



Pandemic demolitions: The unrecognized Bedouin villages in southern Israel and the ongoing housing crisis

Huda Abu Obaid
Elianne Kremer

Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, NCF

Huda Abu Obaid is a Bedouin feminist activist from the township of al-Lagiyyih, an active leader for the rights of the Bedouin and the Director of Local lobby and employment at NCF. **Elianne Kremer** is a Uruguayan-Israeli development expert with experience in field research, analysis and M&E in humanitarian aid and social development. She is directing the Research and International Relations of NCF, working closely with community activists. **Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF)** is an Arab-Jewish organization established in 1997 by Arab and Jewish residents of the Naqab, to provide a platform for a joint fight for civil rights equality.

Contact:
intl.advocacy@dukium.org;
advncf@gmail.com

Abstract

This Update reports on the continued eviction policy that the State of Israel has been leading towards the Bedouin of the Negev-Naqab, a situation existing since the establishment of the State in 1948 and deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic. The housing crisis for Bedouin indigenous citizens and communities has long been urgent and dire, as the State of Israel continues to deny the existence of thirty-five Bedouin villages that are unrecognized and thus lack basic infrastructure like electricity, sewage services, water connections and garbage disposal. With little access to health services, these communities continue to be transparent on the map and in national statistics. Members of the Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, an Arab-Jewish organization established in 1997 by Arab and Jewish residents of the Naqab to provide a platform for a joint fight for civil rights equality, detail these historic and ongoing housing injustices, supported by powerful photos from the exhibition *Recognized: Life and Resilience* captured by Bedouin women.

Keywords

Housing, demolitions, pandemic, Bedouin residents, land

During the Covid-19 pandemic, housing has been called the primary defense against the coronavirus across the world. To prevent the spread of Covid-19, states across the world, including Israel, have asked its citizens to 'stay at home' and in many cases legislated home confinement and curfews. Such public health measures are based on the assumption that everyone has access to shelter that provides adequate protection against contracting and spreading the virus, which is, unfortunately, not always the case (Vilenca et al., 2020).



Figure 1

Photograph by Huda Abu al-Qian, from the unrecognized village of 'Atir, 2016

Although the right to adequate housing is a recognized fundamental right in international law, a sizable proportion of the Naqab's 290,000 Bedouin citizens live in informal settlements and grossly inadequate housing. The latter includes overcrowded conditions and limited access to water and sanitation. This has made Bedouin citizens particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus, with the added factor that many are also suffering from multiple health issues. Furthermore, inadequate housing has made it almost impossible for Bedouins to self-isolate. According to a study by the UN's Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, mortality and infection rates are significantly higher among minorities and other vulnerable groups with inadequate housing conditions—conditions which have contributed to excessive, and largely preventable, death and suffering (Rajagopal, 2020).

The demolition of housing and other structures is a major tool utilized by the State of Israel to achieve its policy goals when dealing with the Bedouin community in the Naqab. These communities reside in three types of settlements —7 townships, 11 recognized villages and 35 villages— that the State refuses to recognize, with the objective of taking control of their land and forcibly displacing them to existing or new townships. The Bedouin community, despite being an UN-recognized indigenous minority, has been suffering a major housing crisis for years without adequate response. Tens of thousands of people live in



Figure 2

Photograph by Amal Abu Qwadir, from the unrecognized village of az-Zarnūg, 2020. *Five people lived in this home. They did not have many requests, aside from having a life of security, and a roof above their heads to protect them from the cold winter's night. They just wanted to live in peace, which should not have to be a request. It is a legitimate right of every person to have a home to live in.*

homes under demolition orders, usually because they are not granted building permits due to the unrecognized status of their villages. Community members are waging a protracted struggle over land ownership, which the State continues to deny.

Although the Ministry of Justice committed to halting residential home demolitions during the pandemic,¹ 2,568 structures were demolished in the Bedouin villages in the Naqab between January and December 2020, representing a 13% rise compared to 2019 (2,241). Despite the humanitarian crisis caused by the pandemic, this is the highest number of demolished structures ever recorded in one year in the Arab Bedouin communities (Negev Coexistence Forum, 2021).

