



SELF-DISTRACTION FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS:

BEDOUIN VILIFIED AMONG TOP 10 ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS IN ISRAEL

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The 'Promised Land' has in a matter of decades become a 'Poisoned Land,' reveals the November 10th weekend edition of the widest-read Israeli daily, *Ma'ariv*.

According to the article, Israel's 10 major polluters include industrial polluters, wealthy contractors, waste dumps, and the indigenous Bedouin of the Negev/Naqab Desert.

The *Ma'ariv* piece was a near-verbatim transcript of a conversation with none other than the Director of the prestigious Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Alon Tal. Tal prominently featured the indigenous Bedouin as spoilers of the beauty and health of the 'Promised Land' on 'equal' par with the largest regional toxic waste facility, high-rises, a superhighway, a sprawling shopping center, electro-chemical plants in Akko, and a Haifa ammonia tank.

Those who cast Bedouin as environmental hazards often fail to note that Negev Arabs were secured as cheap labor to construct toxic regional infrastructure on confiscated Bedouin lands, infrastructure to which they ultimately have little access, and from which they suffer major health impacts.

The Bedouin as Hazards to the Health and Beauty of the 'Promised Land'

Tal concluded his interview with *Ma'ariv* with the declaration: "As someone who deals with ecology and environmentalism I have to speak the truth."

"The Bedouin harm open areas. They create a situation of over-grazing, which brings about land erosion. There are fifty-thousand illegal structures in the Negev built by Bedouin. They are halting the development of the area since nothing can be done with land they've occupied. It's not fair towards the general public, who're supposed to enjoy these open spaces, to go on a retreat and even ride a jeep through the open landscape." As this writer would have, *Ma'ariv* journalist Sarah Leibovitz-Dar queried, "So you suggest wiping out Bedouin culture so that Yuppies can drive in jeeps?"

Those ecologists that fail to see destitute Bedouin as sharing the same level of responsibility as corporate polluters flush with cash, those advocates who refuse to vilify the population suffering the worst effects of pollution in Israel – are they less honest than Tal?

Unfortunately, Tal is not at all alone in his 'honesty.' One advisor to the Ministry of the Environment who refused to be named put it more bluntly: "The Bedouin are an environmental hazard. They throw their trash everywhere and they're having children all over the place. They steal our land." Never mind that the unrecognized villages 'enjoy' extremely irregular and limited municipal trash pick-up.

As Bedouin are stigmatized, classed with corporate polluters, corporations are being rewarded for making inroads towards environmental management. In mid November, Bilha Givon of the NGO Negev Sustainability (a well-known advocate of Green-Industry partnerships), will give over environmental awards to Israel's top polluters, most of them located at the Ramat Hovav Industrial Council, the largest toxic waste facility in the region and the custodian of over half the nation's industries. Ramat Hovav will now add Bilha's award to the long list of awards prominently featured on their website, from The Council for Beautiful Israel, the Israel Standards Institute, and the Ministry of Environment, among others.

The Dumpyards of the Desert: The Hazards of Modernization

Naqab Arabs share some 2.5 % of the desert with Israel's nuclear reactors, 22 agro and petrochemical factories, an oil terminal, closed military zones, quarries, a toxic waste incinerator, cell towers, a power plant, several airports, a prison, and 2 rivers of open sewage. Due to constant exposure to toxicity and radiation, the risk of cancer for residents in this entire area is significantly higher than the rest of the country, according to a 2004 preliminary Israeli Ministry of Health study.

"If it were me, I would pick my children up in the middle of the night and take them away from this place that is worse than hell. They are sacrificing their children for a political agenda," Negev planner Rami Charuvi told Devorah Brous, director of the environmental justice organization Bustan, this spring. "If it were me, would I care more about the land, or about my children? The problem with the Bedouin is that they care more about their land." Charuvi referred specifically to the Al-Azazme tribe, settled adjacent to Ramat Hovav.

Throughout the 1950's, like all other Naqab Bedouin tribes, the Al-Azazme were forcibly displaced from their land holdings to the "Siyag" (fence) area between Arad, Dimona and Beer Sheva. About half of the tribe was forcibly settled in the area now known as Wadi el Na'am, and in 1979 Ramat Hovav, Israel's hazardous waste disposal facility was built on village grounds. Most of the men of Wadi el-Na'am sought employment within the new Ramat Hovav Industrial Area.

