



**UK Task Force**

on issues relating to Arab citizens of Israel

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## **Introductory Briefing: Bedouin in the Negev**

### **December 2011**

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#### **History and Demographics**

- At the end of 2011, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics recorded that there are 201,000 Bedouin in the Negev, accounting for between one quarter and one fifth of the population in the region.<sup>1</sup>
- The term “Bedouin” derives from the Arabic word “desert” and refers to tribes of traditionally pastoral desert-dwelling Arabs, who migrated from one place to another as a result of water scarcity and a lack of permanent pastoral land.
- Prior to the formation of the State of Israel approximately 90,000 Bedouin lived in the Negev under a traditional system of individual and community land ownership.
- During and immediately after the formation of the state, the population shrank to around 10,000, with the rest of the population having relocated to Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>2</sup>
- In the early 1950s, the Israeli military authorities moved all the remaining population to an area known as the ‘Siyag’, near Be’er Sheva and, in 1953, the Israeli government passed the ‘Land Acquisition Law’, which gave the state the right to register the lands previously occupied by the Bedouin. Following this, the Israeli authorities created a master plan for the development and urbanisation of the Negev.
- Between 1968 and 1990, the government resettled half the Bedouin population into seven government-planned towns. The other half of the population resisted relocation and remained in unrecognised villages, ineligible for municipal services such as connection to the electrical grid, water mains or refuse collection.
- The resulting situation is one of unresolved tension between the Bedouin and the state over land issues.

#### **Recent Government Responses to Land Issues**

- Over the past decade, successive Israeli governments have attempted to formulate new policies to regulate unrecognised Bedouin settlements.
- In 2007, the Knesset announced it would establish a committee to recommend solutions to the lack of land and planning policies for the Negev Bedouin. The Committee for Regulation of Bedouin Settlements in the Negev, directed by Judge Eliezer Goldberg, published its findings in 2008.
- Its central recommendations were to: grant recognition to unrecognised villages, freeze home demolitions, and recognise the Bedouin as equal citizens of the state with historical, ancestral ties to the land.
- However, the report was criticised by the Regional Council for Bedouin Unrecognised Villages in the Negev (RCUV)<sup>3</sup>, an NGO set up to advocate on behalf of the unrecognised villages, on the basis that it failed to include a definitive timetable for implementing the plan, or a means for improving social services.

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<sup>1</sup> CBS, Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2011, table 2.6. See:

[http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ\\_shnaton\\_e.html?num\\_tab=st02\\_06x&CYear=2011](http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_06x&CYear=2011)

<sup>2</sup> Falah, Ghazi. "Israeli State Policy towards Bedouin Sedentarization in the Negev"; *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 19 (2), pp. 71-90 (1989)

<sup>3</sup> The Regional Council of Unrecognised Villages is a non-governmental organisation set up by the Bedouin community to advocate on behalf of unrecognised villages. It is not a recognised local authority.

- A team under the leadership of Ehud Praver, Head of Policy Planning in the Prime Minister's Office, was commissioned in 2009 to implement the recommendations of the Goldberg Committee and find a solution to the problem of unrecognised villages in the Negev.
- The plan was approved by the Cabinet in September 2011.<sup>4</sup> Its main recommendations are:
  - To demolish the majority of unrecognised villages and relocate their inhabitants to the seven government-planned towns or the 10 villages that are in the process of recognition.
  - To resolve land ownership claims within a fixed five year period, with financial compensation for people who can prove they have worked the land they lay claim to. The right to receive compensation is based on ownership claims that were filed by the Bedouin from 1971-1979 and will amount to up to 50% of the land claimed. Compensation for the remaining 50% of land will only be made available after the initial 50% has been relinquished to the State.
  - To reduce the economic and social gaps between the Bedouin and Israeli society as a whole through a 1.2 billion NIS (£205 million) scheme for economic development in the Negev.
- The government views this as a very generous proposal given the lack of land ownership documentation and the level of financial compensation included in the proposal, which is higher than originally specified in the Goldberg Report.
- However, this plan has been met by strong criticism from the Bedouin population (who were not included in the planning process), largely because the plan reneges on many of the recommendations made in the Goldberg Report. Demonstrations have been organised in Be'er Sheva and the surrounding areas, as well as outside the Prime Minister's Office on 11 December 2011. The wider Arab population in Israel called a general strike on that same day in solidarity with the Bedouin.

