

About the “Unrecognized” project

The “Unrecognized” project incorporates a traveling exhibition, lectures, panels, various events and an Internet empowerment project. In 2003, following reports of Bedouin fields in the Negev which had been sprayed with a toxic substance from the air, in a state-sponsored act, I initiated the project that makes use of artistic, media, educational and social tools to bring the story of the unrecognized Bedouin villages to the attention of wider audiences in Israeli society and abroad.

The panoramic photograph format adopted in the project is the generally accepted format for landscape and group photographs. In the annals of photography, most photographs of panoramic views portray powerful images of nature and of wild landscapes; people are, for the most part, absent from such photographs. If they appear at all, they are presented romantically, as miniature figures, as part of the landscape.

The panoramic photographs in the “Unrecognized” project can therefore also be seen to run counter to the way the country’s leadership has viewed the Negev and its Bedouin inhabitants at different times. The romantic perception of a flock of sheep and a shepherd playing a *halil* (flute) on the horizon, alongside ideals that refashioned the Negev in line with imported Western standards, are confronted in the project by images of a contemporary and complex reality. Sharp and clear images, whose objects are generally placed at the front of the photograph, stare directly into the eyes of the spectator, while their stories place them in a social, political and humanitarian context.

Tal Adler



Abu Telul

Wesal and Nadia Al-Fayumi at Ben Gurion University

Ahmad Al-Fayumi is vice principal at the school at Abu Telul and has taught there for some 30 years now. Everyone in the area knows him. He and Seham have five daughters and three sons. The two oldest girls have already completed their higher education; Samira is now a nurse at Soroka Hospital and a senior nurse at Maccabi Health Services, and Amira is a special-ed teacher. Two of the younger daughters, Wesal and Nadia, are currently studying at the university. Ahmad is sure that his sons will also get a higher education when the time comes. Education is a family concern.

Ahmad recalls that when he started teaching in the village, the school only had several dozen students and, of these, only two were girls. He had to go from house to house, from tent to tent, to persuade parents to send their children to school. "Every day, I brought a new group to the school," he says. "Every day." At first, he persuaded parents to send their sons; only afterwards did he convince them to send their daughters. Later, he had to persuade parents to allow their daughters to continue their education past ninth grade. He explains,

"People did not think that everyone needs to study. It was enough for them if one member of the family was literate and could read the letters from the National Insurance Institute. That was enough for them. I told them that, even according to religious Islamic law, they were obligated to send their children to study. The first command in religious law is to study. If you did not study yourself, and you also prevent your children from doing so, it is a sin twice over; you have earned yourself a place in hell."

Parents who wished were given lessons to learn to read and write after school hours.

Both Wesal and Nadia believe in education. This year, they coordinated the first summer camp of its type for 50 children from seven unrecognized villages. They and the other students who initiated and ran the camp worked as volunteers and plan to expand its activities next summer.

Wesal (23) teaches at the comprehensive school in A'rara-Benegev. It is her fifth year there. She is also studying in a new program at Ben Gurion University. This year, *Inshallah*, she will be completing her master's degree in education. Nadia (21) is studying chemistry at Ben Gurion University and is participating in an extra-lessons program for schoolchildren and in a correct nutrition instruction project for women in the unrecognized villages.



Al-Araqib

Sayah Al-Turi

Sayah Al-Turi is sitting in the tent of solidarity and protest that he pitched when the Israel Land Authority again destroyed his large field crops. For years he had suffered in silence; this time he decided to cry out. It happened one morning in March 2005. This time they used tractors. Since 2002 the Authority had sprayed the land from the air. They sprayed poisonous materials with no forewarning, without marking the fields. Besides the fields, people and animals also suffered from the spray. Property was damaged as well. Residents of the area and various organizations petitioned the High Court of Justice, which forbade the state to spray citizens' fields like that. The country obeyed. A few months after the court decision, at an early hour of the morning, hundreds of soldiers and policemen appeared on Al-Araqib lands. This time, the helicopters only circled above them; the lands themselves were overrun by well-secured tractors. Within a few hours all the Al-Turi family's and neighbors' crops for the season had been destroyed.