Early on, the Ramat Hovav toxic waste facility was privately run and underwent no government regulation. Waste did not undergo any pre-treatment before transport to the site. Storage facilities were weak, barrels often rusted, and toxic residues went unlabelled. Reactive materials were

stored near containers of cyanide. Despite the area's perceived invulnerability, cracks were found in the rock beneath Ramat Hovav.

From its inception, the facility developed a history of accidents and closures. Within a year, the Ministry of Health ordered the closure of the site, and within three, the company went under the management of a government corporation. Under government management, the site fared poorly as well. Every few years, Ramat Hovav would catch fire, killing or injuring workers, shepherds, sheep, donkeys or soldiers stationed nearby, and wafting a toxic cloud over Wadi el Na'am, Beer Sheva, and surrounding villages. Every once in a while, regional councils would discover that the evaporation pools of Ramat Hovav's Machteshim chemical factory had overflowed, or that waste was leaking from drainage pipes into their reservoir. Nearly ten years after its establishment, outcrops of the chalk under Ramat Hovav showed fractures potentially leading to serious soil and groundwater contamination in the future.

A decade later, Al-Quds al-Arabi reported that Israeli companies were engaging in illegal dumping of toxic waste to avoid the cost of treatment and transport to Ramat Hovav. While it cost about \$65 to hire a driver to dump a five-ton truck of waste in the West Bank, to dispose of the same volume at Ramat Hovav cost more than \$11,000. Around the same time, Ramat Hovav reported that only 18-19% of the toxic waste that should be delivered to the site ever arrived. The rest was dumped illegally throughout Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. A large portion of Israel's toxic waste was (and is to this day) illegally hauled to the Tul Karem dump, atop the regional aquifer serving the central West Bank and Tel Aviv-Triangle area.

When an explosion occurred in tin barrels storing organo-phosphorus pesticides in 1997, the 7,000-8,000 Negev Arab residents of adjacent villages were not warned and suffered daily danger until they were evacuated. The absence of any regulated emergency alert system seems to persist to this day: Ramat Hovav's website Emergency Regulation section still reads: "under construction."

Wadi el-Na'am is the only unrecognized village that has agreed to move from its current location, with proper compensation in the form of suitable land rights. Despite the horrific conditions of life in the village, the Al-Azazmeh would rather maintain a vestige of semi-autonomy, than shift to an urban township rife with the social breakdown resulting from near-total joblessness, crime and drugs - a move signifying a kind of cultural suicide.

Recently, a plan to relocate Tel Aviv army bases and construct a so-called 'Boot Camp City' for army professionals and their families was sidelined in favor of expanding Ramat Hovav. And instead of implementing a unanimous 2004 government decision to abate pollution, Ramat Hovav is tripling its incinerators. Rather than investing a fraction of its billions in adhering to basic environmental standards, Ramat Hovav is now seeking funding from the government for clean-up. This November, Bilha Givon, Alon Tal, and several other key Israeli environmental figures met

with the top Ramat Hovav CEOs to discuss regulations for the new incinerators. No amount of environmental regulation could be enough to convince the residents of Wadi Na'am that they are safe.

Government officials will not stand for the suggestion that the location of toxic infrastructure on Negev Arab lands is an effective strategy to convince the Bedouin to renounce their ancestral land claims. Nevertheless, Ehud Leumi party leader Beni Alon's remark (of the 'transfer party'), "We will make their lives so hard they will ask to leave," has particular 'resonance' for Naqab Arabs.

'Civilization' as a 'Containment' of the Bedouin Hazard

In the 50's, Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion claimed the Bedouin should be expelled "not in order to dispossess the Arabs of the Naqab/Negev...but in order to guarantee our own right to settle." It was in a similar vein that Israeli 'war hero' Moshe Dayan said in the years leading up to the building of the first recognized townships, "Without coercion but with governmental direction ... this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear." Committing ethnocide was represented as a requisite effect of the modernization of the region; Yet in effect, the government strangled traditional culture without introducing viable opportunities for constructive modernization.

In practical terms, the government regards the land on which unrecognized villages reside space that could be used to accommodate new Jewish growth and address the problem of over-development further north. To illustrate, the Koenig Report on Handling the Arabs in Israel recommended: "Expand and deepen Jewish settlement in areas where the continuity of the Arab population is prominent...examine the possibility of diluting existing Arab populations." The Council of Unrecognized Villages stresses that despite the fact that the residents of the unrecognized villages comprise more than 14% of Naqab/Negev residents, the unrecognized villagers hold a mere 1.3% of lands in the Naqab/Negev.

