

BEDOUIN TOWNS IN ISRAEL AT THE START OF THE 21st CENTURY:

The Negev Bedouin And The Failure Of The Urban Resettlement Program

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The statistics on the situation of the Bedouin towns in the Negev reveal the complete failure of the urbanization policy they were designed to implement. Factors in this failure include provision of insufficient land and inadequate auxiliary services; budgetary hardships in the local councils; an absence of local autonomy; the lack of a sound economic base; lack of government jobs; inferior education; and inadequate health, social, and leisure services. The glaring result of long years of discrimination is a series of third-world enclaves in the midst of an affluent society.

Since the late 1960s, the government of Israel has carried out an urbanization policy of resettling the Bedouin community of the Negev in towns. This policy was problematic from its inception, firstly because the entire process was imposed from the outside. The Bedouin had no share in decision-making and were not participants in shaping the program or designing the new communities. The stiff price of the failure of this policy, unfortunately, is being paid mainly by the new towns' Bedouin residents themselves.

The history of the Bedouin resettlement policy

The nature of the permanent settlement selected for the Bedouin people of the Negev did not attempt to account for their traditional lifestyle.

Bedouin have been living in the Negev since the fifth century B.C.E. They were traditionally organized into tribes, and earned a living by raising livestock. During the 1948 war and immediately thereafter, the Israeli authorities evicted many Bedouin from the Negev, who became refugees in nearby Arab countries, mainly Egypt and Jordan. Of some 65,000 Bedouin residents of that period, only 11,000 remained. Those left in the Negev were then forcibly removed from their lands and concentrated in distant, unfertile areas, to make sure they would pose no obstacle to rapid Jewish settlement or to recognize the validity of Bedouin claims. Of 3,000 Bedouin property claims submitted in the last twenty years, not a single Bedouin has won his case.¹

The declared intentions of the programs for urbanizing the Bedouin was to create conditions that would enable the provision of basic services to the Bedouin population. The real purpose, however, was to concentrate them in urban locales and prevent them from cultivating, living on, and/or claiming ownership of the lands the state had expropriated.

Successive governments of Israel have dealt with the Negev Bedouin via a policy based on

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1 Campbell, 10: 1998

massive and systematic transfer of people to permanent towns and registration of Bedouin lands as state lands. This policy is intertwined with the nationalist vision of its Zionist sources: The Negev was perceived as an empty space (“a state without a people”) that needs to be populated. The Bedouin were portrayed as representing a backward culture now in its terminal stages of disappearing from the theater of history.² As a consequence of this policy, the Bedouin were stripped of their assets and expelled from the land that provided their livelihood.

The seven Bedouin towns in the Negev (Rahat, Tel Sheva, Kseifa, Arara of the Negev, Segev Shalom, Houra, and Laqiyya) now have some 70,000 residents. This is about half the total Bedouin population in Israel, and about a quarter of the population of the Negev as a whole.

The failure of the Bedouin towns

The state’s approach guaranteed the failure of the experiment to urbanize the Bedouin. It created a reality in which the community is mired in poverty, without decent education, confronting galloping unemployment, and facing hostility by the establishment - alienated from the state and the majority of the people living in it. The problems enumerated below are among the principal factors that led to the failure of the Negev Bedouin urbanization program.

A. Shortage of land and related services

The land area allocated to these towns is insufficient to permit orderly growth of the community and inclusion of a reasonable range of services, infrastructure, public and community facilities, commercial enterprises, businesses, and shops. The Bedouin towns do not have adequate sewage systems, sidewalks, or public transportation; the roads are inferior; sports fields and play facilities for children are inadequate or nonexistent; community centers are lacking; etc. Notably, there were no industrial zones set up. Although some of the towns potentially could expand, there is no land for that; the adjacent land is owned by the state or by kibbutzim, or other interest groups. The case of the expansion of Omer (a Jewish suburb of Be’er-Sheva) at the expense of nearby Tel-Sheva (a Bedouin town) illustrates the double standard that exists today in the matter of land in the Negev.

Normal, healthy growth for these Bedouin towns will require that land be made available, in the requisite quantities. The towns will need adequate land zoned for industry, with auxiliary services, if they are to develop a proper economic base and the commercial and industrial foundation required to get economic development moving ahead. And they must have a reasonable inventory of residential plots for future housing, at reasonable prices, if they are to cope with their projected population constraints. Note that such allocation of land would not represent a cost component in the national budget, but simply a change in land allocation priorities at the Israel Lands Administration.

