



**THE NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE  
IN BEDOUIN URBAN TOWNSHIPS: THE END OF SELF-SUBSISTENCE**  
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By Rebecca Manski, BUSTAN

*We should transform the Bedouins into an urban proletariat - in industry, services, construction, and agriculture. 88% of the Israeli population are not farmers, let the Bedouin be like them. Indeed, this will be a radical move which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on...*

-Moshe Dayan to Haaretz, 1963

It was in a similar vein that 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."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, today, many prefer to call themselves 'Negev Arabs' rather than 'Bedouin,' explaining that 'Bedouin' identity is intimately tied in with a pastoral nomadic way of life – a way of life they say is over. Although the Bedouin continue to be perceived as nomads, today all of them are fully sedentarized, and about half are urbanites.

This article sketches the rapid transition of Negev Arabs from rural to urban life, from an environmental justice perspective -- with special attention to ways that State mechanisms have discouraged subsistence herding and encouraged the indigenous Bedouin population to concentrate in government-built townships. In conjunction with confiscation of agricultural and herding lands and the subsequent loss of means of self-subsistence, has come the development of health problems related to rapid urbanization. The rapidity of the transition has resulted in a lost sense of self-sufficiency, just as harmful to the existential health of the Bedouin as to physical wellbeing.

Environmental concerns are inextricable from social and political challenges facing the residents of this region. Until we can address the existing strain on resources with which Israel already contends, until we can conceive of radical new ways to accommodate the Negev's current inhabitants without further degrading and deteriorating the physical and existential health of its people - we should not be considering yet more unsound urban development which falls into the status quo mold. *Ultimately, this will lead to a heightened struggle over land and resources, exacerbating the conflict between the Jewish and Arab peoples locally and regionally.*

#### *The Urbanization Process*

Counter to the image of the Bedouin as fierce stateless nomads roving the entire region, by the turn of the 20th century, much of the Bedouin population was settled, semi-nomadic, and engaged in agriculture according to an intricate system of land ownership, grazing rights, and water access.<sup>2</sup> After 1948, the new State of Israel imposed a military administration over the region, declared most of the desert a closed military zone and designated 85% of the Negev "State Land." All Bedouin habitation on this newly-declared State Land was retroactively termed illegal and "unrecognized." Now that Negev lands the Bedouin had inhabited upwards of 500 years was designated State Land, the Bedouin were directly severed from their sole means of self-subsistence – agriculture and grazing. The government then forcibly concentrated these Bedouin tribes into the *Siyag* (Arabic for 'fence') region near Beer Sheva, declared the Siyag

<sup>1</sup> "Interview with Dayan," *Haaretz*, July 31, 1963

<sup>2</sup>F. Ghazi, "The Spatial Pattern of Bedouin Sedentarization in Israel," *GeoJournal*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 361-68; 1985  
"Semi-nomadic" in this case refers to movement within a limited 12-13 km radius.

closed, and enabled the military governor to impose strict movement restrictions. The Bedouin were hedged in physically, economically and psychically.<sup>3</sup>

In order to reinforce the invisible Siyag fence, the State employed a reining mechanism, the Black Goat Law of 1950. The Black Goat Law curbed grazing so as to prevent land erosion by prohibiting the grazing of goats outside one's recognized land holdings. Since few Bedouin land claims were recognized, most grazing was thereby rendered illegal. Those whose land claims were recognized found it almost impossible to keep their goats within the periphery of their newly limited range, and into the 1970's and '80's, only a small portion of the Bedouin were able to continue to graze their goats. Instead of migrating with their goats in search of pasture, the majority of the Bedouin migrated in search of wage-labor.<sup>4</sup>

In 1979 Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon declared the region south of the 50-degree latitude a protected nature reserve, rendering a major portion of the Negev almost entirely out of bounds for Bedouin herders. In conjunction, he established the 'Green Patrol,' the 'environmental paramilitary unit' with the mission of fighting Bedouin 'infiltration' into national Israeli land by preventing Bedouin from creating facts on the land and grazing their animals. During Sharon's tenure as Minister of Agriculture (1977-1981), the Green Patrol removed 900 Bedouin encampments and cut goat herds by more than 1/3.

