

# The Plight of Palestinian Bedouins

From the Illusion of Development under Occupation to the Development of Steadfastness



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Translated by Elias Khayyo

**B**edouins comprise one segment of the Palestinian people. They are a part of its history and culture and participate in its social, political, cultural, and economic interactions. Like their fellow citizens, Bedouins in Palestine have faced a series of military occupations and raids, the last of which is the Israeli occupation. The occupation policies and schemes have usurped the land of Palestine and aim to fragment, deform, and eliminate the Palestinian people's identity. Thus, they divided the population into various categories, such as Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians, and Bedouins, aiming to tear up the Palestinian social fabric and damage the foundations of its national and pan-Arab identity, sense of belonging, and unity.

One of the most dangerous policies that the occupation adopted to isolate the Bedouins from their society and people has manifested itself in attempts to Israelize them. Bedouins have been branded with the claim that they do not belong to the Palestinian people through the promotion of conscription of

Bedouins into the Israeli army. These conscripts thereby express their belonging to the occupation state rather than to their own people. It serves as a denial of their Arab identity. The occupation has been using the same policy to deal with Palestinian Druze or Circassians. It is imperative that we resist the occupation's attempts to mainstream the stereotype that Palestinian Bedouins had no sense of Palestinian national belonging or identity and that they gave their loyalty to the occupation state.

Historical facts and the patriotic roles played by Bedouin Palestinians in facing colonialism and raids throughout history emphatically negate this falsehood. Palestinian Bedouins have paid an exorbitant price and have been subjected to various forms of subjugation, maltreatment, uprooting, and displacement, from the time of *Al-Nakba* in 1948 until today, throughout all areas of Palestine. They have suffered as martyrs, political

prisoners, and injured individuals like the rest of the Palestinian people. The legendary steadfastness of *Al-Araqueeb* village in the Palestinian Naqab, which was demolished over 200 times, and its residents' death-challenging defense of their village and rights is a clear example of the patriotic spirit of Palestinian Bedouins.

Researcher Ahmad Heneiti's study *Bedouin Communities in Greater Jerusalem: Planning or Forced Displacement?* highlights the fact that Bedouins live in all parts of the West Bank. They belong to three major tribes: *Al-Ka'abne*, *Al-Jahaleen*, and *Al-Rashayda*. The majority descends from the Naqab desert, as they were displaced during *Al-Nakba* and the following years, which makes 70 percent of the Bedouins who live in the central West Bank refugees. The study indicates that Bedouins in the northern and western West Bank live mostly as small individual families, whereas in the southern and central areas and in the Jordan Valley, there is a dense presence of Bedouin



communities. Each of the three major tribes comprises smaller families. The study mentions that in the central West Bank, ownership of the land on which Bedouins reside is of four types: private ownership by families who live in nearby villages and towns; endowment land; village community ownership; and governmental ownership or state land. The latter is of two types: some is controlled by

to the deeply intertwined segments of the Palestinian people in a small geographical area. Generally speaking, most Palestinians have Bedouin roots in the social and cultural sense, as tribalism, clannism, agricultural production, and livestock production exist in common, while values, customs, and behavioral patterns intersect between Palestinian Bedouin communities and Palestinian



the Palestinian Authority, whereas the majority is under Israeli control.

The identity of Bedouins in Palestine is a dynamic concept that extends throughout Palestinian history and geography and includes a number of interrelated social, economic, cultural, psychological, and geographical factors. This is due

villages and rural areas. This is evident in the traditions of weddings and funeral rites, and more clearly in informal or clan justice that is widespread also in cities, villages, and refugee camps. Some individuals or families have deserted the Bedouin lifestyle yet remain connected to their cultural roots.

The Palestinian social reality is becoming increasingly intertwined due to the gradual urbanization and integration that Palestinian society has been undergoing in recent decades. Many tribes with Bedouin roots have deserted the Bedouin lifestyle that is based on movement and livestock breeding and have settled in permanent villages and towns. Some Bedouins have even moved to live in cities. This was evident in the case of the Arab al-Ta'amra tribe in eastern and southern Bethlehem, for example. The complexity increased because of the changing economy, multinational markets, an increase in the rates of education, and the communications and transportation revolution.

