

What is Behind the Non-Recognition of the Bedouin Villages?

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The government of Israel is planning to invest roughly eight billion shekels in the relocation of approximately 40,000 rural Bedouin to overcrowded unemployment-stricken towns. This economically and socially irrational scheme is at the foundation of a government plan known as the Praver/Begin Plan. It must be noted that the transfer will be implemented forcefully, against the wish of the Bedouin, and will create additional tensions between the government and citizens who are being treated as subjects.

The Naqab (Negev) is large enough. Its area comprises approximately 60% of the area of the state, yet only 8% of the country's population lives in it. There is enough room for everyone – Bedouin and Jews. This is the claim made by Dr. Thabet Abu Ras, director of Adalah's office in the Naqab. Why are decision-makers, those who hold the reins of government, unable to reach the same conclusion? There is no moral justification, and no practical necessity, to force the Bedouin into unemployment-ridden towns when it has already proven that these are of no value – not to the state and not to its Bedouin citizens.

The State of Israel today rejects the traditional Bedouin method of land ownership, yet this is a system that was recognized not only by the British and the Ottomans but also by the Zionist movement itself. Zionist organizations that were active before the establishment of the State of Israel recognized Bedouin ownership of their land in the Naqab as can be seen from late 19th century diaries [Levontin] and until 1948. According to a comprehensive land survey conducted by the "Hachsharat Ha'yeshuv" company [Israel Land & Development Company] in 1920, almost three million dunams of land in the Naqab were under Bedouin ownership. Today, even if all of their claims are accepted, the Bedouin will dwell on 650,000 dunams. Is this a land takeover or just a matter of making do with what little there is?

Even if we assume that there is a justification for the above rejection of land claims and if we assume that Bedouin villages are situated on "state lands", the plan still constitutes criminal discrimination. Hundreds of Jewish agricultural communities (most of the moshavim and kibbutzim) are located on state land and the state of Israel leases the land to them for generations at a symbolic fee. The state does not demolish them or deny them electricity and water. The State of Israel only applies this policy to the Arab Bedouin.

In practice, the state is attempting to uproot the Bedouin from their villages and to concentrate them in townships so that they will live in a small area while at the same time allotting more land for the establishment of small Jewish settlements and lone, individual farms that are allocated only to Jews, sometimes on lands that were expropriated from the Bedouin. The Bedouin already live in overcrowded conditions when compared to the Jewish agricultural sector. In terms of distributive justice the density in unrecognized villages – including all of the land they claim – is more than six times that of the neighboring Jewish agricultural council, Bnei Shimon.

Israel justifies this policy in a way that deviates from any principle of decency and equality. The State of Israel wishes to step into the shoes of the Ottoman Empire – an occupying and undemocratic power– through the selective adoption of its laws and regulations that even the Ottomans did not impose on the Bedouin in practice, all in order to disinherit them. This created a moral dissonance even within the Committee for the Matter of Lands in the Negev headed by the right-wing attorney Plia Albeck who determined that "it is not humanly possible, [...], that Bedouin will be evicted from all of the area of the Siyag [...] despite many years of residence [in the area] only because of the claim that there was no rural or urban settlement in this locality in 1858" [quoted from the Adva Center Report]. And if the legal situation in the mid-19th century when the Ottoman land law was legislated is the dubious foundation for the determination of ownership today, as the Albeck committee maintained, then the conclusions that must be reached based on this principle, if adopted honestly, are much more far reaching. It is not possible to go back in time in such a selective and callous way in order to exclusively incriminate the Bedouin settlements and to deny their right to exist.

Behind this plan stands the aim of Judaizing the Naqab. The objective is not the settlement of Jews alongside the Bedouin but instead of the Bedouin, and at the expense of their living space. As a Jew who is connected to his tradition, I feel a deep shame for this policy, and a deep rage that the state ostensibly implements it also in my name.