B. Inadequate budgets at the local councils

Operating budgets for the Negev Bedouin towns come from two sources: government allocations and local tax revenues. In addition, the towns are sometimes entitled to grants for development projects that are not part of regular budget funds. An article by Professor Eran

² Shamir, 1999: 473

Razin on “The Budgetary Capacity of Negev Bedouin Towns” shows that the Bedouin towns were the object of systematic budgetary discrimination on the part of government ministries.³ The very formulas used to calculate the funds budgeted for these towns were discriminatory, and the development grants allotted to them were miniscule, in view of the urgent needs and compared with what is allotted to Jewish towns.

An examination of aggregate monetary measures for all seven of the Bedouin Negev towns, compared with Jewish towns in the Negev (see Table 18, below), permits us to generalize about the state of the budgets in these Bedouin towns.

The independent (local tax) income per resident was very low in the Negev Bedouin towns, equaling only about 30 percent of the independent income per resident in Jewish towns in the Negev. Meanwhile, the Bedouin towns received government grant funds per resident that were actually a little higher than those received by Jewish towns in the Negev. Razen explains this as follows:

This statistic does not necessarily testify to an absence of discrimination toward the Bedouin towns, because it does not address the low economic status of the Bedouin residents or the absence of the advantages of scale in the small Bedouin towns; it does, however, show that the government today is investing considerable resources in the municipal system in this sector. Based on certain assumptions, which attribute responsibility for the tremendous municipal fragmentation in this sector to the Arab councils themselves, some would even rely on this data to show that the Arab local councils, among them the Bedouin councils, are actually benefiting from affirmative action in the allocation of the Interior Ministry general funding.⁴

Table 18: Local councils in the Negev by community sector and fiscal indicis, 1998.

Councils:	Monetary measures:	Bedouin town & city councils in the Negev	Jewish town & city councils in the Negev
<i>No. of councils</i>		7	11
Local tax income per capita (NIS 000)		0.57	1.94
Government ministry allocations per capita (NIS 000)		2.37	2.00
Of that: General (Interior Min.) grant per resident (NIS 000)		1.16	0.64
Percent comprised by local tax (independent) income (%)		19%	49%
Total expenditure per capita (NIS 000)		2.93	4.52
Debt burden per capita (NIS 000)		1.01	2.01
Surplus (deficit) per year per capita (NIS (000))		0.01	-0.54

The proportion of local tax income in the regular budget in Bedouin towns in the Negev is very low, only 19 percent, as opposed to 49 percent in Jewish towns in the Negev. The debt burden

³ Razin, 2000; in Hebrew

⁴ Razin, 2000, pp. 46-47

in the Bedouin towns is low, in stark contrast to the Jewish towns in the Negev,⁵ where the debt per resident is particularly high, as may be seen in Table 18.

The lack of an economic base and the high unemployment rates mean that local tax collection is paltry. This failure was formally recognized in recent reports from the state comptroller's office.⁶

C. Lack of local autonomy

Until September 2000, the five new Bedouin towns were run by non-local people named by the Interior Ministry to run the local councils. They weren't Bedouin, but outsiders whose loyalty was first and foremost to the party that appointed them.

D. Lack of an economic base

A survey of businesses, published in 2000 by the Center for Research on Bedouin Society and Development, shows a tiny number of private initiatives in Bedouin towns, mostly small, with most failing. Nearly all the potential workforce is forced to seek employment outside the communities, where systematic discrimination awaits. In the entire Negev, from a sector with a workforce of 15,000, fewer than 400 Bedouin are employed in manufacturing companies. A few are employed in large, modern industries, and none are employed in high tech.⁷ The result is especially high rates of unemployment and a shortage of jobs, particularly for women in the labor force, among whom traveling to work outside the community is less accepted.

E. Lack of public sector jobs, and inferior education

Only 15 Negev Bedouin are employed in the civil service, aside from those in education and culture or religious affairs.⁸ This figure reflects blatant, systematic discrimination.

In 1998, the Katz Commission report (publishing the findings of a special government commission) documented the gross failure of the educational system in the Bedouin sector: an inferior, untrained corps of teachers, a severe shortage of classrooms, dismal results on matriculation examinations, high drop-out rates, special problems among female students. Since publication of the report, the authorities have completely ignored its recommendations for tackling what is wrong with the system, and fixing it.