"We need to handle the root of the problem, which is the status of the Bedouin," says Tal. "In Jordan they've moved the Bedouin to permanent communities without hurting their honor..." In Jordan, a majority-Bedouin nation ruled by a Bedouin monarchy, access to land takes on incomparable dimensions. In Israel, the final vestiges of indigenous Naqab culture will be permanently wiped out if the Bedouin relinquish their last remaining land holdings.

In mainstream Israeli society, many see Bedouin villages as the settlements of lawless encroachers pitching their tents on random hilltops, without regard for planning law or Israeli development needs. Prominent environmentalists such as Alon Tal have lent further legitimacy to such perceptions by depicting unrecognized villages strewn with tin shacks as a form of illegal junkyard. In turn, he compares them to settlers who steal open land meant for public use. "All

around the Negev you can see shacks and tents of Bedouin who have built illegally, and you can definitely add to that category the Jewish pioneer settlers, who take up large plots of land."

Tal's sentiments echo decades-old rhetoric. An article by Gideon Kressel dating back to the 1970's read: "Illegal building spreads with alacrity; scores of structures are erected regardless plan or order... In several instances the herdsmen violently refused to remove their herds claiming that the field had belonged to their forefathers..."

Greenwashing Militarism (Or, Greenwashing the 'Green Patrol' Uniform)

In 1979, Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon declared the Negev south of the 50-degree latitude a protected nature reserve, rendering it almost completely out of bounds for Bedouin herders. Then, Sharon's Agriculture Ministry established the 'Green Patrol,' an environmental paramilitary unit with the mission of fighting so-called Bedouin infiltration into national Israeli land, by preventing Bedouin from creating facts on the land and grazing their animals.

In a 1977 Ha'aretz article, reporter Dan Margalit quoted Hillel Adiri of the Green Patrol, "...if the settlement is moved - even if only by several hundred meters - the dating of the settlement begins anew.' Thus, there were several occasions when the Green Patrol simply entered the campsite, killed a few dogs and forced the camp elder to move his tent to a different location and so to lose the accumulated years." In addition to uprooting Bedouin encampments, the Green Patrol's main task was to enforce the Black Goat Law of 1950, which prohibited grazing on a large scale.

In 1978, Israel's three top desert ecologists sent a letter to the Jerusalem Post insisting that the Black Goat Law was outmoded and arguing the ecological and economic advantages of managed goat-grazing on the Negev ecosystem. As Tal himself pointed out in an earlier book, they argued that soil productivity relies on disturbed soil and benefits from the nutrients in animal droppings; undisturbed soil is prone to salt, algae and lichen crusting, which prevents seed germination. Furthermore, dominant species are kept in check by grazing. The Negev Desert, as we know it, was not a wild land untouched by human influence: Rather, the Bedouin, like indigenous peoples globally, had been impacting and managing their home ecosystem for centuries or even millennia. The solution was not to endanger the black goat, which was an intrinsic part of the desert ecosystem, but to manage it. Otherwise-valid environmental justifications for restricting grazing have been invoked in the IDF's favor to an extreme degree, in effect forwarding policies which annihilate the last vestiges of the Bedouin grazing tradition.

During Sharon's tenure as Minister of Agriculture (1977-1981), the Green Patrol removed 900 settlements and cut goat herds by more than 1/3. We may recall that, as a principle force behind the Gaza colonies, Sharon also envisaged a Negev propagated with Jewish settlements. In turn, during the 'Withdrawal' the 'pioneering spirit' of a portion of Gaza settlers was channeled towards the Negev.

Similarly, the JNF has suggested that the zeal of American Zionists should also be channeled towards the Negev, "allow(ing) us to be 21st century pioneers and to once again be part of a nation under creation," as former American-JNF President Ronald Lauder says, and "answer(ing) the need for Jews in the Diaspora looking to make aliyah the pioneering way." In order to make way for the American-JNF's plans to attract 500,000 new 'pioneers' in a decade, the government has resolved to settle the 'Native Problem' once and for all.

Last spring, just prior to the Israeli national planting holiday, 2,500 dunams of Bedouin fields - including those planted by the Vice Mayor of Rahat - were destroyed by the Green Patrol. On the holiday, an assembly of politicians from Sharon's Kadima party stuck a smattering of saplings into pre-dug holes in a JNF desert forest. Planting for PR purposes, the candidates obtained permits and 'made the desert bloom.' Engaged in self-subsistence, the Bedouin villagers did not, and 'broke the law.'