Denied access to their former sources of sustenance, severed from the possibility of access to water, electricity, roads, education, and health care in the unrecognized villages, and trusting in government promises that they would receive services if they moved, tens of thousands of Bedouin resettled in seven legal towns constructed by the government. Harvey Lithwick of the Negev Center for Regional Development points out that the towns did not offer any alternative means of livelihood, to self-subsistence off the land: "...the major failure was a lack of an economic rationale for the towns..."<sup>5</sup> Today, Dayan's vision of the transformation of the indigenous Bedouin into an urban proletariat has both manifested and failed: In the most established of Bedouin towns, over 25% of Bedouin men (not to speak of the women) are unemployed.<sup>6</sup>

The government's approach to urban development in the 'Last Frontier' has replicated the same paradigm of energy-inefficient and water-intensive cement development projects implanted in desert cities around the world – and it has done so at the expense of equitable allocation of resources. While the Bedouin township of Tel Sheva is filled with sun-baked, grass-less, gravel-filled lots, its affluent Jewish neighbour, Omer, is a wasteful suburban oasis replete with grassy lawns and gardens, air-conditioned shopping plazas, and swimming pools at the heart of a parched land.

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<sup>3</sup> G.M. Kressel, "Changes in Employment and Social Accommodations of Bedouin Settling in an Israeli Town," *The Changing Bedouin*, p. 146; Transaction Books, date unknown

Due to the prohibition against leasing lands to non-Jews at the time, the Bedouin were not allowed to rent farmland. Furthermore, Negev Arabs were allowed to leave the Siyag only with special permits, and as a result, the Bedouin were unable to openly conduct trade in their ancient regional trade center of Beer Sheva.

<sup>4</sup> Following the disintegration of a decade-long ban on hiring non-Jewish labor, thousands of Negev Bedouin moved north in search of work on Jewish farms. Others remained at home in the south and spent half the week working for Israelis in the north, unable to move freely due to the work and travel permits required under Military Rule.

<sup>5</sup> H. Lithwick, "An Urban Development Strategy for the Negev's Bedouin Community," p.3; Negev Center for Regional Development and The Center for Bedouin Studies and Development, August 2000

<sup>6</sup> R. Sinai, "Number of jobless hits all-time high;" Haaretz, September 27, 2004

The two chief stable sources of employment for Negev Arabs - the IDF and Ramat Hovav toxic waste facility – are inherently hazardous occupations and directly challenge the basis of Bedouin culture. Working as soldiers entails enforcing borders which inherently restrict their original nomadic way of life. And employment in Ramat Hovav involves processing some of the most destructive substances known to humankind, also proven poisonous to Bedouin agriculture and herds. The only remaining options include reliance on welfare, dependence on crime, or, wherever possible, self-subsistence agriculture.

In the end, concentrating the Bedouin into urban townships has hardly served to preserve the pristinity of the 'Last Frontier.' Not long after Sharon's 1979 decision to set aside a portion of the Negev as a nature reserve, the military soon took over the State Lands from which the Bedouin had been evicted, conducting environmentally harmful exercises on JNF lands designated as park space.<sup>7</sup> The remaining portion of the Negev available for civilian purposes has come to be regarded as "Israel's waste dump." In just a few decades, Jewish immigrants and Bedouin who once roved the entire region have come to 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 Jewish and Arab residents in this region is significantly higher than the rest of the country, according to a 2004 preliminary Israeli Ministry of Health study.

### *Unhealthy Aspects of Urban Life*

In urban townships, Bedouin have access to a wide range of services vital to their health. They live closer to clinics. They receive the electricity necessary for powering medical equipment. Living in houses with heat, rather than the corrugated tin shacks of the unrecognized villages, residents have less of a chance of suffering heatstroke in the summer and premature children have a greater chance of survival in the winter. With stores nearby, they have access to food. They have access to water. These factors combined have advanced Bedouin health considerably.

At the same time, each of these advancements has been accompanied by significant disadvantages. Says Mariam Abu Regayek, Bustan's partner in Tel Sheva, and proprietor of an organic desert herb company: "When you concentrate a people that once lived independently off the land, as herders, as free nomads without any boundaries.....they become dependent consumers and laborers. We have become imprisoned by borders and by roads and by zoning practices. We have become a people that buys what we need and no longer remembers how to make what we need. We work in factories and shop to meet our needs and eat processed foods that make us sick."