This reality became more complex following the 1948 *Nakba*, when the Palestinian people and its social structures were subject to an earth-shattering experience. It manifested itself in the uprooting and displacement of the people, the destruction of Palestinian villages and cities, and the emergence of refugee camps, with all the ensuing repercussions, including social fragmentation, the ripping apart of clans and families, and the usurpation of land and natural resources.

All of the above makes it extremely difficult to determine precisely who the Bedouins are and the size of their populations in Palestine. Palestinian researcher Ahmad Heneiti indicated in an interview with *Al-Quds News Agency* that while Bedouins traditionally have followed a lifestyle characterized by nomadism, desert dwelling, and the reliance on livestock, these determinants are currently no longer valid.<sup>ii</sup> Hence, I rely on two determinants to define Bedouins: a lifestyle that depends on livestock raising, despite its decline, and, more significantly, Bedouins

defining themselves as Bedouins. These determinants, however, create a problem in determining who Bedouins are and in assessing their numbers and the percentage of refugees among them. Among Bedouins in the central occupied West Bank, such as Al-Jahaleen, Al-Rashayda, and Al-Ka'abne tribes, for example, most members still depend on the Bedouin lifestyle that revolves around livestock raising and adhere to a lifestyle that is closer to the traditional Bedouin model. The members of these tribes define themselves as Bedouins, whether they live a lifestyle that resembles the Bedouin lifestyle or reside as individuals in Palestinian cities and villages or even abroad.

The particular Bedouin culture, social traditions, and lifestyle, and their existence over wide geographical areas in Palestine challenge the Zionist scheme of settlement expansion that aims to control the land. Thus, Palestinian Bedouins are regularly victims of uprooting and forced (re)settlement, property destruction, livestock theft, and confinement in isolated communities, while they must resist attempts that aim to lure them to join the occupation army.

According to the study entitled *Arab Al-Jahalin from Al-Nakba to the Wall* (in Arabic) by Hadeel Hunaiti,<sup>iii</sup> the occupation forces use two methods to implement their schemes. The first is forced expulsion. The second involves military intervention and repressive measures such as subjecting them to harassment, imposing fines for alleged building or access violations, and preventing them from accessing the resources that sustain their livelihoods, including pastures and water supplies, which has resulted in the displacement of large numbers of people.

Mahmoud Fatafta asserts that since its inception, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has indirectly played a role in the destruction of the sources of steadfastness and perseverance for the Bedouin community. This started when the PA agreed to designate the land where Bedouins reside as Area C, then extended to the lack of provision of health care and educational services for Bedouins, and it finally culminated with the PA's failure to protect the Bedouin economy that is based on livestock raising. It has neither supported them with feed nor supported the marketing of their products or offered protection from the competition.<sup>iv</sup>

Bedouins live under difficult conditions due to their nomadic lifestyle and because they live as individual families or in small communities scattered in the Jerusalem desert, the Jordan Valley, and in the desert areas south of Hebron – removed from villages, towns, and cities. This means that they lack the minimum level of services and infrastructure. Their access to health care is frequently poor, and some Bedouin communities lack health insurance and cannot afford the high cost of health services. Even among the Bedouins who carry UNRWA-issued refugee ID cards, more than 77 percent have complained about limited health services.<sup>v</sup> The educational opportunities are very limited and conditions deplorable, as they lack schools or have difficulties in accessing transportation to public schools. As a result, students tend to drop out and enter the job market, frequently finding work as temporary laborers in Israeli settlements.

In addition, Bedouins' economic conditions suffer from ongoing measures, intentionally implemented by the occupation authorities, which constrict their access to pasture under the pretense that these areas are green zones, closed military zones, or needed to build roads and expand settlements. Furthermore, the apartheid annexation wall has swallowed vast areas of grazing land.<sup>vi</sup>

One of the key problems that Bedouins in Palestine face is the absence of authentic and serious development plans and projects that would support Bedouin steadfastness, secure their continued existence in the land, and allow them to enjoy their lifestyle and culture. Such measures would consolidate their national identity, sense of belonging, and role in combating the Israeli occupation and its expansionist settlement schemes; they would also raise awareness of Bedouins' contribution to the national struggle among Bedouins themselves as well as among the general Palestinian population. Ahmad Heneiti indicates that the failure of developmental interventions concerning Bedouin communities is due to the organized yet erroneously politicized approach upon which such interventions are based throughout the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem. They are closer to



Israeli forces suppressing a peaceful march against settlement on the lands of citizens in the Msafer Yatta area, south of Hebron, 2021. Photo by Mashhour al-Wihwah, 2022.

