

Israel plans mass evictions of Bedouins

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Israel's parliament, the Knesset, is due to sign into law the Praver-Begin plan that will evict nearly 40,000 Bedouins from their homes in the Negev desert.

The Bedouin, unlike Jewish citizens, are denied recourse to the law courts to appeal their evictions. Dispossessing them of their historical lands will destroy their pastoral way of life and condemn them to a future of poverty and unemployment.

This is the largest attempted eviction of the indigenous Palestinian population by Israel in decades. It is a flagrant violation of the constitutional rights of Israel's Bedouin citizens to property, dignity, equality, adequate housing and freedom to choose their own residence. The plan, when implemented, will erase all remaining Bedouin land claims from the state record.

The Bedouins have rejected the plan, which was drawn up without any consultation with them. There have been rallies and demonstrations over the summer in the Negev and northern Israel protesting the bill.

Human rights groups and the European Union have registered token protests, with Raquel Rolnick, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, describing the measure as the “new frontier of dispossession of traditional inhabitants, and the implementation of a strategy of Judaization and control of the territory.”

The Bedouin in the Negev are one of the most discriminated groups among Israel's Arab citizens. More than half of the 160,000 Bedouin live in 35 “unrecognised” villages that either predate the establishment of Israel in 1948 or were officially transferred to villages created by military order in the early 1950s. These areas constitute less than 5 percent of the Negev.

About 70,000 Bedouin live in 10 villages that were given partial recognition in 2003 and incorporated into a non-contiguous council, Abu Basma, which, under legislation passed in 2009, will hold no elections in the

foreseeable future.

Israel refuses to provide the 35 unrecognised villages, which it regards as “trespassers,” with basic services and infrastructure such as electricity and running water or place them under municipal jurisdiction, in order to “encourage” their Bedouin citizens to give up their ancestral land. No such restrictions apply to Israel's “unrecognised” settlements in the West Bank or Israeli farms established in the Negev that are retroactively given legal status.

Israel has employed economic coercion to remove Bedouin from their land. It has also suppressed British government documents from 1921 exempting Bedouin land owners from registering their land. The Israeli government has reclassified the land as state land and declared that the Bedouin are only “guardians” of the land. It has negated the Bedouins' rights to property and historical ties to the land in ways not dissimilar to the treatment of the indigenous peoples of Australia, Canada, South Africa and Brazil.

The Praver Plan continues this discrimination, but aims to settle once and for all the issue of landownership. Under the plan, first approved in 2011 and subsequently modified by Minister Benny Begin, the son of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Israel recognises Bedouin ownership of just 100,000 dunams, an eighth of the outstanding claims, and far less than the 2 million dunams they owned in 1948 and on which their herds have grazed for centuries. The rest of the land is to be confiscated. Monetary compensation will be a derisory 20 to 50 percent of the land's value.

The Praver Plan also legislates for the “relocation” of the Bedouin in the unrecognised villages to one of seven government-planned townships near Arad, east of Be'er Sheva. It implies that the Bedouin population will be concentrated in a specific area in recognized settlements and that no Bedouin settlements will be allowed beyond this area—compounding concerns about

ethnic discrimination.

Israel is proceeding with the new law even before it has been passed, through home demolitions. The Interior Ministry wrote in response to a Freedom of Information request from Adalah, the legal rights centre, that it demolished 862 homes in 2012, including 449 that were demolished by their owners after they were threatened with heavy fines if they did not do so. In the first four months of 2013 the authorities demolished an additional 399 homes, of which 187 were self-demolished. The village of al-Arakib has been demolished more than 50 times. Its lands are designated to be turned into a “peace forest.” The process has been accompanied by a campaign of vilification, with journalists describing the Bedouin tribes as dangerous criminal families that control “the most crucial strategic roads in Israel.” Some have tried to link the Bedouin to the recent unrest in Sinai, Egypt, and accused youth protesting against the Praver Plan of supporting Al Qaeda.

The displacement of the Bedouin is part of the process of dispossessing Palestinians in the West Bank to make way for Israeli settlements. In this case, the Bedouin are full Israeli citizens, with some even serving in the Israeli army.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced a scheme to establish ten rural Jewish satellite communities around the eastern Negev town of Arad. These are set to house 1,500 military families as part of a wider relocation of army bases to the Negev. The government recently announced a \$50 million assistance programme to encourage army personnel to relocate to the Negev.

The overall aim is to boost the number of people living in the Negev by 50 percent, to 1 million in 2020, with a \$6 billion expansion of Be’er Sheva and the surrounding area. Forty thousand soldiers are to be relocated to four new bases, set to cost \$650 million, 30 kilometres south of the city, starting with 10,000 in 2014. By far the largest component of the project is a new army training base, Kiriya Hadracha. There are also plans for a high-tech park and a high-speed rail link.

Netanyahu announced the Praver Plan with the cynical claim that “it was in line with the government’s policies of development, progress, attracting the population to the periphery and increasing the

availability of housing.” It would, he said, “bring about a better integration of Bedouin in Israeli society.”

Netanyahu indicated the strategic concerns underlying the Praver plan. He said that the growth of the country’s Arab minority, already one fifth of the population, posed a “palpable threat” to the Jewish character of the state of Israel. “The effect could be that different elements will demand national rights within Israel—for example, in the Negev—if we allow for a region without a Jewish majority,” he said.

Rawia Aburabia, a lawyer with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, described this apartheid-style solution as “part of the Israeli policy of Judaising the state, in order to have maximum Arabs on minimum land.”

There is a further consideration. The relocation of the Israel Defence Forces headquarters known as the Kirya, originally an old British base, currently in central Tel Aviv and located across the road from Tel Aviv’s glitziest shopping mall, will release 47 acres of some of the most expensive real estate, valued at \$14 billion. The Ministry of Construction and Housing estimates 35,000 apartments, including about 9,000 moderate-rent housing units, will be built on the Kirya site. Israel’s financial elite are set to make a killing on the development.



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