenous people, thereby withholding from them the full range of rights of indigenous peoples under international law.

Current issues

Bedouin in Israel's Negev desert live in some of the poorest conditions in Israel, deprived of basic rights, including the right to water, shelter and education. They live with the constant threat of eviction and home demolitions, under enormously stressful conditions that have a serious effect on their health and well-being. Indeed, over the years tens of thousands of Bedouin have been displaced and lost their lands. The Israeli authorities have pursued a slow and steady process of suppressing Bedouin's most basic human rights by not recognizing their villages and withholding basic facilities such as water, electricity and transport.

The state has also disrupted the Bedouin's traditional semi-nomadic way of life by taking over their land and restricting their movement. This has had far-reaching consequences for Bedouin, from increasing poverty levels and already high levels of unemployment to a loss of traditional culture. Today the Bedouin live in impoverished conditions in the Negev desert. They are not recognized by Israel as an indigenous population and are therefore deprived of specific rights accorded to indigenous peoples under international law.

One key issue for Israel's Bedouin population concerns the lack of free, prior and informed consent, which is a cornerstone of indigenous peoples' rights. Bedouin who live in villages that are not recognized by the Israeli authorities face frequent home demolitions. Hundreds of families have to watch as Israeli armed forces come with bulldozers and flatten their homes. A recent pressing case is that of the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hieran, which the government intends to pave over with a new

Jewish town. In January 2017, a Bedouin teacher and an Israeli police officer were killed during a police operation. The village was razed to the ground by the authorities in October for the 119th time since its first demolition in July 2010. The community finally signed an agreement in April 2018 to relocate to the nearby town of Hura, in order to avert further evictions and bloodshed.

The issue of the lack of meaningful participation as well as consent lay at the heart of Bedouin opposition to the Praver-Begin Plan, proposed in 2011 and approved by the Knesset in 2013. The Plan was meant to pave the way for the destruction of the 35 'unrecognised' Bedouin villages and the displacement of tens of thousands of Bedouin. Meeting considerable criticism, the Plan was later shelved, although a subsequent five-year economic development plan focusing on recognized locations – but not mentioning the 'unrecognised' villages – has led to widespread suspicions that the Plan is being implemented in all but name.

Meanwhile, the government supports the expansion of Israeli settlements in Bedouin lands in the occupied territories. Settlers face no similar restrictions on how and where they can live. According to the narrative of the government and mainstream Israeli society, the Bedouin are 'squatters' on state land and are often portrayed as 'dangerous' and a 'security threat'. This perception continues to be used to legitimize the destruction of Bedouin communities.

Hundreds of Bedouin have also been put at risk of statelessness with the denial or annulment of their Israeli nationality, despite many having contributed military service and tax for decades as part of Israel's citizenry, due to historic administrative errors that could potentially leave thousands without Israeli citizenship.