

# **The Bedouin in Israel**

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**by Dr. Yosef Ben-David**

Dr. Ben-David is an associate researcher at the Jerusalem Institute of Israel Studies.

Israel's Bedouin citizens - a minority within the Arab minority - have in recent years received increased attention, both from the media and from government institutions.

The process of integrating the Bedouin into Israeli society takes place on two levels - the formal, i.e., by government policy; and the informal, i.e., by changing relationships with Israeli society in general and Jewish society in particular.

The process, as may be expected, is fraught with "natural" difficulties experienced by this cultural group:

- the transition from a traditional, conservative society which only a generation ago was nomadic, entails relinquishing values, customs and a traditional economy;
- the Bedouin have to cope with the process of urbanization - the very antithesis of their nomadic tradition - and the attending poverty and crime rate;
- the Bedouin to some extent fail to distinguish between objective difficulties and those connected with their changing sub-culture and thus feel an exaggerated sense of deprivation.

Yet a comparison of the situation of the Bedouin in Israel to that in Arab countries will show that Israeli Bedouin enjoy conditions that their brethren lack, mainly in two areas: welfare and land ownership.

Israel's attitude towards its Bedouin citizens has always been positive. Well aware of the difficulties of the Bedouin and based on a thorough knowledge of the subject, the last two governments have begun taking steps to solve the problems with unprecedented determination and allocation of the necessary funds.

A Ministerial Committee for the Advancement of Bedouin Affairs, comprising ten government ministers has been set up and, over the next four to five years, billions of NIS will be allotted for the implementation of the new programs. The Minister of National Infrastructure, who is responsible for construction and housing as well as for the Israel Lands Administration, has been empowered to negotiate with the Bedouin regarding land rights and has adopted a policy of a "once-and-for-all" solution to those problems.

## **Demography**

The Bedouin population in Israel currently numbers 170,000 persons, living in the following regions:

- some 110,000 in the Negev
- some 10,000 in the central region
- some 50,000 in the north

The Bedouin population has increased tenfold since the establishment of the State (1948), due to a high natural increase - about 5% - which is unparalleled in Israel, or elsewhere in the Middle East. A high fertility rate related to traditional social values regarding size of family and/or tribe as a political advantage, as well as modern health and medical services with easy access, which reduced infant mortality and increased life expectancy, are responsible for this figure.

## **Education**

More than anything else, education can contribute to the integration of the Bedouin into Israeli society. Under the Compulsory Education Law, every Bedouin child is entitled to twelve years of free education and the law is very strictly enforced, at least at the elementary school level. Three factors enhanced implementation: an awareness of the necessity and the benefits of an education as an economic and social-mobility tool; the idleness of children and youngsters in the wake of moving to permanent settlements (they had been the main labor force tending the fields and the livestock); and the establishment of a relatively large number of schools in the scattered locations of the Bedouin.

Within a single generation, the Bedouin of Israel have succeeded in reducing illiteracy from 95% to 25%; those still illiterate are aged 55 and above.

Thirty to fifty percent of the students in elementary schools (depending on location) go on to high school, a ratio similar to that elsewhere in the country's Arab sector. They attend Bedouin high schools in the Negev and Arab high schools in the central and northern regions of the country.

Some 650 Bedouin - 30% of the Bedouin high school graduates of 1998 - are enrolled at present in post-secondary education. About 60 percent of them attend teacher training colleges and 40 percent study at the universities (including the Technological College of Be'er Sheva). In addition, 35 students are enrolled in universities abroad, since they did not qualify for admission to Israeli institutions; the universities now tend to ease admission standards for Bedouin students.

## **Health Services**

The National Health Insurance Law (NHIL) which took effect on January 1, 1996 considerably improved health services for about 30% of the Bedouin population who had not belonged to a sick fund. According to the NHIL, every resident is entitled to a basket of health services provided by clinics, specialists and hospitals.

Mother-and-child care centers provide health education, check-ups monitoring development and immunization. Today, hardly any Bedouin women give birth at home; going to hospital makes the mother eligible for a grant from the National Insurance Institute and provides unaccustomed pampering.

## **The Bedouin in the Negev**

Most of the Bedouin tribes in the Negev hail from the Hejaz, a region in the north of the Arabian peninsula.

*Education:* At present there are 33 elementary schools, three high schools and three vocational schools for the Bedouin community in the Negev. At the elementary level, with an enrollment of 95%, the school population is made up of equal proportions of boys and girls. But because Bedouin society regards females as inferior and does not encourage them to study, girls make up no more than 10% of the pupils in high schools. At first many teachers had to be brought in from outside the community, today 60 percent of the teaching staff is Bedouin.

All the Bedouin high schools and 60% of the elementary schools in the Negev, are located in the seven Bedouin towns there. Over the past five years, extensive resources have been invested in schools, especially in buildings, services, water pipes, heating and more. Computers and laboratories have also been introduced.