Throughout 2020 and 2021, enforcement authorities continued to distribute demolition warrants, carry out demolitions, interrogate livestock farmers, and issue fines to herders (mainly for the purpose of harassment). These enforcement measures, often effective in

¹ Letter from Ministry of Justice regarding demolition of structures in the Naqab during pandemic. (2020). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/2zfvy323> [Hebrew]

driving the populace to destroy their own property, cause extreme duress. Owners take such action to escape some of the trauma of demolition, save personal belongings and construction materials, and avoid paying the fines levied by the authorities for demolition costs which further impoverish Bedouin families. Under these conditions, adult heads of households, who on average support a family of approximately seven people, experience additional stress and mental health problems – all compounded during a pandemic.

The Arab Bedouin Communities in the Naqab: The pandemic as an excuse to perpetuate historic relations of inequality

All Bedouin residents suffer from wide-spread discrimination and violations of their human rights and are marginalized from mainstream Israeli society. According to the Israeli National Insurance Institute (2018), 79.6% of the Naqab's Bedouin children live below the poverty line.

The State of Israel is using all the means at its disposal to concentrate the Bedouin community in large, crowded townships—against the wishes of most members of the community—rather than negotiating in good faith to resolve the issue of Bedouin land ownership and settlement. Yet this is not a new process under the pandemic, but rather has deep roots going back to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.



Figure 3

Photograph by 'Āyṣhah 'Abū al-Qi'ān, unrecognized village of Umm al-Ḥirān, 2017
This is a house in the village of Umm al-Ḥirān. The family was evicted, and their home was demolished.

**Figure 4**

A photographer from az-Za'arūrah, 2017.

A protest against house demolitions in the village of Umm al-Hirān the day the Shabid Ya'a'akub 'Abū al-Qi'ann was killed and later his home was demolished.

In the middle of the 19th century, the Naqab was the permanent territory of Bedouins affiliated with various tribal confederations. Their livelihood was based, for the most part, on water-scarce agriculture in an area of about two million dunam (200,000 hectares). On the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel, between 65,000 and 100,000 Bedouin lived in the Naqab. During and after the 1948-1949 war, most Bedouin either fled or were deported to Jordan, the West Bank, Egypt, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula, leaving a population of 11,000. At this time, the State of Israel began evicting the remaining Bedouin communities from their places of residence, a process which continues to this day. From the early 1950s until 1966, the State of Israel concentrated the Bedouin in the Naqab in a closed area called the Siyāj (in Arabic: fence), under military rule. During this period, the State displaced entire villages from their land in the western and northern Naqab into the Siyāj area.

Land belonging to Bedouins who became refugees, as well as much of the land owned by those who remained or were internally displaced in Israel, was appropriated and nationalized through the claim that these lands were 'dead lands'. During this time, the State enacted the Planning and Building Act (1965) and thereby re-designated most Bedouin land as agricultural land, nature reserves, or closed military zones, rather than areas for establishing Bedouin villages. The State also began to regulate and register land in its own name with total



Figure 5

Riḍā, Um al-Ḥirān, 2017.

My daughter Ruḡayyah is helping to take things out of the demolished home of Yaʿakob, my uncle, who was killed. That was one of the worst moments that we have experienced.

disregard for Bedouin's indigenous rights to that land. In this way, all existing Bedouin houses were retroactively declared illegal. For the first time, the phenomenon of 'unrecognized villages' came into being: villages for the most part founded before the establishment of the State of Israel that did not receive any recognized planning status, thus became illegal under Israeli law.

In 1966, with the termination of the military administration and the completion of planning proceedings for the first Bedouin township of 'Tal as-Saba', the urbanization process imposed by the State on the Bedouin population of the Naqab began—a process that continues to this day. Since then, the State has established altogether seven Bedouin townships, most in the Siyāj area, promising the residents 'modern' services in exchange for organized settlement on urban plots. Israeli policy towards the Bedouin in the Naqab in the following decades has sought to concentrate the entire population in these seven townships.

