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Israel's invisible villages: towards the disappearance of the Negev Bedouin?

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One hundred and fifty people were there to mark the saddest of anniversaries: the commemoration of the destruction of the village of Al-Araqib by the Israeli police, four years ago on 27 July 2010. Former inhabitants of the village, friends and relatives and members of the few families that still live there, Israeli activists present to express their solidarity, everyone met under the last remaining trees to share the *iftar* meal that marks the end of the Ramadan fast. The *sheikh* thanked everyone for coming, and stressed the importance of *sumud*, the determination of the inhabitants to resist and remain in the village. Doctor Abu Freh, a former resident of the village, emphasised the definition of this term, a concept fundamental to the Palestinian struggle in general. *Sumud*: steadfastness, peaceful resistance, continuing to live, but also, he added, to remain human.

The inhabitants of Al-Araqib, a small Bedouin village near Be'er Sheva in southern Israel, were fighting for the survival of their village and their right to remain on the land where it stood. Like some forty other villages scattered within the triangle formed by the towns of Rahat, Dimona and Arad, Al-Araqib is a ghost village, unrecognised by the Israeli authorities: it is not shown on maps, nor signposted locally, officially inaccessible to ambulances and unconnected to the various public networks, in particular water and electricity... The government considers these villages to be illegal and accuses their inhabitants of "invading" and "squatting on" state land, whereas their inhabitants and the NGOs that support their claims, define them as "unrecognized". Their current status is in fact the result of a very specific policy introduced in the 1950s by the new Hebrew state.

With the creation of Israel and the war with the neighbouring Arab countries, a large proportion of the Negev Bedouins fled to Jordan, Egypt or Gaza. Between 1951 and

1953, those who remained were concentrated within an area called the “Siyag” (permitted area), corresponding to the triangle where the unrecognized villages are now located. This forced displacement, scheduled to last six months, ended in 1966, with the lifting of the martial law that had governed the lives of Palestinians living in Israel since 1949. In the meantime, a veritable legislative arsenal was introduced, giving the State the legal means to appropriate Palestinian land and to bypass legally established property titles. The acquisition of land, begun by the Jewish National Fund in the early 20th century, thus continued by other means.

Two laws, in particular, were widely applied in the Negev: the Absentees Property Law,¹ adopted in 1950, and the Land Acquisition Law of 1953.² The first transferred the property of “absentees” to a “Custodian”. Absentees were defined, amongst other things, as any Palestinian citizens who had left their habitual place of residence for a place outside Palestine before September 1, 1948, or for a place within Palestine held by forces hostile to Israel. The second law allowed the government to seize land not in possession of its owner on April 1, 1952, for military or development purposes. These laws thus created the category of “internally displaced persons”, a schizoid classification also referred to as “present absentees”, which many Negev Bedouins still find themselves in today.

Nonetheless, situations vary from one village to another: some, like the inhabitants of Al-Sira, which was already located in the Siyag zone, were never displaced. In this case, it was the creation of a military airport nearby which justified the demolition orders first sent to the inhabitants in 2006,³ on the grounds that the village’s land had been expropriated in the 1980s.

More land, fewer Arabs: this has been a basic constant of Israeli policy since the 1950s, both in Israel and on the West Bank. The inhabitants of Al-Araqib and of the other unrecognized villages were thus requested to go and live in one of the seven towns created for the Bedouins in the 1970s. Rahat, a twenty minute drive from from

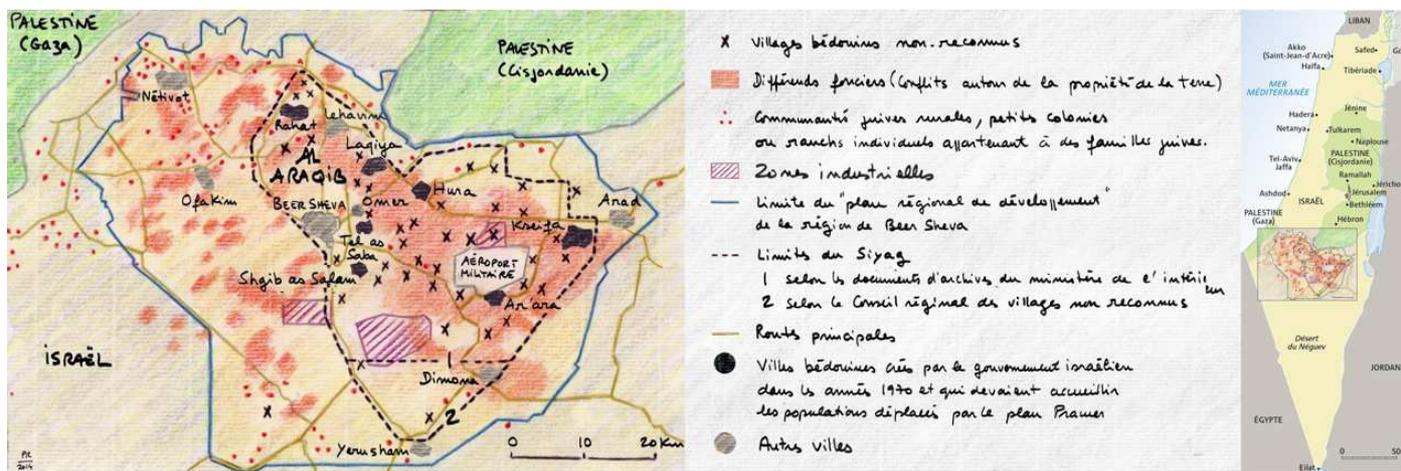
¹ <http://www.israelawresourcecenter.org/israelaws/fulltext/absenteepropertylaw.htm>