The erection of a rigid *built environment* has introduced new hazards for a people formerly accustomed to open-air tents or buildings of stone and soil.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Aziza Abu Freih, a nurse at Soroka Hospital says, the lack of government investment in public infrastructure and services for children in urban townships leads youth to create their own atmospheres of play out of areas rife with hazards. Children transform trash-heaps of broken metal, deserted cars, electrical pylons, drainage basins, etc. into playgrounds. "Because they don't have a place to play, it is common for children to climb into the gutters and explore or swim in the drain pipes or the cachement basins by roads...They try to splash one another and get problems with bugs and bacteria, or they drown."

Further, out of necessity, Bedouin *waste management* was traditionally based on salvage and recycling principles. What waste could not be used served as compost or as an energy-source. Bedouin traditionally burned camel and goat dung for heat and cooking purposes, an ancient method which has been resuscitated into the modern innovation known as 'bio-gas.' Due to fear of being cast as 'primitive' in the eyes of the public, many Bedouin today have separated themselves from traditional skills such as these, forgoing heating altogether or opting to pay for standard gas even as prices surge in the midst of worldwide shortages.

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<sup>7</sup> The impacts of erosion via heavy vehicle use warrants significantly more attention.

<sup>8</sup> During the harvest season, Bedouin would reside in 'baika,' houses built from the materials around them. Bedouin built their structures with thick insulating walls and north and east-facing windows, such that there was enough air circulation on hot days and there was little need for heating.

Furthermore, the introduction of plastic and metal have not been accompanied by adequate municipal trash pick-up services or basic sewage infrastructure, nor have they been accompanied with related education about proper waste management. As a result, scattered waste and effluent abounds in urban townships, harming water quality and attracting insects which then spread disease. In addition, the government has placed a range of waste facilities in close proximity to Bedouin village lands (e.g., Ramat Hovav, adjacent to the Al-Azazmeh of Wadi el-Na'am, and the Jerusalem municipal dump, adjacent to the Jahalin encampments). The legitimate waste management concerns that need to be solved in the Bedouin community are a symptom of modern life, and are linked in with the development of new systems of governance which link citizenship with service provision.

Further, *access to stores and restaurants* means that Bedouin have access to canned goods, eat more processed and fast foods,<sup>9</sup> and exercise considerably less.<sup>10</sup> *Access to electricity* necessary for refrigeration and has altered the Bedouin diet significantly – including consumption of much greater quantities of meat<sup>11</sup> and less fresh produce -- and led to a range of health conditions. As a result of the unprecedented consumption of sugar in large quantities, rates of diabetes are extremely high, and Bedouin children in urban townships suffer from more teeth problems than those in unrecognized villages.<sup>12</sup> Today, researchers at the Faculty of Health Sciences at Ben Gurion University have found: "There is now a high prevalence of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in a population that was at low risk 30 years ago."<sup>13</sup>

Says Abu Freih: "Working in the hospital, I look at the women and see they are not cooking. While before the wife cooked home-food, now she has the opportunity to buy pre-packaged, prepared food. Now, she takes falafel, she takes shwarma, home to her children." In conjunction with the consumption of more fattening, less nutritious foods, the severance from means of self-subsistence has eliminated the rigorous exercise accompanying planting and harvesting. "Before they were always working, with the land and the sheep, lots of different work in the house and outside the house. The women used to walk together to visit friends and family. Now all the women have diabetes and high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. All the time, they are saying – 'I want to work outside the home, but my husband will not let me – I am all day sitting in the house with nothing to do.'"

It is a testament to the degree to which Bedouin regard life in urban townships as inferior to that of rural life that none of the rural Bedouin villages have willingly agreed to move from their

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<sup>9</sup> Bedouin traditionally consumed a range of unprocessed whole-grains such as cracked wheat and lentil, using ancient heirloom seeds passed down through the centuries. They made whole-wheat flour for unleavened bread made fresh every day, perhaps the most important part of the meal for Bedouin. The Bedouin have since lost these heirloom seeds and buy husked white flour to make their bread or buy bread made of processed white flour stripped of minerals, ground from wheat sprayed with pesticides. This means they no longer receive the nutrients they are biologically accustomed to, their systems have become less sturdy, and as a result they are more prone to disease.