*Health:* There are clinics in all seven Bedouin towns in the Negev (in Rahat, proclaimed a city in 1994, there are four clinics and a day-hospital). The medical staff includes Jews and Arabs; fifteen of them are Bedouin doctors. Most of the Bedouin living outside the towns can reach the clinics easily; in the more outlying areas, several mobile clinics provide services in the mornings.

A total of 12 clinics provide services in the Negev at present (one clinic per 6000 persons); another 10 clinics are in various stages of establishment. Hospital facilities are available in Be'er Sheva. If a gap still exists between health services in the rest of the country and in the Bedouin towns, it relates more to the physical domain than to the level of medicine.

*Land Rights:* In most countries in the Middle East the Bedouin have no land rights, only users' privileges. Israeli Law is derived largely from Mandatory (British) law which in turn incorporated much Ottoman law. Under Israeli law, a person who has not registered his/her land in the Land Registry cannot claim ownership; but in the mid 1970s Israel let the Negev Bedouin register their land claims and issued certificates as to the size of the tracts claimed. These certificates served as the basis for the "right of possession" later granted by the government. Following the signing of the Treaty of Peace with Egypt, it became necessary to move an airport to a locality inhabited by 5000 Bedouin. The government, recognizing these land claim certificates, negotiated with the certificate holders and paid compensation to them. Most moved to Bedouin townships, built houses and established businesses.

In recent years the Ministerial Committee for the Advancement of Bedouin Affairs has undertaken to solve the problem of land ownership and has been assured of the necessary funds. The government is willing to leave some 20% of the land claimed in Bedouin possession and to compensate them for the remainder. In the past, tensions relating to land ownership have led to violence. A solution is now possible, but it requires the willingness and goodwill of both partners.

Two kinds of land offenses make media headlines: illegal building and grazing in protected areas:

*Illegal building.* Tents and light structures (shacks and huts) built illegally are treated forgivingly. But construction of houses of stone or concrete without a building permit is considered an offense, since adequate infrastructure and services cannot be provided. Some 2,000 such locations with buildings already exist, scattered over an area of about 1,000 square kilometers.

*Grazing in protected areas.* Most of the livestock of the Bedouin in the Negev who keep flocks of sheep and goats are registered and approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, which provides pasture land outside the Negev for six to seven months of the year, since the carrying capacity of the Negev is limited. Owners who, for reasons of tax evasion, have not registered their livestock and do not receive Ministry of Agriculture services, frequently trespass on nature reserves or populated areas. They are liable to be punished under the law.

*Permanent locations:* The establishment of permanent towns did not begin until the Bedouin themselves constructed buildings to replace tents. But the urbanization process is by no means simple, as the planners have to deal with issues involving tradition and social structure and the Bedouin themselves have difficulty in articulating their wishes in planning terms.

The first Bedouin town, Tel Sheva, was founded in 1967. Here all possible mistakes were made, both by the planners and by government officials. Since then another six towns have been established in the Negev and an effort was made to learn from each previous experience. But the planning concept focused on urban settlement, while many Bedouin wanted to live in rural localities. Today there are plans to found such rural localities and it is hoped that they will satisfy the traditional aspirations of the Bedouin.

#### **The Bedouin urban population in the Negev (1998)**

|              |        |
|--------------|--------|
| Rahat        | 28,000 |
| Tel Sheva    | 7,000  |
| Aro'er       | 6,200  |
| Keseifa      | 5,500  |
| Segev Shalom | 2,600  |
| Hura         | 2,400  |
| Lakiya       | 1,500  |
| Total        | 53,200 |

The total Bedouin population of the Negev is about 110,000, which means that about 57,000 are still scattered in outlying areas. It will be Israel's task in the near future, to solve, together with the Bedouin, the problems of their settlement in towns and rural communities.

*Livelihood:* The desire of about 30% of the Bedouin in the Negev to retain traditional occupations - the raising of livestock and dry farming - as a source of primary or additional income, causes them to seek pasture land, the supply of which is decreasing due to development and increased quantities of livestock. Given the arid conditions of the Negev, the government, though increasing quotas from time to time, providing veterinary services and refraining from the importation of mutton, must limit

pasture land. This is at times depicted in the media as cruel, and the Bedouin as victims of high-handedness.

Other sources of livelihood are:

1. Thirty percent of the Bedouin in the Negev have permanent jobs (in factories, government services etc.).
2. A similar percentage of unskilled workers cannot obtain permanent jobs and they are the immediate victims when recession and unemployment strike. The National Insurance Law guarantees minimal income to the unemployed, the elderly, the disabled or ill and to orphans and widows.
3. In private enterprise: they have succeeded to capture three niches in which neither Jews nor Arabs compete (providing income to an estimated 25% of the population): as agricultural contractors with modern mechanical equipment; as owners of trucks, utility vehicles, buses and cabs, or as salaried employees of transportation companies; and as contractors for development work, involving the use of heavy mechanical equipment.

