

## **Unrecognized - About the project**

The "Unrecognized" project was born in 2003 following reports of Bedouin fields in the Negev which had been sprayed with a toxic substance from the air, in a State-sponsored act. I started to look into the matter and came face to face with the issue of the unrecognized villages and their inhabitants. As an artist and an initiator of projects for social change, with awareness of the importance of public opinion in political processes, I assembled a project that makes use of artistic, media, educational and social tools to bring the story of the unrecognized Bedouin settlements to the attention of wider audiences in Israeli society.

With the help of the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, and with the aid of personal ties forged in the course of the work, I appealed to the residents, to official representatives and to representatives of groups from the unrecognized villages to participate in a project that would portray each and every village through a story and a photograph. The decision on the story to be told and the photograph to accompany it was made jointly in a process that took over two years, and that included meetings, interviews and joint discussions.

The panoramic photograph format adopted in the project is the generally accepted format for landscape and group photographs. In the annals of photography, most photographs of panoramic views portray powerful images of nature and of wild landscapes; people are, for the most part, absent from such photographs. If they appear at all, they are presented romantically, as miniature figures, as part of the landscape.

The panoramic photographs in the "Unrecognized" project can therefore also be seen to run counter to the way the country's leadership has viewed the Negev and its Bedouin inhabitants at different times. The romantic perception of a flock of sheep and a shepherd playing a halil (flute) on the horizon, alongside ideals that refashioned the Negev in line with imported Western standards, are confronted in the project by images of a contemporary and rich reality. Sharp and clear images whose objects are generally placed at the front of the photograph, stare directly into the eyes of the spectator, while the stories beside them explain the photographs' social, political and humanitarian context.

As part of the "Unrecognized Settlements" project, a website will be set up, akin to a portal for the unrecognized villages, and it will use the photographs and stories as an introduction to a more in-depth acquaintance with the villages and their inhabitants. A soon to be published book will contain articles on the subject alongside the photographs and stories.

As the project travels around the country, it will also provide a stimulus for encounters between members of different groups, Arabs and Jews from the Negev and from other places. These meetings, which might form the beginnings of more in-depth and broader acquaintances, will seek to remove the masks of ignorance, of fear and of false perceptions.

Tal Adler

## **The unrecognized Bedouin villages in Israel - Background**

About 160 thousand Bedouin citizens of the State of Israel currently live in the Negev. Over 80,000 of them live in 45 unrecognized villages with populations ranging from 500 to 5,000 residents. These villages do not belong to any regional councils, and their residents do not have any water, electricity or sewage infrastructure, paved roads, garbage disposal, etc. Many of these villages have no clinics, schools or kindergartens. Many houses, and even tents, are destroyed by the State every year. Many residents of these villages, fearful of the next wave of demolitions, live in corrugated iron shacks, suffering from extreme heat in the summer and freezing cold in the winter.

Dozens of Bedouin tribes lived in villages in the Negev for hundreds of years until 1948, the year of Israel's establishment. Some tribal members can recount dozens of generations in the Negev, from the beginning of Ottoman rule, over 400 years ago.

The traditional way of life of the Bedouin combined the tending of flocks and agricultural work, but in the course of the 19th Century, the Bedouin tribes of the Negev began to rely more and more on agriculture, not only to meet their own needs: wheat and barley from the Negev, for example, were sold to beer brewers in Europe. Tribal lands were therefore demarcated, and agreed boundaries became part of the way of life for many of the tribes. This way of life characterized the residents of villages in the Shomron and North of the country as well and involved roaming to areas of rich pastures in the hot summer months, and returning to their permanent places of residence with the onset of winter.

Over hundreds of years, the foreign rulers of the land respected the way of life of the Negev Bedouin. The Bedouin, for their part, accepted the rule of the Turks and the British after them. Aerial photographs of the Negev from the time of the British Mandate show vast tracts of land worked by the Bedouin, who cultivated wheat and barley and roamed with their flocks. Maps from that and earlier periods show the division of Negev lands between the various tribes.

Then, in 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, most of the Bedouin tribes lost their land and were turned into refugees. Today, most of them live in Egypt, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank; only very few were allowed to remain within the borders of the State. Until the mid-1950s, the few remaining tribes in the country were concentrated in an area called the "The Syag (Reservation)": about 900 square kilometers from Arad in the East to Beer Sheva in the west, and from Yeruham in the south to Kibbutz Shuval in the north. Until 1966, the Bedouin lived there under military rule; whoever sought work, to build a home, to buy agricultural equipment and livestock or sell them needed the authorization of the military ruler in Beer Sheva.

There, too, one can find the origins of the story of the unrecognized villages: in 1965, as military rule came to an end, the Planning and Building Law was enacted to regulate the status of all settlements in the country in terms of planning, boundaries and affiliation with a municipal authority. The National Outline Plan drawn up under this Law did not include a single Bedouin village in the Negev. Overnight, the residents of 45 Bedouin villages became squatters on State lands.