<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, Bedouin engaged in dry-farming, harvesting rainwater throughout the rainy season and feeding it to plants gradually. During the harvest, they would eat fresh produce, such as tomatoes, onions, okra, cucumbers, and various melons; the rest of the year, they ate dried tomatoes and okra.

<sup>11</sup> In the past, animal meat was only eaten on special occasions and had to be consumed immediately after slaughter in order to avoid dangerous spoilage in the desert heat. Those families that kept chickens relied upon their eggs rather than slaughtering them for meat, and many families trapped or captured wild birds and fowl, particularly during the planting and harvesting seasons. Today most Bedouin eat meat daily and buy meat at the store, with all the hormones plentiful in factory-farmed meat.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob E. Steiner, Harold D. Sgan-Cohen, and Joseph Nahas. "Sweet preference and dental caries among Bedouin youth in Israel:" *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* Volume 12 Issue 6 Page 386 - December 1984  
In the past Bedouin hardly used any sugar for flavoring, and gathered wild plants and herbs to spice their food.

<sup>13</sup> For extensive information on the impacts of rapid sedentarization on Bedouin diet and health, see research by the Coordinator of the research project, Kathleen Abu Saad. (K. Abu-Sa'ad, S. Weitzman, Y. Abu-Rabiah, H. Abu-Shareb, D. Fraser: "Rapid lifestyle, diet and health changes among urban Bedouin Arabs of southern Israel;" in: K. Tontisirin, E. Boutrif, W. Clay, Z. Malek, A. Randell, eds. *Food, Nutrition and Agriculture*; FAO - Rome, 2001)

villages into government-planned towns. The *only* unrecognized village that has agreed to move from their village lands at all, Wadi el-Na'am, adjacent to the Ramat Hovav toxic waste facility, is not receptive to moving to an urban township (the government's selected location, Segev Shalom). The village suffers perhaps the most extreme example of environmental injustice experienced by a Bedouin community;<sup>14</sup> yet despite the horrific conditions of life in the village,<sup>15</sup> the Al-Azazmeh would rather maintain a vestige of rural semi-autonomy than shift to what they see as the equally unhealthy way of life in urban townships.

*'Environmental' Justifications for Reining the Bedouin=<sup>16</sup>  
The Green of Militarism, Rather than Environmentalism*

When Bedouin attempt to engage in self-subsistence agriculture, the State's Green Patrol repeatedly uproots the fruits of their efforts. Several days before the Tu B'Shvat planting holiday last year, Vice Mayor of Rahat Youssef Abu Zayd stood over barley fields uprooted by the State. Abu Zayd told Bustan he planted in vacant space "to be self-sufficient, and make a dignified living," in conscious defiance of the image of Bedouin as a burden. Israel Land Authority spokeswoman Ortal Tzabar indirectly acknowledged that the permit system negates incentive to secure legal go-ahead, "In all the court cases that there have been about this until now, they have lost - they are now afraid to go to court."

Rather than subsidizing sustainable efforts of Bedouin citizens (such as the Vice Mayor of Rahat) to grow food at the crux of desert-greening efforts, the State of Israel has created, in the Green Patrol, an institutional version of settlers who uproot ancient groves to "redeem" land for Jews, cloaked in 'green rhetoric.'<sup>17</sup> Says Bustan member and Horticultural Manager at Adam v Chava, Chaim Feldman: "The desert could bloom, in a much more sustainable manner, if Israeli policy could understand the potential here. Even now, Bedouin agriculturalists know many things about living and farming in a land without water, that we don't." Yet until now, as regards State efforts to urbanize the Bedouin, the olive green of militarism has overridden that of the olive branch (i.e. working cooperatively to 'green the desert').

