



# The Naqab (Negev)

## SNAPSHOT

The Naqab desert, in the southern part of Israel, has faced demographic threats since Israel's creation. In 1945, more than half of the indigenous Palestinian Bedouin population was expelled from their lands. Between 1948 and 1953, 90% of the remaining inhabitants were forced out. Half of the Bedouin currently residing in the Naqab live in 38 villages which are unrecognized by Israel. The state continues to claim ownership over the land where the villages have been formed. As a result of this, Bedouins in the Naqab are often forced to leave their houses and their land in order to live in governmental designed towns that comprise just 1% of the district. The Bedouin towns have poor infrastructure and the highest unemployment and poverty rates in Israel.

## BACKGROUND

The Bedouin community in the Naqab has been suffering from house shortages, and has consistently and historically been threatened with forced displacement and house demolition. Despite Israel's attempt to separate the issue of the Bedouins from that of the Palestinians, the threats faced by the Bedouin community are an integral part of the Palestinian struggle over land

Prior to the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, Bedouins were the sole residents of the Naqab. Until the British Mandate in 1921, the Bedouin proclaimed ownership of the land they cultivated without any written record, as an act of rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. The Bedouin viewed written records of ownership as an act that forced them to be subjects of foreign rule, and one that would make them liable to being taxed and to serve in the Ottoman army. In 1921, those who did not register their land but had still cultivated it were given a certificate of ownership, which was then re-categorized as Miri, meaning state-owned land that could be cultivated for a one-time fee.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-seven years later, following the establishment of Israel, the Israeli court ruled that any Bedouin who had refused to register the land in their name in 1921 and had not received a certificate of ownership was no longer eligible to do so.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1948 and 1953, the Israeli state emptied the Naqab of 90% of its residents. This was done through massacres, force displacements, and destruction of livestock and property.<sup>3</sup> In 1947, over 90,000 Bedouins, members of 96 different tribes, lived in the expanse stretching southward from today's Kiryat-Gat and Ashdod, and held approximately two million dunums of land.<sup>4</sup>

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In 1946, two years before the creation of the Israeli state, the first Jewish settlement was built in the Naqab. With the establishment of the state, most of the Arab Bedouin who survived either fled or were expelled to Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Egypt. Those who remained behind were grouped and concentrated in an enclosed area known as Siyaj (Arabic for “enclosure” or “fence”). The area was 1.5 million-dunums, and already had thousands of Bedouin who resided within it. With the restrictions of the military regime imposed on non-Jewish residents within the newly established state, Bedouins were prevented from returning to their land. Two Jewish “development towns” were created at the time (Dimona in 1955 and Arad in 1962) on portions of Siyaj land.<sup>5</sup>

Following the termination of the military regime in 1966, many inhabitants were transferred yet again. They were moved to two townships, Tel Sheva in 1968 and Rahat in 1972, both of which were separated from the Bedouins’ ancestral land. Others remained in villages which are to this day “unrecognized.” This status means that these villages have no electricity, urban infrastructure, roads, running water or even schools, as the state refuses to extend these services to them.<sup>6</sup>

## CURRENT ISSUES

Today’s Naqab desert has become a dumping ground for polluting industries, garbage, and radioactive storage sites. It also serves as a space for housing military training zones as well as incarceration facilities for Palestinian political detainees<sup>7</sup> and African refugees.

### Population and Living Condition

The Bedouin community of the Negev numbers about 230,000 people, representing 31.4 % of the entire Naqab population. Around half of them live in 38 villages which are unrecognized, and whose land the state continues to claim ownership of. Of 144 official townships within the Naqab, 18 are set aside for the

Bedouin community.<sup>8</sup> These comprise 1% of the district area, and remain crowded, with poor infrastructure and the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the country.<sup>9</sup> The Bedouin have put forward ownership claims, however, on 776,000 dunums of Naqab land, amounting to 5.4% of the Naqab.<sup>10</sup> However the Israeli government does not fully recognize these claims and continues to work towards urbanizing and Europeanizing the Naqab.

### Continuous forced displacements and house demolitions.

Governmental plans to urbanize the desert disregards the Bedouin community. To push forward its plans, the government often threatens to demolish the unrecognized villages in the area for the sake of setting roads, planting forests, digging mines, and building new Jewish settlements instead.<sup>11</sup> As such, Bedouin residents of the Naqab are constantly fearing forced displacement once again. The state of Israel exercises a “house demolition policy” in all Bedouin towns and villages of the Naqab, whether they are planned towns, newly recognized villages, or unrecognized villages. All these are subjected to demolition for being build “illegally”. The problem remains that the lack of official planning in recognizing villages and the impossibility of obtaining construction permits, leads to a situation where Bedouins build illegally, since the government does not provide them with a “legitimate” solution.<sup>12</sup> As such, despite the recognition of 10 villages by the Israeli authorities since the 2000s, there was hardly any construction permit provided for the residents of these villages since then.<sup>13</sup>

Over the last three years, 2,752 structures were demolished in Bedouin Palestinian community in the Naqab; 982 structures were demolished in 2015, 1073 in 2014 and 697 in 2013. These including the repeated destruction of the unrecognized villages of al-Araqib, Liqiya, Umm al-Hiran and others. As such the Israeli High Court of Justice, in May 2015 ruled that plans to destroy Umm al-Hiran and displace its residents may proceed, all for the sake of constructing the governmental plan and build the Jewish town Hiran on its ruins.<sup>14</sup>





## REFERENCES

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