

# Colonial Social Engineering

The Policies that Aim to Force Palestinian Bedouins to Give Up Their Lifestyle



By Ziad Hmaidan

**T**he desert occupies more than 60 percent of the geographical area of historical Palestine, and numerous Palestinian Bedouin tribes have dwelled there throughout history. They were in contact with the other tribes and parts of their community that lived in the Sinai desert, Jordan, and the Arabian Peninsula. During and immediately following *Al-Nakba* of 1948, 800,000 Palestinians were displaced from historical Palestine by Zionist gangs. At the time, more than 100,000 Bedouins lived in the Naqab alone, and 90,000 of them became refugees, forced to move to the refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, and the diaspora. Only 10,000 were able to remain on their land in the Naqab. The Bedouin tribes of the West Bank continued to live in the areas that extend from the northern ends of the Naqab, along the Dead Sea's western shore, to the northern Jordan Valley.

Israel viewed with deep suspicion the Bedouins who stayed in the 1948 territories. It imposed its military governance system on them, as on the rest of the Palestinian people in the 1948 territories, thereby transforming the Palestinian communities into "pending spaces" and communities that live in a "state

of exception," or in "homo sacer and bare life conditions," as outlined by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Moreover, like all Palestinians who remained in the 1948 territories, the Naqab Bedouins were placed under an extensive "discipline and punish" system and "restrictive biopolitics" described by Michel Foucault, exposing their lives to a rigorous state of siege. For example, any movement between cities and towns required a permit from the military regime.

Once Israel lifted the military governance system, it worked to Israelize the Palestinians of 1948 in order to integrate them into its colonial system as second- or lesser-class citizens through a social engineering process that combines the use of soft power tools and the exertion of power, even extreme violence. In parallel with these policies, Israel launched a great settlement process in the Naqab in order to cordon off the area called the containment area, which is where the Naqab Bedouins live.

**Bedouins have been exposed to an ongoing and slow strategy that employs soft power as well as violent means as it aims to erase their identity, reduce their cultural and national awareness, and fragment and marginalize their communities in the hope that they will succumb and accept their displacement, urbanization, and the confiscation of their lands.**

Israeli helicopter flying low to scare the local Bedouin inhabitants of Msafer Yatta, south of Hebron. Photo by Mashhour al-Wihwah, 2022.



Currently, 270,000 Palestinian Bedouins live in the Naqab. They have faced and are still facing many policies that aim to reduce their awareness of their Bedouin identity and induce them to accept the fate that has been decided for them in order to seize their territory. Such measures include the attempt to co-opt and appeal to some Bedouin sheikhs by appointing them as *mukhtars* (mayors) to ensure Bedouin submission. Doors have been opened for Bedouins to enroll in the Israeli army. Cultural influence has been exerted through the Israeli education system and lifestyle. Bedouins have been exposed to intimidation and pursued by security forces. Bedouins as a group or community have been treated as if they were not related to the Palestinian community. Laws – for example, the Absentees' Property Law – have been adopted and implemented to serve Israel's colonial plans, and Bedouin ownership of the land is not being recognized, as outlined in the Praver Plan of 2013.\* Roads and colonial settlements have been built on Bedouin land, and nature reserves and afforestation projects have been used as pretexts to seize Bedouin land. Israel's "canning policy" aims to prevent Bedouins from living their traditional nomadic lifestyle of grazing livestock and instead gathers them in constrained areas, which has resulted in their urbanization and displacement. Numerous laws have been passed to this end, and efforts are being made to control population growth and reduce the high birth rate among Bedouins.

In spite of all these attempts to erase their identity, Bedouins have been able to resist and preserve their language, identity, and national affiliation. They have also continued to cling to their territory.

The Bedouins who live in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the territories

occupied in 1967, were placed under Israel's military governance system and have been facing the same colonial policies, albeit more intensely and violently as they are being imposed through a different legal system.