emergency relief and in the best-case scenario aim to improve the residents' living standard – within their limited capacity under occupation. In other words, attempts at development are carried out within the Israeli regime that guarantees the hegemony of the Israeli economy over its Palestinian counterpart, while subordinating all measures to Israel's demands for security.<sup>vii</sup>

The steadfastness of the Bedouin communities and the preservation of their rights is a basic component of the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and its national liberation project. Consequently, it is a patriotic task and social responsibility for all Palestinians to support Bedouins in facing the challenge of overcoming the incessant occupation and settlement schemes that target their communities. We all must resist the Israeli policies that aim to destroy

their lifestyle, besiege them, seize their geographical space, and force them to remain in closed segregated areas.

Achieving this general objective requires a methodical national Palestinian vision and the political will to combat the policies of annexation, settlement expansion, displacement, uprooting, segregation, and coercive settlement. We must object to the erection of walls, the installation of checkpoints, and the destruction of the geographic and social connectivity of Palestinians while providing the necessary legal support to cases that face the aggression perpetrated in various ways by the occupation authorities and by settlers.

Inconsistency and improvisation must be overcome in dealing with



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

Bedouin communities. Instead, a comprehensive strategic plan with immediate, midterm, and long-term ranges must be developed. Especially in Area C, so-called developmental interventions that are in fact relief interventions and those that lead to the consolidation of the occupation must be replaced by development projects that support the steadfastness of Bedouins on their land and meet their specific needs. These include health awareness-raising campaigns and the provision of health care services through centers and mobile clinics, the comprehensive inoculation of all, health insurance, and maternal care. Education must be facilitated and improved by constructing schools in Bedouin communities, providing

transportation, securing protection from attacks by settlers, addressing truancy, and enabling access to vocational and university education by granting financial aid.

Furthermore, infrastructure needs to be made available, which includes access to water, electricity, heaters, and roads. In terms of the economy, Bedouin communities and families need support to ensure that their basic survival requirements are met. Their steadfastness must be enhanced by dedicating a percentage of the general budget to offer support by providing tools, textiles, livestock, feed, and veterinary care. The marketing of their products must be facilitated and protected from competition. Also, specific plans need to be formulated to deal with

unemployment among members of Bedouin communities.

Bedouin citizens must be involved in determining their needs, and these needs must be met in ways and contexts that suit the culture and lifestyle rather than leaving the Bedouin population at the mercy of funding institutions and their conditions that are frequently contrary to Palestinian national objectives and interests.

Finally, it is important to consolidate national awareness and strengthen the identity and cultural expressions in Bedouin communities, including tradition and oral history. Festivals and cultural events that revive Bedouin cultural heritage through poetry, song, dance, and handicrafts should be held. Advocacy and solidarity campaigns with Bedouins should be launched on the national, regional, and international levels to combat the occupation schemes.

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Suppressing a peaceful march against Israeli settlement on the lands of citizens in the Msafer Yatta area, south of Hebron, 2021.  
Photo by Mashhour al-Wihwah, 2022.

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<sup>i</sup> Ahmad Heneiti, "Bedouin Communities in Greater Jerusalem: Planning or Forced Displacement?" Institute of Palestine Studies, *Jerusalem Quarterly* 65, 2016, available at <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/198347>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ahmad Heneiti, "Bedouin Communities in the West Bank: A Lifestyle that Resists Zionist Settlement Expansion" (in Arabic), *Al-Quds News Agency*, February 20, 2020, available at <https://alqudsnews.net/post/149919/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Hadeel Hunaiti, *Arab Al-Jahalin from Al-Nakba to the Wall* (in Arabic), Ramallah: Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Mahmoud Fatafta, "The Bedouin of Palestine...Traveling Without Sunrise and Steadfastness Without Sunset: Between the Might of Geography and the Failure of Politics" (in Arabic), *Alhadath*, April 7, 2015, available at <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/14865/>.

<sup>v</sup> Mahmoud Fatafta, "The Bedouin of Palestine."

<sup>vi</sup> Mahmoud Fatafta, "The Bedouin of Palestine."

<sup>vii</sup> Ahmad Heneiti, "Patterns of popular existence and survival in the Jordan Valley" (in Arabic), Institute for Palestine Studies, July 28, 2020, available at <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650417>.