

Israeli regime escalates destruction of Bedouin villages

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Even as Benjamin Netanyahu's regime in Israel continues its genocidal war in Gaza, wages a campaign of terror against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, and threatens war against Lebanon, it is ramping up its ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian minority within Israel itself.

The systematic demolition of Bedouin villages across the Negev region is part of Netanyahu's efforts to "Judaicise" Israel, including East Jerusalem annexed illegally by Israel, by forcing as many Palestinian communities off their lands and out of their homes as possible. This brutal process has been underway for years, but is accelerating under the current government, which is led by fascists. It further exposes the lies of the corporate media throughout the world that Israel is a "democratic" state with equal rights for all its citizens.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Nati Yefet, the media manager for the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Arab Villages in the Negev (RCUV), a democratically elected body that represents about 150,000 Bedouins in 35 villages that are not officially recognised by the state. Such villages typically lack access to both water and energy infrastructure, leading in turn to high levels of poverty and unemployment. Yet traditionally, many of the Bedouin have been loyal to the state of Israel, with around 10 percent even serving voluntarily in the Israel Defence Forces.

He explained that the RCUV had helped to achieve recognition for 17 villages since its founding in 1997, protecting them from demolition. Most of these villages, however, still "don't enjoy all the services and opportunities of other Jewish communities." It is much harder for them to obtain building permits, for instance.

For people living in unrecognised villages, the situation is much worse. The RCUV works with them to try and secure their basic needs from the government. "Many are illiterate, they didn't have education; we work to build schools, kindergartens. Almost 6,000 children aged 3 to 5 don't go to preschool. The first time they meet the education system is when they go to school."

Data also shows that one in six Bedouin teenagers aged 16 to 17 do not attend high school, compared with just 3 percent of Israeli Jewish students in the same age group.

Despite the common depiction of Bedouins as a nomadic

people, prior to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, Bedouin Arabs owned millions of dunams of land (a dunam is 1,000 square metres), much of which was cultivated. Yefet explained that at "the end of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire acknowledged the Bedouin landowners and users in something like 5 million dunams. The British mandate in the 1940s did aerial surveys and found they were cultivating something like 2 million dunams." Wheat and barley produced by the Bedouin farmers was exported, including to Britain where it was used in beer making.

"The Zionist movement wrote a report in 1920 saying that only around Beersheba the Bedouins own 2.66 million dunams, from which 1 million was cultivated for agriculture. The Zionist movement bought lands from the Palestinians, from the Bedouins, in transactions that were registered [by the British colonial administration]. They recognised the Bedouin ownership of lands. But after the establishment of Israel, the courts said: no, no, you don't own anything."

The Zionist policy was, and remains, Yefet said, "the smallest number of Arabs possible on the smallest amount of land." The Knesset passed a planning law in 1965 which banned construction in the Bedouin villages and retroactively made most of them illegal.

The process of expelling Bedouin people from their homes has accelerated under the Netanyahu government, which has demolished more than 2,500 Bedouin structures every year, about one third of them houses. Attempts by the RCUV and other organisations to oppose the demolitions in court have repeatedly hit a brick wall, with liberal judges siding with the far-right ministers.

Since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, followed by the war against the people of Gaza, the actions of the Israeli state have become even more brutal. The Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin, which is carrying out the expulsions, is led by far-right minister Amichai Chikli, with the fascist national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir also playing a leading role.

Ben-Gvir promised upon taking office at the end of 2022 that there would be an increase in the demolition of "illegal" houses in the Negev. Last year, 3,250 Bedouin structures were destroyed. There was a brief respite from October to December,

when the state paused its operations due to a lack of manpower at the start of the war against Gaza. Some Bedouin Israelis were killed during the Hamas operation, leading to rare positive media coverage of the Bedouin community.

The demolitions and evictions in the Negev resumed with full force in January 2024. Yefet predicted that at the current rate, more than 4,000 buildings could be destroyed by the end of the year, which would set a new record.