### **The Bedouin in Central Israel**

No Bedouin lived in central Israel in 1948. The fact that 10,000 currently live in this region is the result of migration from the Negev, due to two main factors:

**Pasture migration:** In 1957 the Negev was struck by drought which lasted for six years. The military administration, responsible for the Negev Bedouin localities at the time, came to the aid of the owners of large herds who requested permission to move to State-owned pasture land in central Israel. This migration led to the establishment of dozens of Bedouin settlements from Kiryat Gat to Mount Carmel, which developed pleasant social and political relations with their Jewish neighbors. In 1977 the government decided that the Bedouin should return to the Negev. Those who had land in the Negev returned there, but the majority remained in Central Israel, because they had abundant pasture land and some of the family members had found jobs, especially in and around the major Jewish cities. In 1992 a new policy, under which they were offered additional rural localities, was adopted; but the process of settlement will undoubtedly last many years.

**Labor migration:** The second factor that led to the migration of Bedouin to central Israel was the search for work, especially by families that lacked land and livestock. This migration process, which lasted from 1954 to 1970, created Bedouin centers in the cities of Ramle and Lod and the villages of Taibe and Kafr Kassem; lesser numbers settled in other Arab villages. The migrants belonged to two socio-economic groups: those who had left behind land in the Negev and those (the majority) who had not. The latter obtained permanent jobs and income and had no intention of leaving. Most of those who had left land in the Negev returned there in 1980, when the government recognized land claim certificates (see above - Land rights).

*In the cities:* The Bedouin who moved to Central Israel adapted quickly to urban life, free as they were of the social and political pressure of the Negev Bedouin who opposed moving to the townships set up for them by the government. They moved

into houses abandoned by Arabs who had fled the country during the War of Independence, or built shacks (such as the train-station section of Lod). The government is now planning housing projects, taking their traditional needs into consideration. Having become permanent residents and enjoying better national and municipal services, the Bedouin show much interest in both general and municipal politics. In these cities they have also developed special relations with the two dominant communities, the Arabs and new Jewish immigrants.

*In the villages:* Paradoxically, the Bedouin who migrated from the Negev to Arab villages were not able to create positive relations with the villagers, despite a common religion and language; they are, instead, considered foreign implants. In 1997 the Kafr Kassem Local Council published a leaflet criticizing their Bedouin neighbors, even demanding their eviction. The incompatibility between the Bedouin, who bought small plots of land for agriculture, and the villagers seems to be linked to the cultural-historical difference between farmers and desert dwellers. But like all Israeli citizens they enjoy education, health and welfare services, despite their claims of being discriminated against by the local authorities, especially in the separate neighborhoods that they have built for themselves in each village.

### **The Bedouin in Northern Israel**

The Bedouin in Galilee and the Jezreel valley, numbering about 50,000, unlike those in the Negev and in the Central region, hail from the Syrian desert. At the beginning of the century their nomadic way of life and militancy put them in a position to harass villages and demand tribute, giving them a sense of superiority over the fellahin (farmers). During the British Mandate the Galilee Bedouin were encouraged to purchase small plots of land and such purchases were recorded in the Land Registry as legal possession.

Towards the end of the British Mandate and during the struggle for the establishment of the State of Israel, many Bedouin joined the Jewish forces, believing that the Jewish state would be generous to them. This also explains the continued good relations after the establishment of the State, as manifested, first and foremost, in volunteering for the security forces and serving on the front lines; volunteering is considered by the Bedouin to be part of their blood-pact with the State of Israel.

One example of the good relations between the State and the Bedouin in the North is the tolerance displayed by the government regarding violations of building laws, non-expropriation of land and the establishment of the townships of Beit Zarzir and Ka'abiya.

### **Conclusion**

Whereas the Negev Bedouin are ambivalent in their attitude toward the State and their identification with it, the northern Bedouin identify with it almost fully. This is manifested, first and foremost, in the extent of volunteering for the security services. As a result, the Bedouin in the North are rewarded with a friendly attitude, both from the establishment and from Jewish society at large.

The "Blood Covenant" between the Bedouin and the State of Israel has its roots in pre-State times. Since then, Bedouin volunteers in the Israel Defense Forces have served valiantly in operations behind enemy lines, on intelligence missions, side by side with kibbutz members in special reconnaissance units and as trackers with the Border Police.

The Wall of Tears of the Yad Ed monument, sponsored by the Jezreel Regional Council, is inscribed with the names of 110 Bedouin fighters who fell in the service of their country.