

Practicing Sumudⁱ

Palestinian Bedouin Communities' Resistant Lifestyle



By Ahmad Heneiti

On the eastern slopes of Palestine's central mountain range, hikers can see many tents and wood-tin structures inhabited by Palestinian Bedouins. The density of these tents and barracks differs from one place to another; in some places, they are very sparse, whereas elsewhere, they form densely built Bedouin communities. These tents and shantytowns lack all services and infrastructure considered necessary for communal life under normal circumstances.

The inhabitants of these homes can be divided into two categories: Palestinian Bedouins and village inhabitants, found especially in the Hebron Governorate, who depend on livestock for their income. Although these shepherds have lifestyles that are similar to the traditional Bedouin way of life, they are distinct because they are villagers who own houses in their villages.

Among Bedouins, there are also two categories: the Bedouins who have lived historically in the eastern part of the Palestinian mountain range, such as the Ta'amra and other tribes, and those who were deported with their herds from the Naqab and the areas south of the Dead Sea during the *Nakba* and in the 1950s. So, in fact, the latter are Palestinian refugees though they kept their traditional lifestyle rather than move to refugee camps because most of them were able to

retain part of their livestock during the deportation. These are Al-Jahaleen, Al-Ka'abna, and Al-Rashayda tribes. Over the years, Al-Jahaleen have spread throughout the areas east of Jerusalem, in parts of the Ramallah governorate, and to the south of Jericho, whereas Al-Ka'abna and Al-Rashayda spread throughout the Jericho governorate, especially in the southern areas. Some families also mingled with other tribes, as, for example, some families from Al-Ka'abna tribe who live east of Jerusalem.

The Bedouin communities live in areas classified as Area C according to the Oslo Agreements. Here, we find many Israeli settlements and bypass roads that connect these settlements and link them to Israel, leading across the

Bedouins are living a permanently temporary life not because of their nomadic lifestyle but because their homes are in constant threat of demolition.

separation wall. Area C is distinguished by low population density, which makes it ideally suited to the Bedouin grazing lifestyle that depends on large areas of land that are neither inhabited

Palestinian children playing next to their demolished home in the Bedouin village of Khirbet Humsa. Photo courtesy of MEE.



nor classified as agricultural land. But these areas are under threat of Israeli annexation not only because of their low population density but also because Israeli law allows for annexation in cases when land is not used for agriculture – a perpetuation of the false Zionist claim that Israel was founded as “a land without people for a people without a land.”

Israel considers the areas in which the Bedouin population spreads to be important and thus prevents Bedouin communities from any type of development, whether in infrastructure or any other field. For example, these communities are denied the right to access water and electricity networks. Israeli restrictions prevent them from constructing roads or paving existing dirt roads. Likewise, they may not convert their tents and shantytowns into concrete buildings or erect new buildings. Thus, these communities suffer from deprivation and are not able to expand their semi-permanent structures to respond to population growth. While hundreds of buildings have been demolished, most Bedouin houses in these communities have received notifications of demolition. Nevertheless, most Bedouin families try to reconstruct their houses in place of the old ones. According to data issued by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Palestinian Territories (OCHA), 46 Bedouin communities in the center of the West Bank are at risk of forcible transfer.ⁱⁱ

*Demolitions and affected Bedouins and farmer shepherds in Area C (January 1, 2010 to January 31, 2023)*ⁱⁱⁱ

Demolished structures	3,494
Displaced people	6,402
Affected people	33,422

The traditional Bedouin lifestyle depends on mobility and travel, but Bedouins in Palestine have been forced by Israel to settle permanently in the places where they live. In cases when a Bedouin takes down his tent and barracks to move with his family to a place with abundant grass and water during the dry season, the Israeli occupation forces prevent him from returning. Some Bedouin families have tried to circumvent this policy by leaving their tents and barracks in place and leaving behind some family members. Sometimes, the Bedouins who live in the Jordan Valley in winter move to the mountains during the summer, but their place of living, as registered on the Bedouin family's ID card, is where they live during winter.

Because Bedouins live in areas where Israeli settlements are spreading as well as in and near areas that Israel has deemed firing zones and closed military zones, Israel has tried to deport Bedouins from these places to areas A or B. In late 1993 and again in the early 2000s, Israel deported the Bedouin families that were living around Ma'ale Adumim settlement. The Israeli civil administration prepared housing units to gather the Bedouins in the East Jerusalem area in a place near the village of Al-Nuway'ima and in the village of Fasayil, both located north of Jericho.

Palestinians appreciate Bedouins for the steadfastness and resistance they show despite the many restrictions that they encounter. The lives of Bedouins are by nature and daily practice characterized by resistance patterns that they need in order to survive. They live in tents and barracks, at times even in caves, frequently possessing only the bare minimum necessary to keep them alive. Bedouins are resilient, as they must overcome the psychological

conditions associated with deprivation. Their homes and structures are made of simple materials, and when these homes are demolished, their owners are quick to rebuild and rise up. Similarly, as Bedouins rely on livestock rearing to support their livelihoods, they need large areas not only for themselves but also for their animals, which is why their dwellings need large spaces. Animal grazing also requires access to vast areas of land that is neither built-up nor arable. This kind of terrain is available mainly on the eastern slopes of the central Palestinian mountain range and in other areas where Israeli settlements are spreading and where closed military zones have been imposed. The Bedouins with their traditional lifestyle affirm the Palestinian identity of these areas on which the occupation forces are trying to impose an Israeli identity. The identity of the land is determined by the identity of the people who use it, and the Bedouin use of these territories helps retain their Palestinian identity, resisting Israeli encroachment.

The Bedouin lifestyle minimizes Palestinian subordination to Israel. While most of the raw materials needed to produce feed for livestock and veterinary medicines come either directly from Israeli sources or through Israel, the simple lifestyle of Bedouins as they depend on grazing minimizes their dependence on livestock feed. The daily movement of their herds in open pastures is much

healthier than animal husbandry in factory settings, and so the traditional grazing lifestyle frees Bedouins from dependence on the Israeli economy. In addition, as Bedouins raise large numbers of livestock, they contribute red meat and dairy products to the Palestinian market, thereby enhancing Palestinian production, minimizing Palestinian dependency on Israeli sources, and increasing Palestinian economic dissociation from the Israeli occupation.

Ahmad Heneiti graduated from Birzeit University with a master's degree in social and cultural affairs, with a concentration in Palestinian agriculture and Bedouin communities, particularly in Area C. He has published two books in Arabic with the Institute of Palestine Studies, titled Bedouin Communities in the Central West Bank as a Case Study (2018), and Israeli Policy towards the Jordan Valley and Its Prospects (2016).

ⁱ The Oslo Agreements divided the West Bank into three areas: Area A comprises 18 percent of the

West Bank and is governed by the Palestinian Authority (with some restrictions). Area B, 22 percent of the West Bank, falls under Palestinian civil administration but Israeli security administration; and Area C, 60 percent of the West Bank and the area that contains natural resources such as water and agricultural land, falls under full Israeli sovereignty.

ⁱⁱ See OCHA, “Bedouin Communities in Area C at Risk of Forcible Transfer,” 2017, available at <https://www.un.org/unispa/document/auto-insert-198627/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ OCHA, “Breakdown of Data on Displacement and Demolition in the West Bank,” available at “Data on Demolition and Displacement in the West Bank,” accessed on January 31, 2023 (the data are updated daily), available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/demolition>.

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