

The Official Data on the Absent-Present Arab Bedouin

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The exclusion of indigenous persons from official statistics is a common practice of colonial regimes, in which the indigenous person is absent, does not appear, and thus does not exist. There are no figures indicating his place in the spatial environment. The official absence of the indigenous person enables the regime to present itself as properly administering matters in a normal and civilized manner, without any disturbances. Simultaneously, official policy deals with the indigenous person as a national problem who disrupts proper order in the state.

Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) gathers and publishes statistics on the health, economy, industry and trade, and other areas of life of the population in the country.² Its work is mandated by the Statistics Ordinance - 1972. As the official body charged with the collection and publication of information, the CBS provides its findings to policy makers responsible for planning and providing services in accordance with the entire population's needs.

The CBS does not publish data on the number of Palestinian Bedouin citizens of Israel living in unrecognized villages in the Naqab (Negev), or on their social, economic, or health conditions, as it does in regard to other population groups in the state. The unrecognized villages do not appear in any category of its data. There is an occasional reference to "Bedouin in the area" or to "scattered Bedouin," giving the impression that the Arab Bedouin are a marginal, unrecognized group dispersed along every hilltop (in the language of the Bedouin Development Authority, a state agency which operates within the framework of the Israel Lands Administration), and are a population to be ignored. Moreover, the information provided by the CBS is inaccurate and misleading. As a result, the CBS has created, or at least contributed to, the exclusion of information on this indigenous group.

This exclusion has a damaging impact on all aspects of Arab Bedouin life in the Naqab, starting with the lack of recognition of their existence, continuing to the denial of their fundamental rights, such as the right to drinking water, and ending with the failure of the government to apply state laws to them and implement their right to equality. For example, the education laws have not been applied because of the CBS's refusal to include the inhabitants of the unrecognized villages in its figures. The Compulsory Education Law (Amendment No. 16) - 1984 and the Compulsory Education Orders (Applicability in Kindergartens) - 1999 and 2001 are being implemented gradually throughout the country by means of orders issued by the Minister of Education, pursuant to an index of characteristics of the local municipalities, and a grading of the local municipalities based on the socio-economic level of the population, as prepared by the CBS. However, as the CBS does not include the Arab Bedouin living in the unrecognized villages in its socio-economic index, the law is not applied to them. As a result, around 12,000 three and four-year-old children who live in these villages do not have the right to compulsory education.

A further example is the government's decision to grant a tax break to residents of Beer el-Sabe (Beer Sheva) and the Naqab (pursuant to the Negev Law - 2001). The government "forgot" the 80,000 Arab Bedouin citizens living in the unrecognized villages and did not apply the law to them, because these villages are not included in any Naqab municipalities entitled to

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² See the Central Bureau of Statistics' official website: <www.cbs.gov.il>.

the tax reductions.³ To overcome this injustice, a special bill was introduced in the Knesset by representatives of the Arab Bedouin in the Naqab to ensure that they receive their rights.⁴

Despite Adalah's request to the CBS to end its exclusionary policy, the information bureau remains unconvinced that the Arab Bedouin living in unrecognized villages should be included in the figures it presents to governmental ministries. The CBS contends that it is impossible to gather this information because these villages are not recognized, meaning that the villages have no borders that would enable the CBS to attain precise statistics.

This is a technical problem that can be readily resolved. Population figures can be determined in numerous ways. For instance, statistics on the number of Arab Bedouin living in the unrecognized villages can be found in the census taken by the CBS in 1995. In 1995, those collecting data for the census went from house to house and person to person in the unrecognized villages, relying on maps and aerial photos (which are also used to locate Arab Bedouin homes for demolition). It is also possible to study the population registry and voter lists (which include the names of those who vote in the schools in the unrecognized villages, the designated polling stations in each village) to obtain the precise number of inhabitants. The number of students can be obtained from the Bedouin Education Authority (the state agency responsible for managing the education system in the unrecognized villages in the Naqab), whilst economic statistics can be located at the National Insurance Institute and welfare offices, and so on.