This is hardly the first time crop-destruction has transpired. For instance, twice in 2003, the Israel Land Administration sent crop-dusting planes to spray Bedouin farmland without regard for the elderly and children in the fields below. Members of the Green Patrol accompanied a large police force on the ground.

The ironic practice of uprooting on the verge of a planting festival reinforces the Palestinian perception that Ben Gurion's vision of "making the desert bloom" is transparent code for "propagating" Jewish settlements and "transplanting" Arab villages. The Israeli government employs this green rhetoric to conceal hegemonic political goals to demarcate contested space. Over 70,000 Bedouin in unrecognized villages are daily engaged in *sumud*, steadfast struggle to stay on their lands in defiance of a process of internal transfer. As such, Naqab Palestinians of the unrecognized villages live under a kind of "unrecognized occupation."

Says Bustan member and Horticultural Manager at Adam v Chava, Chaim Feldman: "They spread pesticides on Bedouin crops so the Bedouin won't root themselves. So the land will be for: the Jewish people. The desert could have bloomed, in a much more sustainable manner, if Israeli policy would have understood the potential here. If every Bedouin village had been recognized, and they could farm, you would see olive orchards and pastures and with a little government help, modern agriculture."

Unfortunately, as far building settlements for Jews and demolishing Arab homes go, a few 'making the desert bloom' allusions and a little 'pioneer lingo' can go a long way. As far as the State's attitude towards Arabs, the olive green of militarism overrides that of the olive branch - i.e. working cooperatively to 'green the desert.' Rather than subsidizing the efforts of Bedouin citizens to grow food at the crux of desert-greening efforts, the State of Israel has created an institutional version of radical settlers who uproot ancient groves to "redeem" land for Jews, in the 'Green Patrol'. Bedouin citizens of Israel are thus classed with West Bank Palestinians who find their

orchards daily destroyed by settlers. In turn environmentalists such as Tal reinforce this equation by categorizing Bedouin with settlers, effectively downplaying the planned transfer of 70,000 Bedouin from lands roved since the spread of Islam in contrast with the removal of a few thousand Gaza colonists in settlements a few decades old.

When the 'Enemy' is not Arab

In casting Bedouin as polluters, Israelis are being distracted from a crisis of feeble environmental regulation in Israel. The depiction of Bedouin as environmental hazards represents the most insidious kind of greenwashing. It casts the very persistence of the Bedouin way of life as intrinsically harmful to the sanctity of the land. And it presents the Bedouin among the chief obstacles in the way of the Zionist dream of 'making the desert bloom'.... when in actuality the Bedouin presence mainly represents a threat to the Zionist reality of sprawling Jewish-only development. It goes without saying that the true 'hazard' is not the Bedouin, but factories and toxic waste dumps, and their efforts to keep a burgeoning environmental health crisis under raps.

According to industry insider and public health expert David Bargror, Israel suffers a 12 million dollar annual loss in hospitalization and health care costs due to pollution damage. Says Bargror, a recently-retired specialist in environmental damage: "There are no real environmental regulations in Israel. We allow substances banned in every other developed country. From all the developed countries in the world, we are one of the only countries that doesn't offer training in environmental damage and management." Just to offer one example recently reported on the internet news site Nana, 50 out of 400 food substances proven dangerous to human health and banned in almost every other developed nation worldwide are still in use in Israel today. Bargror himself helped to found Haifa Chemicals (one of Israel's largest corporations): "I come from industry, so I know what goes on in there. Every company that initiates construction is supposed to conduct an environmental impact assessment, but the assessors are hired by the factories, and no one checks up to make sure the assessments are conducted properly, ethically. The assessors are easily bought out."

Bargror says Israel has developed first-world consumption patterns without accompanying first-world regulations. "We invite companies to come here to further 'build' and 'develop' the country, so that we will feel as modern as possible; And here the labor is more expensive for them than in, say, Indonesia, but then, the labor is also more skilled, and they don't have to pay for environmental cleanup." The result, says Bargror: "We are simply a State in the process of suicide. The fact is, the Bible makes the Jewish people a symbol of a people who help each other and take care of each other, but we don't even take care of our own: Forget about the Bedouin, we are exploiting ourselves."

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