² <http://www.israelawresourcecenter.org/israelaws/fulltext/landacquisitionlaw.htm>

³ After a long legal battle between the inhabitants and the State, the district court cancelled the demolition orders on May 1, 2014.

Al-Araqib, has a population of 58,700.⁴ It is Israel's biggest Bedouin town, where the children of the village go to school and where most of the former inhabitants of Al-Araqib now live.

Despite the social failure of these "townships",⁵ known for their extremely low standard of living and often rather high rates of criminality, the different government lines have not varied over time, the goal being always to impose sedenterisation on a traditionally nomadic people, and to free up the space they occupy. The purpose of the recent, government-backed Praver Plan, was "the regulation of Bedouin settlement in the Negev", including provisions to relocate almost 40,000 people to the Bedouin townships. The plan was officially buried on December 12, 2013 after one of its main architects, Benny Begin, told the Knesset's Interior and Environment Committee that the Bedouin had never been informed of the contents of the plan and so had never given their consent, in contradiction of government claims. A very short time after, the task of "regulating" the Bedouin presence in the Negev was assigned to Ya'ir Shamir and to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, on exactly the same principles as before.



⁴ http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_24&CYear=2014

⁵ In addition to Rahat, the townships are Lakiya, Sgib as-Salam (Segev Shalom), Arara, Hura, Kseifa and Tel as-Saba (Tel Sheva).

The inhabitants of Al-Araqib are among the internally displaced persons who have tried to return to their land. The families were moved in 1951, on the assurance that they could return after six months. In 1953, however, the land was declared state property; when a law was introduced allowing Israeli citizens to submit their property titles for registration, the inhabitants of Al-Araqib presented their applications, which to this day have still not been processed, as is the case with all the applications so far submitted. Most of the families then dispersed, some to live in Rahat, others moving to find work. Around fifty families decided to return and settle near the cemetery in 1998, when it seemed likely that the land was under threat from the plantations of the Jewish National Fund. They are now fighting for the village and their rights over this land to be recognised.

After the spraying of the harvests with herbicides in 2003 and 2004, the destruction of the village and the surrounding crops in 2010 and the seventy or so demolitions that followed, the village land has gradually been overrun by the trees of the Jewish National Fund.

Another step in the steady erasure of Al-Araqib was taken on June 12, 2014. The bulldozers of the ILA (Israel Land Administration) entered the cemetery where the last remaining families on the former village land had taken refuge. The handful of houses, caravans and tents, the mosque's new minaret, the water reserves... everything was destroyed and removed.⁶ Even the fence that marked the margin of the cemetery was removed, so that the boundary could be redrawn to cover less land. The trauma was all the greater in that the cemetery, a symbol of the ancestral bond between the Bedouins and this land, had since 2010 been seen as a protected space, where the police did not enter, or entered only occasionally to take photos.

A few days later, a new strategy was employed: the land all around the former cemetery wall, and in the southern part of its interior, was excavated, dug up and turned, to prevent any return or future construction.

⁶ Video shot by Silvia Boarini https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rNv_zBixJ0.

**Fig. 2****Fig. 3**

A month later, the inhabitants were still there. The village, or what remained of it, had been reorganised, with each family retaining its own space. Haqma and Salim had settled near the entry gate: a tent and Salim's old van, its seats removed, served as the children's bedroom. The parents were sleeping in the central space, using a tarpaulin as a roof. No more kitchen, bathroom, or even running water. The *sheikh* was living in an igloo tent with his wife, and his son Aziz had found shelter with his family in the building used as a mosque on Fridays. Faces were haggard and the atmosphere tense. Sujjud and Ali, Haqma's and Salim's youngest children, continued to play. Maryam, the 23-year-old sister, attempted a joke: "We'll be comfortable here this winter!!" Because of course, there was no question of giving up. Haia Noah, from the Negev Coexistence Forum, could not hide his admiration, despite his concern

about the situation: "Living for a month in these conditions, no one else could have managed it."



