

Introducing: The Center for Bedouin Studies and Development Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

ALEAN AL-KRENAWI

Director

In little more than a generation the Bedouin Arabs of the Negev have traveled many hundreds of years, from a way of life as old as history to the modern culture of Israel. Traditionally, the Negev Bedouin were organized into nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes that lived by raising sheep, goats and camels and engaging in seasonal agriculture. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, their mobility was greatly restricted; the traditional lifestyle and economic pursuits were no longer viable for the vast majority of the community. A radical social and economic transition began in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the government began implementing plans to centralize the Negev Bedouin in seven urban settlements in the northern Negev. Today, 56% of the Negev's Bedouin Arabs reside in these towns. The remainder live in unrecognized villages that have no basic infrastructure and/or social services.

The transition has been costly. The skills the Bedouin developed for survival in the desert did not equip them for urbanization; they lost their economic independence and it has not been replaced. The manifold problems of a society in transition resulted in the fact that Negev Bedouin Arabs remain one of the most marginalized segments in the country; this situation is detrimental to their own people, their community and the entire fabric of Israeli society. Negev Bedouin face a myriad of social, economic, health and educational problems and they are neglected in all areas of development.

The Center for Bedouin Studies and Development is a resource for researchers from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the region as well as for Bedouin schools and educators, social workers, health professionals, community leaders and students.

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, established with the vision of developing the Negev and serving its population, is in a unique position to address the needs of the Bedouin population. It has chosen to do so through the Center for Bedouin Studies and Development.

Ben-Gurion University's sponsorship of social, educational and health research and intervention programs in the Bedouin community has increased in recent years. The proliferation of such projects highlights the need to coordinate efforts in order to strengthen their effectiveness. It also reveals the enormous information gaps in every aspect of Bedouin life.

Dr. Alean Al-Krenawi is the new director of BGU's Center for Bedouin Studies and Development succeeding Dr. Ismael Abu-Saad the former director. The center was established in 1998 by Robert Arnow, chairman emeritus of the University's Board of Governors. The Bedouin Center at BGU plays a major role in promoting the level of education in the Bedouin community.

The Center's goals are:

- To create a documentation center, including a data base, which will constitute a major source of research material on the Bedouin;
- To conduct and publish original research on educational, social, historic and cultural issues of the Bedouin and other societies in transition;
- To promote research on the unique heritage and the transition process of Bedouin in the Negev and in the Middle East;
- To evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs;

- To develop social, educational and health programs designed to meet the special needs of the society;
- To provide academic support to leaders, teachers and administrators;
- To encourage and support the enrollment of Bedouin students in programs of higher learning;
- To sponsor seminars and conferences on relevant topics for researchers and community leaders from Israel and the region;
- To facilitate an international exchange program for students who wish to conduct original research in Bedouin studies at BGU.

Some of the projects conducted by the center include:

A Way Ahead, The Future of the Bedouin Towns

One year ago, the Bedouin center launched its most ambitious project to date. With the encouragement and support of Mr. Robert Arnow, the center investigated the conditions of the seven Bedouin towns in the Negev. The goal was not only to document their plight, but also to determine the causes of their failure and to formulate a plan for improving the situation. At present the center's team is in the midst of meetings with government offices such as the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Agriculture and others in order to implement the project's recommendations. One of the project's goals was to empower the mayors of the seven Bedouin towns and create a coalition between them and the center at BGU.

Budding Scientists

This program aims to prepare a core group of Bedouin scientists, engineers and technology professionals who will be able to take part in the development of the Bedouin community. The program focuses on enriching the Bedouin students' academic education, which has generally prevented them from enrolling in the University, particularly in the fields/disciplines of science and engineering. Shortly after it began, the program staff discovered that the high school students, among the best in the Tel-Sheva High School, were generally reaching a 7th grade level. This low academic level was not entirely unexpected because for the vast majority of students the high school curricula in mathematics and English are inadequate and physics is not taught at all.

To overcome this problem, the project's staff, together with the students' English and mathematics teachers, developed a coordinated plan to bring them up to grade level. The students' motivation was so high, they chose to continue with the Budding Scientists program during their fall and winter term breaks from school and the intensive summer program was expanded from three days to twelve.

Current Projects include:

- A preparation seminar for new Bedouin students to provide them with learning and coping skills to deal with psycho-social barriers they face at the University;
- A joint survey with Brookdale on the needs of children, youth and mothers in the Bedouin community; and
- A conference on Tribal borders among the Bedouin of the Negev is scheduled for November 11, 2001.

Future Plans are:

- To develop programs to meet the psychological, social and economic needs of the Bedouin community;
- To hold a seminar for social workers, psychologists, school principals and general practitioners from primary health care facilities to help these professionals collaborate and to examine the Bedouin problems from a holistic perspective. This seminar will be organized by the Center and the Departments of Education and Social Work;
- To plan the Second International Conference on Working with Indigenous People.

Alean Al-Krenawi, Director
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
P.O.B. 653, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel
Web site: <http://www.bgu.ac.il/Bedouin>
E-mail: Bedouin@bgumail.bgu.ac.il
Tel: 972-8-6472859
Fax: 972-8-6461876