



12th of November, 2020

Dear Delegates,

NCF wishes to draw your attention to the recent declarations of Amir Peretz on the recognition of unrecognized Arab Bedouin villages in the Negev highlands.

On Monday, the 26th of October, the Israeli Industry and Economy Minister, Amir Peretz, participated in the first discussion of the Parliamentary Commission to improve the situation of the Bedouin population in the South, and declared his commitment to recognize three Bedouin settlements that are still unrecognized: 'Abdih, Rakhamah, and Khašim Zannah, as well as his commitment to establish a non-tribal¹ Bedouin city.

Approximately 1,250 Israeli Bedouins live along Road 40, between Beer Sheva, Kibutz Sdeh Boker and Mitzpe Ramon. Almost all of them are members of the Sarahin and Zayayadin clans that belong to the Al-Azazme tribe. They live in four unrecognized villages: Sahal al-Baggār, 'Abdih, Nafḥah and Wādi Arīḥā.

Since the mid-20th Century, the State of Israel severely restrained the Bedouins' of the Negev Highlands in their ability to settle with liberty. Large tracts of land were registered on the name of the State and some declared national nature reserves where the grazing of livestock is outlawed. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed other, even larger areas, for army training and maneuvers. The IDF also built a massive training facility and base in the area. As a result of these measures, during the 1970s, many Bedouin families were forced to uproot themselves, move out of those lands, and settle closer to Road 40.

In December 2015, as a result of pressure from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Defense, a Subcommittee of the National Planning Committee proposal to establish a single, permanent, recognized village based on one of the aforementioned villages, that would include the other three as remote "neighbourhoods," was rejected. In practice, the idea behind this proposal was to formalize the legal status of all four villages, and they would then be eligible to receive services from the State in the areas of education, infrastructure, and others. Instead, the National Planning committee accepted the establishment of a single village in Sahal al-Baggār – Ramat Ziporim. The other three villages were designated as "areas for the development of tourism", basically denying the families in these communities of the right to live there.

Two years later, in October 2017, as a result of several procedural changes, a decision was made to designate 'Abdih as the permanent settlement, instead of Sahal al-Baggār, since more than half of the area's 1,250 inhabitants, lived within its perimeters.

The Bedouin communities found themselves facing multiple challenges that included bureaucratic complexities, the discrepancies between the decisions that were made and their implementation, the poor communication between the authorities and the residents, including language barriers, and the lack of infrastructure that was made available to the communities.

¹ "Non tribal" referring to villages which are intended to be populated by members of various tribes.



NCF supports civil organizations that have filed a motion against the plan to define the 'Abdih village as the only permanent settlement and the three other communities as tourist development hubs that includes the following stipulations:

- The main goal must be the preservation of the heritage of the Bedouin on the Negev Highlands, recognizing it as being in danger of eradication.
- The detailed plans for the permanent settlement and the plans for the three tourism hubs need to be submitted and approved simultaneously, and not in sequence.
- Those families and individuals operating the three tourism hubs must be allowed to continue to reside on-site.

We await the government to reach a final decision concerning these plans and implement its decision in this regard.

Sincerely,

Elianne Kremer

International Lobby and Research Coordinator



Background on the villages

‘Abdih

The village of ‘Abdih is an unrecognized Bedouin village home to about 500 people, located in the Negev Highlands near Route 40. The village is part of a cluster of three villages (from north to south): Wādi Arīḥā, ‘Abdih, and al-Baggār. After the establishment of the State of Israel, the families in the Negev Highlands were among the few who were not concentrated in the al-Siyāḥ’ area and continued to lead their way of life as a rural community.

In terms of infrastructure and services, ‘Abdih has a temporary educational center that includes a school for first to nine graders, with 300 students and two kindergartens. High school students must travel for school to either Bīr Haddāj or Šgīb as-Salām (Segev Shalom). There is a small health clinic in the area, but it is barely open. Both the school and the clinic were established only in the year 2000, following a ruling by the Supreme Court for Justice. Garbage collection is irregular and is not budgeted by the authorities. The villagers are not connected to the national electricity grid or to the sewage system. Some of the residents are connected to the central water system and some are not.

In 1993, as a result of a policy to concentrate the Bedouin population in the planned townships, and after the Israeli Court rejected land ownership claims of some of the Bedouin residents, seven families (from the Sara’hin faction of the Azazmeh tribe) were forced to relocate to the township of Šgīb as-Salām (Segev Shalom). Following a six-month strike in front of the Israeli Parliament, the families reached an agreement with the Government of Israel. The agreement allowed those seven families (from Sahal al-Baggār/Ramat Tziporim and ‘Abdih) to move and live on the ‘Abdih site.