Since 1999, the State of Israel has recognized 11 villages in the Naqab. However, in practice, there is no significant difference between the recognized villages and those that remain unrecognized. Most recognized villages still lack approved urban plans, as a result, residents cannot obtain building permits. At the same time, demolitions continue in both

recognized and unrecognized villages, and essential infrastructure such as water, electricity, sewage disposal and roads remain mostly inaccessible or incomplete.

Members of the Bedouin community in the Naqab are citizens of the State, but the State insists on neglecting them. Israeli planning policy has ensured over the years that most Bedouin villages will remain unrecognized, continue subject to policies of demolition and punishment and suffer being deprived of basic infrastructure and services.

Furthermore, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) has refrained for years from a comprehensive and appropriate census of the Bedouin community and instead favors estimates based on various discriminatory assumptions and formulas. As a result, the State lacks the comprehensive and accurate picture of the Arab Bedouin population of the Naqab and its socio-economic situation necessary for allocating services to tackle poverty-related problems that require governmental policy and regulation. In other words, the materialization of the State's neglect harms these citizens' civil and political rights in different ways, but one of the most acute, violent modalities of such neglect is home demolitions.

The fact that the highest number of demolitions occurred during a global pandemic reflects the State of Israel's commitment to its discriminatory policies and disregard of the Bedouin indigenous minority.

Note on photographs

The photographs and captions throughout this Update come from the exhibition **Recognized: Life and Resilience captured by Bedouin women**, organized by the Negev Coexistence Forum in December, 2020. The exhibition can also be accessed online here.

Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality is an Arab-Jewish organization established in 1997 by Arab and Jewish residents of the Naqab, to provide a platform for a joint fight for civil rights equality. The Forum recognizes the neglect of various Israeli governments and their authorities, who have denied the Bedouin community in the Naqab full rights, and acts to prevent further affliction and harm to recognized and unrecognized villages. The Forum's activities are varied and include local and international advocacy, research, community activities, public protests, social media, work with Israeli and foreign media, and more. All activities are based on Arab-Jewish collaboration.

References

- Ministry of Justice, Israel (2020) Letter regarding demolition of structures in the Naqab during pandemic. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/2zfyv323> [Hebrew]
- National Insurance Institute (2018) 2018 Annual report: The dimensions of poverty and social disparities. National Insurance Institute, Research and Planning Administration.
- Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (2021) *No Shelter in Place: State Demolitions in the Naqab Arab Bedouin communities and its impact on children*, <https://tinyurl.com/w9sezhd5>.
- Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (2012) *Processes of dispossession in the Negev/Naqab: The Israeli Policy of Counter Claims against the Bedouin-Arabs* [Hebrew] <https://tinyurl.com/y3dve4tb>.

- Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (2021) Table of demolition of structures and ploughing of crops in the Naqab. <https://tinyurl.com/2eb5u88p>.
- Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (2021) *Uncounted: Indigenous Bedouin citizens neglected by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics*, <https://tinyurl.com/3an3z8a9>.
- Negev Coexistence Forum (2020) *Violations of Human Rights of the Arab Bedouin Community in the Negev/Naqab during Pandemics*, <https://tinyurl.com/2se99n9a>.
- Planning and Building Law (1965) Israel, <https://tinyurl.com/ycg3dzqi>
- Rajagopal, B. (2020) COVID-19 and the right to adequate housing: impacts and the way forward. UN Report A/75/148 retrieved 10 June 2021, <https://www.undocs.org/A/75/148>.
- Southern Administration for the Coordination of Enforcement of Land Laws (2020) Summary of Working Year 2020, p. 10 Section 1 [Hebrew]
- Vilenica, A., McElroy, E., Ferreri, M., Lancione, M., Fernández, M. and García-Lamarca, M. (2020) Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal. *The Radical Housing Journal*, 2:1, pp. 9-28, https://radicalhousingjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/RHJ_Issue-2.1_02_Editors-paper_09-28-1.pdf