### Socio-Economic Status

- Bedouin communities in the Negev are by far Israel's most disadvantaged group in terms of per capita income, unemployment, poverty rate, education and public infrastructure.
- The poor socio-economic status of the Bedouin results from a number of factors, including Bedouin cultural traditions (e.g. consanguineous [blood-related] marriages, polygamy, patriarchal society) and inadequate social service provision.
- Yet, in many respects, the Bedouin have benefited a great deal from becoming citizens of Israel. For example, education has been one of the major agents of modernisation. Within a single generation, since the Compulsory Education Law came into effect in 1949, illiteracy was reduced from 95% to 25%.<sup>5</sup>
- However, there is still a huge disparity between the socio-economic status of Bedouin compared to Jewish and Arab communities more generally. Bedouin settlements in the Negev are traditionally characterised by the highest poverty rates in Israel. In 2007, 71.5% of Bedouin households were under the poverty line, compared to 54.5% and 16.2% in the Arab and Jewish sectors, respectively.<sup>6</sup>
- According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics' socio-economic ranking of 400 localities in Israel, the four lowest-ranking local councils are the government-established Bedouin towns (Tel-Sheva, Kseife, Ara'ara and Segev-Shalom).<sup>7</sup>
- Only 21% of the Bedouin population is employed: 35% receive income support benefits, 8% receive elderly benefits, 5% receive handicap benefits and 26% receive unemployment insurance. An estimated 80% of the residents of the unrecognised villages live below the poverty line.<sup>8</sup>

### Political Representation

- Of the 120 Knesset members, one is a Bedouin - Taleb al-Sana, of the Arab Democratic Party and member of the United Arab List (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister's Office Press Release, *Cabinet Approves Plan to Provide for the Status of Communities in, and the Economic Development of the Bedouin Sector in the Negev*, (PMO: 11 September 2011) at:

<http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/Spokesman/2011/09/spokenegev110911.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Yosef Ben-David, *The Bedouin in Israel*, (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 1 July 1999). See:

[http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1990\\_1999/1999/7/The+Bedouin+in+Israel.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1990_1999/1999/1999/7/The+Bedouin+in+Israel.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Suleiman Abu-Bader and Daniel Gottlieb, *Poverty, Education and Employment in the Arab-Bedouin Society: A Comparative View* (Jerusalem: National Insurance Institute, Research and Planning Administration, June 2009). See:

[http://www.btl.gov.il/Publications/research/Documents/mechkar\\_98.pdf](http://www.btl.gov.il/Publications/research/Documents/mechkar_98.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Natalya Zibel, *Characterisation and Classification of Local Authorities by the Socio-Economic Level of the Population, 2006* (Jerusalem: CBS, November 2009). See: [http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=200924244](http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=200924244)

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Epstein, *The Negev Bedouin: Social and Economic Rights*, (November 2011, p.2). See:

<http://www.uktaskforce.org/docs/bedouin-description--non-land-centered-.pdf>

- In recent years, the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel has increased its presence among the Negev Bedouin, filling the gap in social needs. Unlike its Northern counterpart, the Southern Branch takes part in Knesset elections and is generally seen to be less radical.
- In the November 2008 municipal elections, four out of six heads of Bedouin localities in the Negev were elected as candidates of the Islamic Movement. Similarly, in the February 2009 Knesset elections, almost 73% of the Bedouin vote went to the United Arab List, in which the Islamic Movement is a major component.<sup>9</sup>

### **Military Service**

- Bedouin have volunteered to the Israeli Army since the early days of statehood. The IDF maintains an all-Bedouin combat battalion and a reconnaissance regiment with several hundred Bedouin soldiers and officers.
- In recent years, following the October 2000 events and the rift in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, fewer Bedouin (from the Negev and the Galilee) have joined the IDF. In 2011, 492 Bedouin volunteered to military service. Although this figure represents an increase from 345 volunteers in 2005, some argue that Bedouin youngsters are feeling increasingly disenfranchised and more needs to be done to encourage them to join the IDF.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For further details, see: Ephraim Lavie and Arik Rudnitzky (editors), *Arab Politics in Israel and the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset Elections*, no. 2 (Tel Aviv University, The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation, 12 March 2009), at:

<http://www.dayan.org/kapjac/files/Elections2009eng2.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See IDF Website, *Chief of Staff meets with Bedouin, Druze leaders*, (IDF: 6 November 2011), at: <http://www.idf.il/1086-13737-EN/Dover.aspx>; and Moshe Arens, *The Bedouin Minority must be integrated*, (Haaretz: 14 June 2011), at: <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/the-bedouin-minority-must-be-integrated-1.367548>