F. Health, social, and leisure services

Health services in Bedouin towns are at a much lower level than those in Jewish areas. Local social services departments are critically understaffed. Leisure-time options are few in a sector where they are desperately needed to help combat violence and drug use among young people and there is an urgent need for services for children. Local social services departments in the Bedouin towns have no more than one quarter the number of staff found in social services departments in Jewish towns of similar size. Most tellingly, perhaps, there are no public libraries in these Bedouin communities.

5 Razin, 2000

6 State Comptroller, 1999; 2002

7 Lithwick, 2000

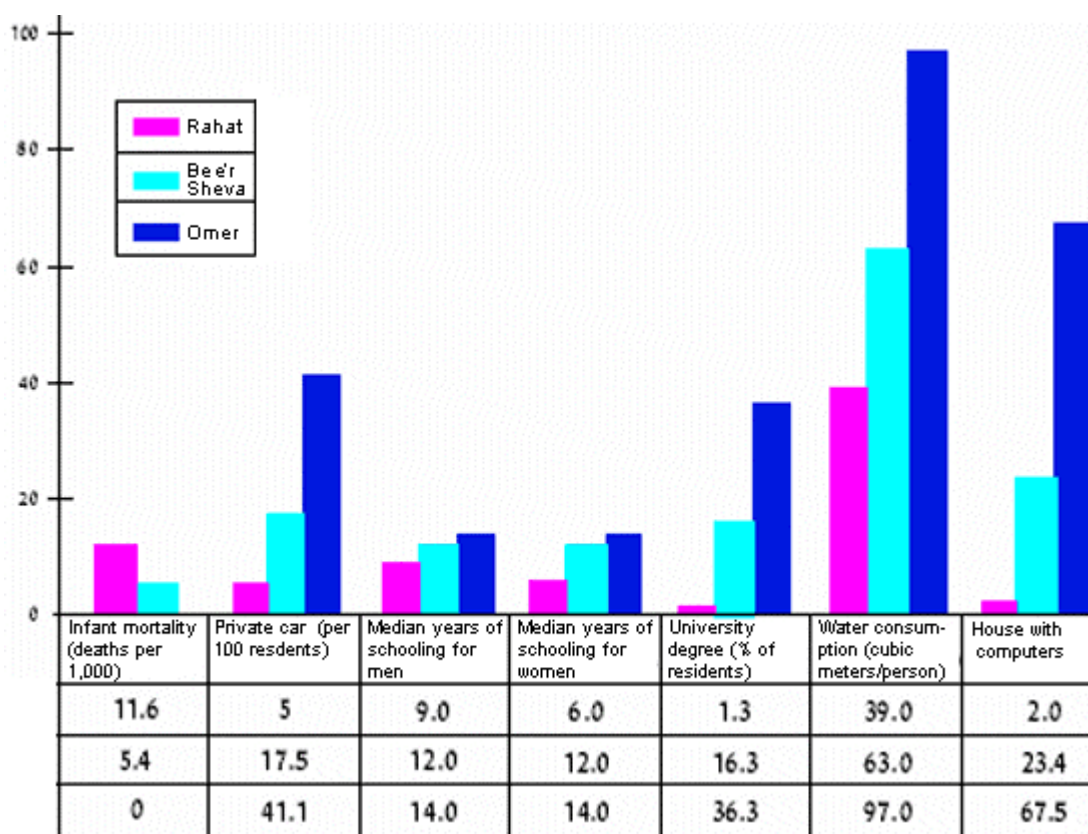
8 Lithwick, 2000

The result: inequality

The “Statistical Yearbook of the Negev” for 2000 provides, for the first time, detailed figures on the situation of the Bedouin. The picture that emerges is one of overwhelming inequality in every sphere: economic, social, cultural, and educational. Diagram 17 (below) highlights some of the of inequality indexes, comparing the largest Negev Bedouin town, Rahat, with Be’er-Sheva and its largest and best-established suburb, Omer. The tremendous gaps between Rahat and Be’er-Sheva are evident, among other ways, in an infant mortality rate in Rahat double that of Be’er-Sheva. Only 2 percent of Rahat residents have a computer at home, compared with 23 percent of Be’er-Sheva residents. Rahat residents, men and women both, average many fewer years of schooling than their Be’er-Sheva counterparts. The gaps between Rahat and neighboring Omer are even greater. The only conclusion to be drawn from the data is that the Bedouin towns, for whose residents so many basic services are either missing or greatly inferior when compared with neighboring Jewish towns, lag far behind. Neglect of the Bedouin towns has made them Third World enclaves in the surrounding affluent society.