In 2015, a decision was made, in principle, by the Planning Sub-Committee of the Planning Administration to establish a permanent settlement for the Bedouin population in Sahal al-Baggār/Ramat Tziporim, north of ‘Abdih, to house all of the Bedouin residents of the Negev Highlands. However, in June 2016, following a reexamination of the area and consultation with some of the Bedouin communities in the area, it was decided to cancel the planning for a village at Sahal al-Baggār/Ramat Tziporim and transfer it to the area of ‘Abdih.

On May 7, 2019, the National Council for Planning and Construction decided to recommend to the Government the establishment of a new Bedouin village in the Negev/Naqab to be called ‘Abdih.

According to the plan, three Arab Bedouin communities (Wādi Arīḥā; Wādi Hawa/Nachal Hava; and Sahal al-Baggār/Ramat Tziporim) will be moved to the area of the Negev Highlands, where a village with 500 housing units will be built for them. Recognition of the village requires additional approval by the government. Residents of Ramat Tziporim, who oppose this decision, announced that they intend to fight it.

In addition to the village, the Authority for the Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev plans to set up three more tourism complexes in the area for the Arab Bedouin residents. While the Bedouin demand that they be allowed to live near the tourist complexes (and the Negev Highlands Regional Council supports them), the Authority for Development and the Ministry of Tourism object to this possibility. Moreover, a decision of the National Council for Planning and Construction prohibits the existence of housing units adjacent to the tourist complexes, even though there are Jewish tourist complexes where individual Jewish citizens are allowed to work



and sleep. The distinct differences between the definition of a Bedouin tourism project and a Jewish one in this matter are highly discriminatory.

Rakhamah

The village of Rakhamah is located 2 km north-east of the town of Yeruham, along both sides of route 204 and is home to 1,500 people. Part of the population has lived in the area for generations, while the others were internally displaced and transferred to this location from the Ovdath-Abdih area in 1956 by the government. The village is named after a water well that is located nearby.

No health services are available in the village. In terms of educational services, there is a school for first to eighth graders, with 270 students and there are three active kindergartens. For medical care, the residents go to Yeruham, which is 4 km from the village.

Water is obtained from a connection, financed privately by the residents, to the main pipeline on the Yeruham-Dimona road. Some residents bring water by way of water tankers. Rakhamah is not connected to the national electricity grid and the residents use solar panels and generators to produce electricity. Some families in the village have no electricity at all. There are no paved roads in the village, no sewage system, and no garbage disposal.

Rakhamah is a Bedouin village that is partly under the jurisdiction of the Ramat Negev regional council and partly under the jurisdiction of Yeruham. The residents of Rakhamah wish to be recognized as an independent, agricultural neighborhood that will be part of Yeruham, or as an independent, agricultural village. The present status as an unrecognized village leaves Rakhamah under the constant threat of house demolitions, that occur every couple of months in the village.

Khašim Zannah

The unrecognized village of Khašim Zannah is home to some 2,000 people and predates the establishment of the State of Israel. The village has important historical sites including an ancient cemetery from the period of the Ottoman Empire, a well, that was filled in by the government, several ancient houses, and caves that were carved out for storing crops. The village is named after Zannah, a righteous woman who is buried in the village. The hill on which the village stands is shaped like a woman's nose, and the village is consequently called Khašim Zannah – "Zannah's nose".

There are no medical clinics or schools in the village, and residents must travel to Be'er Sheva or Šgīb as-Salām to receive medical services or attend school. Currently there is a plan for a Services Center that will include kindergartens in two areas of the village and a school, being studied by the National Planning and Building Council. Since public transport is infrequent, many people abstain from seeking medical treatment and there is a high dropout rate, particularly among girls.

Until mid-2020, most residents draw water from a designated spot on the main pipeline, near route 25, using makeshift plastic. This changed and currently the residents are connected to the main pipeline through the Negev Water Corporation.

The village is unrecognized, but appears in the Be'er Sheva Metropolitan Plan, in a location designated as a "rural agricultural area", making it viable for recognition. That notwithstanding, the village faces a double threat as both Route 6 (the trans-Israel Highway) is planned to run through part of the village and cover a significant part of it, while other parts of the village have been designated for forestation.