One advisor to the Ministry of the Environment who refused to be named told Bustan 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 and erode it with their goats. They take up all the open spaces." In a milder extension of this sentiment, several months ago, the Founder of the Arava Institute, Alon Tal, went to *Ma'ariv* and delineated the 10 most serious polluters in Israel in an article entitled: "Poisoned Land." On this list, he prominently featured the indigenous Bedouin as spoilers of the beauty and health of the 'Promised Land' on 'equal' par with Ramat Hovav, electro-chemical plants in Haifa, and an ammonia tank on the way to Acco. "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

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the 1950's, like all other Negev Bedouin tribes, the Al-Azazme were forcibly displaced from their land holdings to the "Siyag" (fence) area between Arad, Dimona and Beer Sheva. Two decades after about half of the tribe was forcibly settled in the area now known as Wadi el Na'am, in 1979, Ramat Hovav was built on village grounds. From its inception, 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.

<sup>15</sup> Despite living in the midst of the regional water tower and electrical plant, residents lack access to electricity, water, roads, and other services; due to living adjacent to the region's largest toxic waste incinerators, rates of miscarriage, congenital malformations, cancer and skin diseases are extremely high.

<sup>16</sup> BUSTAN Director Devorah Brous devoted extensive attention to this issue. See: "Uprooting Weeds," Hebrew University Thesis, 2004.

<sup>17</sup>D. Brous: "Not Greening, but Weeding, the Negev;" *Haaretz*, March 04, 2006

<sup>19</sup>S. Leibovitz-Dar: "Poisoned Land;" *Ma'ariv* 10/11/2006

public, who're supposed to enjoy these open spaces, to go on a retreat and even ride a jeep through the open landscape."<sup>19</sup>

Note that the main 'green justification' for the Green Patrol's actions against the Bedouin – that Bedouin subsistence grazing inherently erodes the land – was long ago challenged and contextualized. 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 solution was not to endanger the black goat, which was an intrinsic part of the desert ecosystem, but to manage it. As is now widely acknowledged, prior to the creation of the State of Israel, the Negev Desert was hardly a pristine land untouched by human influence: Rather, the Bedouin, like indigenous peoples globally, have been impacting and managing their home ecosystems for centuries or even millennia.

The argument that simply by virtue of residing scattered across the desert the Bedouin are among the chief obstacles in the way of the dream of preserving open spaces and 'making the desert bloom' (i.e. with Jewish development), has oft been employed to justify a larger agenda of corralling the Bedouin into urban townships to make way for new Jewish settlements. Regarding rural Bedouin land use as a threat to open spaces fails to take into account the fact that Bedouin occupy little more than 1% of the Negev<sup>21</sup> and fails to call into question the IDF's hegemony over more than 85% of the Negev's open spaces (according to Negev planner Rami Charuvi). And it distracts citizens from the fact that the most formidable 'hazards' Israel's citizens face are not the Bedouin, but factories and toxic waste dumps, and their efforts to keep a burgeoning environmental health crisis under raps.

It is common to assume that the adverse ramifications of sedentarization constitute an inevitable experience nearly all indigenous peoples must universally undergo. However, everything BUSTAN has witnessed in 8 years of work in the Bedouin community evidences that urbanizing 80,000 rural Bedouin by force will be more costly – in money, in blood, in precious integrity, and even to the land – than would be the recognition of their villages in conjunction with investment in Bedouin efforts to green the desert. Far from standing as an example of Israel's potential in the realm of sustainable development and renewable energy, and its adherence to its own minority rights protections, the urban townships stand as a 'model' of unsustainable desert development. And as such we must ask whether the forced sedentarization of the Bedouin, and the repression of Bedouin self-subsistence, is in our best interests as environmentalists and as citizens working towards the interrelated aims of making the desert bloom, and cultivating a homeland based as much on sustainable relations between communities, as with the land.

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**Rebecca Manski is the Communications Coordinator of the Desert Environmental Justice Organization, BUSTAN.** BUSTAN strives to present sustainable & replicable models for fair allocation of clean public resources and a healthy paradigm of development that serves both Jewish & Arab populations, by promoting land *stewardship* in the face of strident political wars over *ownership* of public resources.

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<sup>20</sup> F. Ghazi, "How Israel Controls the Bedouin in Israel," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, p.44; Institute for Palestine Studies and Kuwait University, 1984

<sup>21</sup> M. Qupty; RCUV, in: *De la Marginación a la Ciudadanía, 38 Casos de Producción Social del Hábitat, Forum Barcelona, Habitat International Coalition. Case study*, 2004