At the time, the Government began construction of seven towns to settle the Negev Bedouin; this was an attempt to finish the work that began with the expulsion of Bedouin tribes, an attempt to gather all the Bedouin into an even smaller area, and to build Jewish settlements on the lands vacated by their inhabitants and owners. Those Bedouin moving to the towns were forced to give up their main sources of livelihood: tending their flocks and agriculture. No alternative viable livelihood was to be found there, and until this day, the Bedouin towns in the Negev head the list of the poorest locations in the country. Many of their residents became destitute and are dependent on allocations from the National Insurance Institute, and the poverty there was and remains a breeding ground for trouble and crime. While Bedouin settlements were evacuated, over one hundred Jewish settlements have been set up in the Negev since the founding of the State, many of them of a rural-agricultural nature.

In 1976, the Agriculture Ministry set up the Green Patrol, financed mainly by the Israel Lands Administration, but which also works for the Israel Defense Force, the Jewish National Fund, the Interior Ministry and the Construction and Housing Ministry. Officially, it is a law enforcement and inspection unit for open country land. In practice, the activities of Green Patrol units are directed almost exclusively against the Bedouin population of the Negev. Over the years there have been innumerable reports of violence used by Green Patrol units; harnessing of Bedouin tents to jeeps and dragging them away, shooting of camels to death, demolishing of structures, uprooting of saplings, eradication of flocks, and violence in general, are all regular occurrences.

Another body set up to help gain control of Bedouin lands is the Bedouin Authority, established in 1986 by the Israel Lands Administration. Over the years, the Authority has assumed responsibility for most areas of life of the Negev's Bedouin citizens. All Government budgets for

the Bedouin, including the budgets of the recognized authorities, are transferred through it. The Bedouin Authority is a permanent cork at the end of the services pipeline; when representatives of the unrecognized villages apply to the authorities for services and infrastructures (water, sewage or electricity, for example), they are always referred to the Bedouin Authority. The Authority's response has not changed over the twenty years of its existence: in return for services, the Bedouin must give up their land and move to one of the seven towns.

While the State claims that the lands of the unrecognized villages are State lands, the Authority is authorized to buy these lands from their inhabitants, and in return, to allow them to buy a building plot in one of the seven towns. Until recently, and in contrast to other citizens of the State, the residents of the unrecognized villages were not allowed to buy plots or houses in the towns until they had given up their lands and come to an "arrangement" with the Authority.

Until the mid-1970's, the main channel of communication between the establishment and the Bedouin population of the Negev was the Sheikhs - the leadership that served as the yes men under the establishment over the years of military rule. Even when others came forward, seeking to represent the interests of the Bedouin by legal and democratic means, the establishment continued to confine itself exclusively to dialog with the traditional and sheikh leadership which wielded all the power.

However, in the 1990's, a new alternative leadership surfaced in the unrecognized villages, and in 1997, its members declared the establishment of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev. The Council, which adopted a strategy of community empowerment and helped to set up local committees in the villages, was founded on the basis of the "Negev Arabs 2020 Plan" prepared by the strategic planner, Dr. Amer Al-Huzayal; the plan proposed the State's recognition of 45 villages as an alternative to the State plan to evacuate them. In 1999, after the Jewish-Arab Center for Economic Development helped to expand and work out the plan, the "Plan for the Development of a Municipal Authority for the Arab Bedouin Villages of the Negev" was submitted to the Interior Ministry. At the same time, a detailed plan was submitted to improve the state of education in the unrecognized villages and to develop an economic and employment infrastructure for the benefit of the inhabitants.

One year later, for the first time in the country's history, the Government decided to recognize six of the 45 unrecognized settlements and to consider the future status of another three. At the end of 2003, the Abu-Basma Regional Council was set up and placed in charge of these settlements and any settlements that would receive future recognition. In the same year, the High Court of Justice also ruled that rural settlement must be planned for the Bedouin, and that they be involved in the planning process, for the first time.

The actions of the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages helped the residents of these villages to gain wider exposure for their various struggles. The decision of the Council members to stick to a joint Arab-Jewish struggle resulted, in 2003, in the establishment of the Beyahad (Together) forum: over thirty organizations that joined forces under the plan to obtain recognition for the unrecognized villages.

The joint civil struggles raked up additional successes, and following the rulings of the High Court of Justice, additional clinics, schools and nursery schools were established in the villages.

But at the same time as progress is being made on the recognition of the nine villages, the rate of house demolitions and the rate of eviction orders in settlements not yet recognized by the establishment has increased. At the beginning of 2005, the Knesset even approved an amendment to the Removal of Squatters Law which places stronger methods and measures at the disposal of Israel Lands Administration inspectors, the regional councils, and Green Patrol inspectors in their interactions with the "squatters", by their definition, on State lands. In 2005 alone, the Bedouin Development Authority allocated over 140 million shekels for indictments against trespassing and for the eviction of the residents of unrecognized villages. Residents who claim ownership of the land are summoned to the courts to prove their ownership; to

date; none of them has won a court case.

The Bedouin Authority prepared an outline plan for the nine villages in the process of being recognized, and did so alone, without sufficient participation from the residents. In the planning committees set up to prepare the recognition of the new settlements, the Authority is trying to force the residents of the villages and the Abu-Basma Council to accept them. The plan greatly reduces the size of the villages, and does not enable perpetuation of their rural-agricultural character. At the same time, the Authority is working to have the residents of the remaining 36 unrecognized villages evacuated to these recognized villages, by which measure they will follow in the footsteps of the seven failed Bedouin towns in the Negev.