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It takes a village

By Ran Shapira

A few minutes after sunset, Raed Abu Alkiyan's house is filled with darkness and the temperature drops quickly. "The children are growing up in unsuitable surroundings," says Raed, a father of five. "There is no heater to warm them at night, no light in the house and no health services."

His house, like all the others in the village of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev, is not connected to the national electricity grid, nor are there telephone connections or a sewage system. Water comes from a makeshift pipe, connected to a building owned by the Jewish National Fund in the Yattir Forest, a few kilometers north of the village. Some of the houses have electrical generators, but they are not operated around the clock. The villagers work in education or farming, run small businesses or serve as civil servants, and their financial resources are limited.

Umm al-Hiran and its neighboring, twin village, Attir, are unrecognized Bedouin towns. Unlike the majority of similar locales in the Negev, they were founded some 55 years ago - in effect, at the government's behest - when their residents were forced to move there. The residents of both villages belong to one large, extended family: the Abu Alkiyan tribe.

Until the 1950s, the tribe lived in the vicinity of Wadi Zubali, near the kibbutzim of Bet Kama, Dvir, Lahav and Shoal. In 1952, the local military governor forced the family to leave that area and move closer to the Lahav forest. They set up a tent encampment there, where they lived for about a year until they were once again instructed to move - this time, to Umm al-Hiran, where they live to this day.

The village is located some 30 kilometers northeast of Be'er Sheva. Less than 10 kilometers to the west lies the Bedouin village of Hura; the Jewish community of Meitar is located about the same distance to the south. The land the Abu Alkiyan tribe was forced to leave decades ago had been allocated to Kibbutz Shoal, which continues to farm it to this day. Azzat Abu Alkiyan relates that no little pressure was applied on those residents who refused to leave Wadi Zubale. For example, his grandfather, who initially refused to leave, eventually ended up being forced to go north to Safed. Since there was no freedom of movement under the military administration, he remained there for several months, and was not allowed to return home or see his family; finally he caved in and agreed to move to Umm al-Hiran.

The village is located close to the Green Line, once the border with Jordan. After it was settled, the authorities assigned the Abu Alkiyan Bedouin a security role: Many of the men received guns and were

asked to help prevent infiltration or smuggling over the border. Despite their work and all the government efforts to transfer them to their new location, the residents were not granted any kind of formal status or recognition. Thus, during all the ensuing years, residents were never hooked up to any basic infrastructure, and have lacked vital health and educational services.

The earliest government document referring to Umm al-Hiran concerns an issue raised by then-health minister Israel Barzilai, in August 1957. Uri Lubrani, at that time the prime minister's adviser on Arab affairs, wrote in a "secret" document that following pressure by the military governor, members of the Abu Alkiyan tribe "agreed ... to move their homes to the vicinity of Attir," and "were leased state lands, according to Agriculture Ministry regulations, and they farm that land."

Born in 1973, Azzat Abu Alkiyan still remembers the vast wheat and barley fields his father cultivated. He says that in the early 1980s, various authorities already began preventing the farmers from working their land, allowing them to use them only for grazing. The fields were later fenced off entirely. Azzat's father was forced to rent a plot for grazing near Hura, far away from their village. A forest was later planted on the lands that had been appropriated by the state.

Attorney Suhad Bishara, from Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, has been following the struggle waged by the residents of Attir and Umm al-Hiran for years. She claims she knows of additional documents indicating that governmental authorities knew about the existence of the two villages. Indeed, an Interior Ministry map from 1962 clearly indicates village houses in Umm al-Hiran. However, the village is not marked on any official map and not mentioned in Interior Ministry plans, and the Israel Lands Administration today says its residents are trespassing on government property.

In the 1970s, the Justice Ministry began the process of registering ownership of the lands in question, but many of Umm al-Hiran's residents were unaware of this process. In any case, the state barely took any action against them until a few years ago. In 1997, a heavy storm hit the area, leaving many homes destroyed. Ariel Sharon, the minister of infrastructure at the time, visited Umm al-Hiran shortly afterward and arranged for financial assistance to help rebuild the homes.

'New and renewed'

The villagers' situation began to change in August 2001, when the ILA presented the government with a report entitled "The Situation in New and Renewed Villages." The document described 68 future Jewish villages - their location, designation and planning progress. The list also included a new village, Hiran, earmarked to be built on the same spot where Attir and Umm al-Hiran are located. In the clause mentioning "special problems," the report said, among other things: "There are Bedouin in the area."

The National Planning and Building Committee approved the plan for Hiran's establishment in April 2002; a few months later, the government also gave its stamp of approval. In the wake of the ILA report, the government began taking legal steps against the residents of Attir and Umm al-Hiran. In 2004, all 1,000 residents were told to evacuate the area because they were trespassing on state lands - 50 years after their previous evacuation and a mere seven years after the government helped them repair their homes.

On the day the evacuation orders arrived, Azzat Abu Alkiyan returned from his job in Hura and saw a Jewish National Fund vehicle parked in his village; its occupants presented him with the evacuation order.

"I took the papers and immediately went to the Adalah branch in Be'er Sheva," Azzat says. He discovered all his neighbors had received similar orders.

The legal demands predated the day the papers were given to the villagers by eight months, he notes. But by then it was already too late to take any action. The residents simply declared the orders were unacceptable to them and remained in place. The authorities responded by issuing demolition orders. With Adalah's help, the residents appealed the court decision and the matter has been under discussion ever since.

Two weeks ago, during a hearing in the courtroom of magistrate Israel Axelrad in Be'er Sheva, Eli Forti, of the Interior Ministry's southern branch, admitted that the houses in Attir and Umm al-Hiran appear on aerial photographs and maps. But, he told the court, "there is no village in this place, there is no sign of a village; there is a group of houses there." He added: "The plan for the village of Hiran includes several houses that are earmarked for demolition."

Hiran, Forti explained, will not be an independent village per se, rather a suburb of Meitar. When asked by Adalah attorney Morad El-Sana, who is representing the residents, how they would build and inhabit a suburb 10 kilometers away from Meitar, Forti pointed out that in any case, the planned town was more suited to a Jewish population than to Bedouin, who prefer a more rural kind of locale, where they can raise sheep and camels, and work the land.

The residents of Umm al-Hiran have heard these claims before.

As evening approaches and darkness envelops his house, Raed says: "The threat to destroy the houses is real. We live here without electricity, without water, without public transportation. Every morning the children have to walk more than a kilometer to catch the school bus, which is not safe; they have to ride 10 kilometers to school and back. But we have survived nevertheless. I have no problem with [the establishment of] Hiran. If a village is set up here, with services like a post office, bank and health clinic, I will live with them in peace. I simply want equal treatment, like other citizens, and for them to recognize my blue [Israeli] identity card not just when there are elections."

In response, an Interior Ministry spokesman says there is a plan to set up a suburb called Hiran and that "a small part of the area earmarked for evacuation coincides with the plan." He adds that "efforts to evacuate the residents began a long time before the subject of establishing a Jewish community there was raised, and the proof of this is that Neighborhoods Nos. 9 and 10 in the community of Hura are designated for occupation by them."

He notes that many tribe members were already living in these neighborhoods and that "a significant part of them serve in senior positions in the Hura council."

The subject of compensation for the Bedouin, he said, is being handled by the Authority for the Advancement of the Bedouin, "but we know there have been talks with the residents over compensation, both in the form of free plots within the village and in the form of monetary compensation."

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