The village of Wadi al-Khalil was bulldozed on May 8, making 300 people homeless. The operation was enforced by hundreds of police officers. The government claims that it needs the land to extend Highway 6 south of the village—but the extension is not scheduled to go ahead for years and the funding has still to be found. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court rejected appeals to delay the eviction.

“You work eight or nine years, saving money to build a house, and then they destroy it,” Yousef Abu Issa, a 35-year-old resident, told +972 magazine. “They don’t give you another place to live, they don’t help you.”

Two weeks later, residents of Um Matnan, which has a population of 240, demolished their own village after the Supreme Court ruled that if they did not do so, it would be bulldozed by the state. “The judge who made the ruling is Daphne Barak-Erez, one of the most ‘liberal’ judges in the Supreme Court. This is to demonstrate how the whole system, sorry to say, is racist,” Yefet said.

In both villages, people remained living in tents amid the ruins of their homes, because they had nowhere else to go. In Um Matnan, Yefet said, the residents took down their tents after one month because the authorities threatened to remove them, “but they will build again because they are still on their lands.”

The state has provided no alternative. “It’s not that they demolish your house and the next day you can go to your new legal house. No. They say: okay, we gave you some lots, you can get a yard where you will be able to build legally. But it is only theoretical at the moment of the demolition, so they don’t have anywhere to go.” The new construction requires the interior minister’s approval, no such approval has been granted for the last two years.

Yefet said that while the methods of dealing with Bedouin villages were not exactly the same as those employed by the military in the destruction of houses in the West Bank, the demonisation of Bedouin people was similar. Most of the Israeli media refuses to report on the conditions facing Palestinians, in Gaza, the West Bank and in Israel itself, so few people are aware of the discrimination against the Bedouins. Insofar as the Israeli media does report on Israel’s Palestinian citizens, it is only negative coverage of the terrible crime and murder rates in these impoverished communities, where criminal gangs operate with impunity.

He noted that when United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres pointed out that the events of October 7 did

not happen in a vacuum, he was widely denounced as an enemy of Israel. “But he’s right, there is a context of 57 years of occupation. Most Jewish Israelis don’t understand it because of the censorship on this issue in the Israeli media.” Similarly, reporting on the war is censored.

There are now regular protests in Israel calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and a deal to release hostages held by Hamas. There is widespread opposition to the Netanyahu government and most Israelis want to live in a “liberal democracy,” Yefet said, but they have to understand that this is impossible while Palestinians and Arabs are treated as second-class. “For a start, let’s see them as human beings that suffer like us, that don’t want war, like us,” he said.

Representatives of the Bedouin community are sometimes invited to speak at the protest rallies in Beersheba—including the father of a teenage boy who was shot dead in February, and who is fighting for justice for his son. However, Yefet noted that “you will see almost no Bedouin in the crowd, because they are very afraid. They know that if the police, the authorities, will see them there, they can get a demolition order the day after. They don’t have free speech and they don’t have any hope.”

The same can be said for the international media and governments throughout the world, above all in Washington, Israel’s main funder and weapons supplier, which is enabling all the brutal oppression of the Palestinians. The Biden administration has made clear that it will continue to back Israel if war erupts with Hezbollah in Lebanon, which the Netanyahu regime is threatening.

Emboldened by Ben-Gvir and other fascist politicians who are pushing for Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and more annexations in the West Bank, a new extremist group, the South Lebanon Settlement Movement, was established in April calling for the annexation and settlement of land inside Lebanon. While the new movement is described as “fringe” in the Israeli media, its perspective is entirely in line with the demands by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich for Israel to “occupy South Lebanon.”

The genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza, and the threat of an even wider war in the Middle East, can only be stopped by the intervention of the working class. The WSWS calls on working people in Israel, who have nothing to gain from such a bloodbath, to defend the basic rights of Palestinians, including the Bedouins in the Negev, as part of a socialist and anti-war movement against the Netanyahu regime and the entire capitalist and imperialist system, which is the source of war and genocide.



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