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Israel: Ethnic cleansing in the Negev

The forced relocation of Bedouins in southern Israel fits Foreign Affairs' definition of ethnic cleansing.

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Israel has been demolishing the homes of the Bedouin in Be'er Sheva in order to relocate them

In September 2011, Israel's government **approved** a plan to **forcibly relocate** tens of thousands of Bedouin citizens in the Negev from their unrecognised villages to government-approved shanty towns. **The Praver Plan**, as it is known, **advanced** again in March this year, when it was endorsed by a committee in the Prime Minister's Office.

Around half of the Bedouin population in Israel live in 45 "unrecognised villages", with a handful in the "process of recognition" by the state (see Israeli NGO Adalah's "**Myths and Misconceptions**"). The Israeli government wants to force them out, claiming that their "squatting" is taking over the Negev. In fact, while constituting 30 per cent of the region's population, today Bedouin are claiming "less than five per cent of the total area".

Although the law that will serve as the implementing arm of the Praver Plan has not yet begun the legislative process in the Knesset, events on the ground indicate that the focus on demolition and displacement is already shaping policy targeting the Bedouin. In other words: Praver is happening now.

Many homes have been **demolished** this year already. In September, dozens of structures were destroyed in a single day, in what was proudly described by the Israel Land Administration as a "rolling **enforcement operation**" against "invasions" of state land. Then on October 11, the recognised village of **Bir Hadaj** was raided and officials posted demolition orders on four homes, prompting protests from village residents and a **harsh response** from police.

Last week, as Bir Hadaj suffered more **repression** and a large **demonstration** was held in Be'er Sheva - and as the village of Al-Arakib was **demolished** once more - the Israeli government announced its intention to **split** the Abu Basma Regional Council in two. The Council "is the appointed municipal government for the recently-recognised Arab Bedouin villages", and was meant to hold its first elections this December. This new decision "will postpone the democratic process for five years - exactly the time necessary to implement the Praver Plan".

Meanwhile, the government continues to push forward initiatives for the creation of new Jewish communities in the Negev - such as Hiran, which "will be **built in place of** the Bedouin village" Umm al-Hiran. The latter's residents learned of the failure of the **appeal** against the **evacuation and destruction** of their village in late September.

The plan for Hiran is part of a broader initiative confirmed by the cabinet a year ago, to create ten new Jewish villages in the northern Negev near the Green Line. The **goal**, according to World Zionist Organisation official Yaron Ben Ezra, is "to grab the last remaining piece of land and thereby prevent further Bedouin incursion into any more state land and the development of an Arab belt".

The week before the demolition orders were delivered in Bir Hadaj, Israel's Minister of Public Diplomacy Yuli Edelstein spoke at a **conference** on an "Emergency Campaign to Save the Negev". Coverage before the event promised that the Minister would "speak about **ethnic demographics** and illegal building", while a post-conference report quoted Edelstein as urging an end to "the merry-go-round cycle of lawful eviction of illegal settlements followed by the immediate return of illegal **squatting**".

For years, the rhetoric of Israeli politicians towards the Negev has emphasised "demography" and the need to "save" the land from non-Jewish citizens. In 2004, the then-Minister for Minority Affairs **Avishai Braverman** stated that "if Zionism is a motivating force, then it needs to travel

south to the Negev, so that Israel does not turn into a Palestinian State".

The following year, **Shimon Peres** - like Braverman, a "moderate" in the Israeli political spectrum - told US officials that Israel had "lost" land in the Negev "to the Bedouin" and would need to take steps to "relieve" the "demographic threat". In 2010, **Netanyahu** warned in a government meeting that a Negev "without a Jewish majority" would pose "a palpable threat".

One of the bodies working with the Israeli government to "Judaize" the Negev is the Jewish Agency. In 2003, the then-treasurer Shai Hermesh **spoke** of "need[ing] the Negev for the next generation of Jewish immigrants", while "the trouble with the Bedouin is they're still on the edge between tradition and civilisation". He added: "It is not in Israel's interest to have more Palestinians in the Negev". Later that year, Hermesh spoke of a **plan** "to settle new rural communities in sensitive areas of the Negev where most of it is settled illegally by Bedouins". The initiative was needed, he said, because "the birthrate of the Bedouins and Arabs in the Galilee is much faster than the Jewish" and thus "we are quickly losing our majority there".

Demography and discrimination, birthrate anxiety and home demolitions: The propaganda about a "progressive democracy" rings hollow indeed. No wonder that earlier this year, in a wide-ranging report highlighting policies of segregation and colonisation, the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) urged Israel to cancel the Praver Plan "which would legalise the ongoing policy of home demolitions and **forced displacement** of the indigenous Bedouin communities".

There is a grim familiarity about new efforts by Israel at expulsion - during the Nakba in 1948, the vast majority of the Negev's Bedouin population were expelled, while those who remained were **forcibly relocated** to an area known as the "Siyag" ("fence" or "closure"). Sixty four years later, the Nakba continues. In a 1993 article for *Foreign Affairs*, a "general" definition of ethnic cleansing was offered: "the expulsion of **an "undesirable" population** from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a combination of these". This is the ugly reality of the Israeli government's "development" of the Negev, and international governments and civil society need to take appropriate action before it is too late.