Everyone who is aware of the reality in which the Arab Bedouin in the unrecognized villages live knows that there are several reasons why these villages are not included in the official data. One obvious reason is the government's desire to conceal the harsh situation in which the people exist. The officials realize that such exposure would raise doubts over governmental policy toward the Arab Bedouin. In petitions filed to the Supreme Court, Arab Bedouin citizens of the state living in the unrecognized villages have shed light on the reality in which they live, and this information has significant power which cannot be ignored. In a decision made eight years ago on a petition filed by legal representatives of Arab Bedouin to connect schools to the electricity grid, President of the Supreme Court, Justice Aharon Barak, noted as follows:⁵

Indeed, the existing situation, in which the schools for Bedouin children that are the subject of the petition have not been connected to the power grid fifty years after the founding of the state of Israel, is completely unacceptable, and brings discredit to the state of Israel. This situation cannot continue.

Simultaneously, however, public debate in Israel, including among governmental officials, gives a contradictory picture of the presence/absence of information of this kind. In May 2005, for example, the University of Haifa held a conference on "Israel's Demographic Problem and Policy" during which statistics on the Arab Bedouin stole the show. Academics who participated in the conference presented data on the birth rate of the Arab Bedouin and contended that action must be taken to reduce it as the Bedouin constitute a real threat to the preservation of a

³ Amendment to the Income Tax Ordinance (No. 125 – Temporary Order) Law – 2001. This amendment adds Section 11B – which gives a tax credit for residents of Beer Sheva and the Negev for the 2001-2003 tax years – to the Income Tax Law.

⁴ Proposed bill to amend the Income Tax Ordinance (Tax Credit for Residents of Beer Sheva and the Negev) (Temporary Order) Law – 2001. The bill was proposed by MK Talab El-Sana in the framework of the proposed State Economy Arrangements (Legislative Amendments to Achieve Budget Objectives and Economic Policy for the 2002 Fiscal Year) Law – 2002.

⁵ H.C. 4671/98, *Dr. Awad Abu-Farih v. Ministry of Education, et. al.* (unpublished decision delivered 23 August 1998).

Jewish majority in the state of Israel. Where, then, did the data for this racist conference come from? How do "precise" official figures appear, all of a sudden, about the most intimate of matters relating to Bedouin women and men?

Furthermore, "information" on the presence of Arab Bedouin reaches state institutions. For example, the Knesset enacted a law to remove squatters (the Public Land (Removal of Squatters) (Amendment) Law - 2005), which present Arab Bedouin children, of all people, as the ones who squat or "trespass" on state land. According to the Knesset and this law, drastic measures must be taken to prevent these children from encroaching upon certain areas. The law empowers Jewish local authorities to remove "the Bedouin squatters" and prosecute them. This law is comparable in nature to the Group Areas Act passed in 1950 in apartheid South Africa which enabled "White neighbors" to remove Black people from "prohibited areas" by evicting them and destroying their homes.

While the law to remove squatters was being passed, the National Planning and Building Council was in the process of approving the establishment of "individual settlements" on vast expanses of land in the Naqab for Jewish citizens. One of the objectives of this plan was to enable the forced eviction by the police of Arab Bedouin found in the "prohibited areas."

However, despite the existence of official "information," there is no official data on, nor recognition of, the dispossession of Palestinian Bedouin land that began with the state's establishment in 1948. Moreover, the state chooses not to use the original names of villages that have been uprooted since then, but opts to refer to such villages with either Hebrew or tribal names.

As a result, data on the Palestinian Arab Bedouin in Israel is absent-present. Their history, socio-economic situation, and ownership of land are facts that are missing from the official records. Meanwhile, data indicating their presence is used to treat them as a threat to the state. This synthesis of absent-present data nurtures preconceived notions and lends support to a racist policy against the indigenous Arab Bedouin. The state's refusal to accord official recognition to data relating to the actual situation of the Arab Bedouin helps prevent, among other things, rational public debate on the oppression from which they suffer, despite their citizenship in the state.