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

On the morning of July 17, two cars, from ILA and the "Green Patrol",⁷ turned up to deliver an envelope: an order to the inhabitants to remove all their material possessions from the cemetery. Before the coming Sunday, i.e. in three days. At 7am

⁷ The official mission of the "Green Patrol, created in 1976, is to protect the environment and to prevent illegal uses of state land. It acts on behalf of different governmental organisations: ILA, JNF, Ministries of Defence and Agriculture...

on the Sunday morning, family members came from Rahat, along with several Israeli activists, mainly from Tel Aviv. In the distance, a continuous rumbling. Not a thunderstorm, but the bombing of Gaza. The helicopters continuously overflying the village contributed to the menacing atmosphere: army helicopters on exercises, landing opposite the village, but also police helicopters flying back and forth overhead, doors open, to observe the assembly below.

The inhabitants had collected their few possessions (mattresses, blankets, saucepans...) in vans, now parked outside the cemetery boundary. The judge who examined the case in the morning had given them seven days to leave. Everything: possessions and people. The *sheikh* returned from the court: *"If we have to, we will sleep in the cemetery, among the tombs"*, he announced. Once again, *sumud*: remain, resist and continue to live. The inhabitants began imagining other strategies that would help them pass through the net, to bypass the orders and continue to live in the cemetery, regardless of the surveillance, while still being able to leave quickly when necessary. One solution proposed by Salim would be to buy trucks to sleep in. An echo of the utopian solutions suggested by Haqma over the previous two years: living on a tractor in order to enter and leave the cemetery at will, or even living underground... The State could no longer say that she was occupying its land.

The anxiety, nevertheless, was palpable. Living conditions were growing harder, the chances of winning ever lower, and above all winning on an increasingly limited number of points. On October 1, 2014, the district court refused an application by the inhabitants to appeal against the expulsion order. On October 14, all the shelters were destroyed, the inhabitants' vehicles and personal possessions confiscated, including mattresses and blankets. The *sheikh* and two of his sons were arrested, and then released the next day with no court appearance.

Aziz, one of the sons of the *sheikh*, was disillusioned: *"We thought that there was such a thing as democracy, law, the courts... I am simultaneously a Palestinian, raised as a Bedouin, a Muslim and an Israeli citizen, why is that a problem?"* The village crystallises this multiple identity and the problems it poses. It embodies both the link with the land as a living space, inhabited, cultivated and cultivable, and the

inhabitants' rootedness in space, a particular land over which they have rights. Walking around Al-Araqib with the village's inhabitants, the landscape takes on a new meaning: here are the boundaries of the Abu-Freh family's land, these are the plots belonging to the *sheikh*, over there the start of Elokbi property... Water tanks and the remains of old stone houses destroyed in 1948 mark the location of these former living places. No physical boundary marks the different plots, yet everyone knows where they are.

In 2011, the UN appointed special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples reminded the Israeli government of its duty to "*protect Bedouin rights to lands and resources in the Negev*", emphasising the cultural and historical importance of their links with the land where they live (UN Human Rights Council, 2011, p. 27). The government's response was categorical: "*The State of Israel does not accept the classification of its Bedouin citizens as an indigenous people*" (*ibid.*, p. 28).

The Bedouin villages are seen only as a symptom of what is generally considered to be a "problem" or a "phenomenon". The position of the Israel's different governments regarding the Bedouin population was famously characterised in 1963 by Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Agriculture: "*we should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat (...) without coercion but with governmental direction... this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear.*"⁸

Coercion has been added to the benefits offered to Bedouins who accept to leave the villages and give up their rights of ownership.⁹ The objective remains the same: the Bedouins must assimilate and, ultimately, disappear. The dismemberment of the unrecognized villages in favour of the "townships" is only one stage in this process.

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⁸ Interview published in *Haaretz* on July 31, 1963.

⁹ Depending on the size of the land claim, the government offers compensation corresponding to a small percentage of the value of the plot in question, a value assessed by the government, and/or a patch of land in a township.

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Légende :

Fig.1 : Map produced by Philippe Rekacewicz, and reproduced with the kind agreement of the author

Fig.2 : Above, al-Araqib in November 2013, below, in July 2014. Pictures Marion Lecoquierre.

Fig.3 : On the left, the tree that used to represent a place of reunion and reception (November 2013). In the center and on the right, the same tree and its surroundings after the destruction of June 2014. Pictures Marion Lecoquierre.

Fig.4 : A gauche, l'intérieur de la maison de Salim et Haqma Abu-Madighem en novembre 2013, avec la cuisine en arrière-plan. A droite, le campement organisé après la destruction de juin 2014. Photos Marion Lecoquierre.

Fig.5 : Two women of the village carry a jerrycan of water towards the tent of the Sheikh, Sayyah al-Turi, and his wife Aliyeh after the mobile-home they were living in was taken away, June 2014. Picture Marion Lecoquierre.