Diagram 17

A comparison of selected urban indices in Rahat, Be’er-Sheva and Omer



Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Negev, 2000

The dismal contrast portrayed in the “Statistical Yearbook of the Negev” is reinforced by additional data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) for 2002, in its annual rankings of local authorities in Israel on a scale of socio-economic deprivation: The Bedouin communities are at the head of the list nationally (the lower the numerical ranking, the greater the distress;

see Table 19 below). The largest Negev Bedouin town, Rahat, is ranked second. These rankings, in and of themselves, suggest the level of hardship faced by these Bedouin towns. What they do not provide is a sense of how wide the gap is between Rahat, in second place, and Be'er-Sheva, the capital of the Negev and its largest city, ranked 115th. This can be seen more clearly via comparative income data.

With lower incomes and higher unemployment, as reported by the CBS, the gap is stark. An urban Bedouin worker earns 30 to 40 percent of what the average worker in Be'er-Sheva earns. Bedouin women who are employed earn much less relative to the rest of the workforce. They average less than seven months' work a year, while in Be'er-Sheva the average is nine months a year. The net result is that average family income for urban Bedouin families in the Negev is less than half that of a Be'er-Sheva family, which in turn is much lower than the national average to begin with. Consider also that every Bedouin household is, on average, double the size of a household in Be'er-Sheva; hence the per capita household income for the Bedouin families drops at least another 25 percent as compared with the per capita income for a Be'er-Sheva family. Thus average per capita household income for Bedouin families is actually around 20 percent of that for Be'er-Sheva families. The most extreme contrast is between average per capita household income in Bedouin households compared with households in suburban Omer; the Bedouin figure is 10 percent that of Omer.

Table 19:
Socio-economic distress ranking of local Bedouin and Jewish towns in the Negev, 2002

		ranking
Bedouin towns	Kseifeh	1
	Rahat	2
	Tel-Sheva	3
	Segev Shalom	4
	Arara	5
	Khoura	7
	Laqiyya	8
Jewish towns	Be'er-Sheva	115
	Dimona	82
	Arad	119
	Meitar	201
	Lehavim	205
	Omer	209

There is a commonly held notion that the Bedouin receive “compensation” for their low incomes, in the form of generous allowances from the government. Allowances to larger families are theoretically an ameliorating factor, but many of the Bedouin families do not receive them. For Israel nationally, 98 percent of children receive such allowances, while in Bedouin communities, the proportion ranges from 49 percent to 92 percent of families (“Statistical Yearbook of the Negev,” 2000). Unemployment compensation is also supposed to be a mitigating factor, but here, too, payments received by Bedouin are lower.

Summary

The factors that led to the failure of urbanization among Negev Bedouin may not be readily comprehensible from the outside. A visit to any of the Negev Bedouin towns followed by a visit to a neighboring Jewish town illuminates the reasons for the failure better than a stack of statistical data possibly can. The endless discrimination visible in the former, and the obtrusive luxury evident in the latter, are unmistakable to any observer.

There is simply no doubt whatever that the guilt for the failure of urbanization belongs squarely with the governments of Israel present and past. The programs they have prepared and continue to prepare do not reflect the needs or interests of the Bedouin community. The Bedouin have had no part whatever in the planning process. Moreover, government commitments to redress distortions in priorities and funding, and government promises to end systematic discrimination, have for the most part not been honored. In this context, the observer has an easier time understanding the Bedouins' sense that the failed urbanization process was never intended to succeed. Otherwise, we would have to believe that the entire mess is the outcome of random chance or a gross incapacity on the part of government.

The vast gaps between the Bedouin and their Jewish neighbors contribute to amplifying the Bedouins' sense of outrage, demonstrating very clearly that the urbanization policy has failed and that a fundamentally different approach is needed. The issue of the failure of the policy of urbanizing the Negev Bedouin is part of the larger question of intentional discrimination by the Israeli Jewish establishment toward the Arab minority. Hence in order to address this, the State of Israel must provide equality for Arab citizens and acknowledge their standing as a national minority with collective rights. The state must also recognize the right of the Bedouin to their land and stop the official and systematic state discrimination against them. Discrimination as government policy has halted development and progress among the Bedouin. Meanwhile, when they resist the imposition of coercive and ill-considered policies in whose formulation they have had no part, the Bedouin find themselves cast as a traditional and conservative society, resistant to change, resistant to moving ahead - instead of being made full partners in the quest for constructive progress in an egalitarian framework. All of this is inconsistent with the values of a progressive democratic society, and must be changed.

Sources

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