After the Oslo Agreement, a process of rebuilding Palestinian collective awareness was launched, with many actors contributing to its implementation, starting from Israel to donor countries that support the reconciliation process. The Palestinian National Authority found itself taking part in this process.

The process of collective awareness engineering targeted all Palestinians, as policies were implemented that aimed to erase, suppress, and fragment their national identity and prevent resistance by involving the Palestinian community in the process of deforming Palestinian culture, society, economy, and values. This process achieved many of its objectives even though the Islamic and national factions opposed the agreements and kept up their resistance. Others, however, have subscribed to the culture and interests of the peace process that operates according to international and regional agendas. It objects to the resistance of Palestinians while claiming that the best alternative is what they call "peace," which has failed to guarantee the dignity of Palestinians or grant the minimum fulfillment of their national rights.

The Bedouins of the West Bank live in territories that were classified as Area C under the Oslo Agreement. Here, Israel was granted full control of lands and resources. Thus Bedouins found themselves without support in facing Israel's ambitions as it works to annex Area C. They have suffered being denied ownership of their land and been exposed to access restrictions

and the confiscation of their land that was declared military or border zones or used to expand colonial settlements. As a result, Bedouins have been prevented from inhabiting or grazing their lands, forced to abandon their traditional nomadic lifestyle that is based on grazing livestock, and exposed to forced settlement and urbanization, which to Bedouins means that they have lost everything, from their identity to their culture to

areas denoted as C around Jerusalem to make room for the expansion of the illegal-under-international-law colonial settlement Ma'ale Adumim. They were gathered on a narrow piece of land, known today as Arab Al-Jahalin village, which belongs to Al-Ezariyya village near Jerusalem. In 2014, the Israeli occupation authorities announced a plan to resettle the Bedouin communities that live throughout the West Bank in three



Suppressing citizens and razing their agricultural lands in Al-Maasara area, east of Bethlehem, 2014. Photo by Abdel Rahman Younis.

the ability to utilize their expertise – handed down through generations – to generate an income and secure their livelihood.

The Bedouins of the West Bank face the dangers of being deported from their land and forced to settle in confined areas. Over the past years, the Israeli occupation forces have deported hundreds of members of Al-Jahaleen Bedouin tribe from the

urban agglomerations near Jericho.

If we compare the reality of Bedouins living in the territory occupied in 1967 with those living in historical Palestine (1948), we find that the same colonial plan is imposed on them; merely the implementation mechanisms differ. All Bedouins face numerous obstacles as a result of the imposed economic and social transformation process. Many of these come in the context



Eviction, demolition, and suppression of citizens and activists in the Khan al-Ahmar community, East Jerusalem, 2018. Photo by Abdel Rahman Younis.

The Damascus Gate popular uprising in Jerusalem (2021) has proven that Palestinian collective awareness throughout the entirety of historical Palestine remains strong. This awareness and solidarity have proven that the social engineering process that aims to produce “a new, submissive Palestinian or Bedouin” will fail at key moments.

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of the deforming social engineering and restructuring process to which all Palestinian Bedouins are exposed. Bedouins of the 1948 areas, “citizens,” face great discriminatory colonial policies, whereas the Bedouins of the West Bank face a racial colonial occupation. They resist these policies by clinging to their land, education, and all manner of legitimate peaceful resistance, even though large numbers of Bedouins have been forced to settle and abandon their traditional lifestyle of traveling with their herds of livestock, having to give up many of their sheep, goats, and camels. Their situation is exacerbated by other factors, such as the harsh economic reality in Palestine, the rising costs of basic necessities and animal fodder, successive droughts over recent decades, a lack of donors, scarce job opportunities, and the lure of menial day labor in Israeli settlements that brings more money. Moreover, the Palestinian National Authority has not been able to provide the support necessary to enable Bedouins to face these cultural, social, economic, and political challenges.

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\* See “Resource: Full text of Praver-Begin Plan for Negev Bedouin,” +972 Magazine, July 19, 2013, available at <https://www.972mag.com/resource-full-text-of-praver-begin-plan-for-negev-bedouin/>.