Members of the Al-Uqbi tribe, among them the Al-Turi family, lived on their lands under both Ottoman and British rule, paying taxes to the changing regimes. In 1948, many of them were expelled beyond the borders of the new state. In 1952, military clerks came to Sayah's father. The army, they said, needed the family lands "only for six months." They promised the residents they could return to their lands within half a year and evacuated them from the area. The family settled close by, a few hundred meters from their lands. Since then, for years, they have waited for permission to return. The Negev was developed; dozens of new settlements were founded. With despair in their eyes, the residents of Al-Araqib watched their lands being plowed and sowed by Jewish farmers. In vain they turned repeatedly to the Military Ruler and asked to return to their lands. Later the Israel Land Authority began to lease them the lands for pasture, for a few months a year. Then, in 1999, the tractors of the JNF (Jewish National Fund) began preparing the family's land for tree planting. Sayah's family was called out. Sayah himself arrived in the area with a gas tank, threatening to blow it up, killing himself and demolishing all the equipment in the fields. Within minutes the tractors were evacuated. Two weeks later the tractors returned to begin planting a JNF forest on neighboring lands—those of the Al-Uqbi family.

In 2000, 48 years after being evacuated, the Al-Turi's returned to their lands, without permission from the authorities. The family's shacks have since been repeatedly demolished. Most residents of the area have had their spirits broken by the spraying, demolitions, arrests and heavy fines and moved to Rahat; but Sayah's family, and a few other neighbors, continue clinging to the land. Two hundred people are waiting, lifting up their eyes to the Israeli justice system and to Allah.



Al-Za'arura

Suleiman Abu-Ajaj and Muhammad Abu-Judeh

Suleiman Abu-Ajaj sits in the *shiq*, a Bedouin hospitality tent, opposite whispering, glowing embers. The tent is dark, but outside considerable light falls on the ruins of the demolished mosque, right opposite. The minaret lies on top of the remains of the shattered bricks and concrete on the edge of the Shalom (Peace) Road—the road linking Dimona with Arad and Ksayifa with A'rara-Benegev.

Suleiman recounts the excitement everyone felt several years ago, when they built the mosque. His expression is fixed as he describes how the whole family got together, how they were all so excited, how they all supported the project. Some donated money; others contributed building materials or put in hours of work. The mosque was built on Suleiman's land, but was meant for all the families on that side of the village. Those on the other side of the village would have to cross a river that had already claimed lives in the past. In winter, they would have to forge a way there through miles of mud as well.

A year of intensive and dedicated work was needed to build the mosque. When construction ended, and only windows had to be put in, government officials appeared in the village and affixed a demolition order to the doors of the new mosque. "Why did they wait a year until we finished construction?," Suleiman asks rhetorically. The village residents got together again and hired a lawyer. Papers and applications were submitted. The construction had cost \$50,000. The bureaucracy cost more money. Time and again they managed to postpone the demolition.

Construction of the mosque lasted a year. And one year is what the residents had to enjoy it. One morning, this quiet, remote village was inundated with hundreds of military personnel, as if it were a battlefield. There were IDF combat soldiers, Border Patrol police, members of the Special Patrol Unit and police vans. All the entrances to the village were sealed off and the armed combatants deployed around it. Then the bulldozers came.

Suleiman was summoned to the spot by his neighbors. When he arrived and saw the faces of the soldiers and police, and their numbers, he begged the residents who had gathered around the mosque not to do anything, to allow the bulldozers to demolish it. "When I saw the soldiers I understood that if anyone dared to resist, blood would be spilled here," he explains. "That I am not prepared to allow. Not even for the mosque."

In less than an hour, the combatants left the village, leaving behind them a heap of concrete and iron in a haze of dust.

"More coffee?," Suleiman offers in the dark tent.



Bir Al-Meshash

Ibrahim Al-Waqili

Ibrahim Al-Waqili is head of the Bir Al-Meshash committee and deputy chairman of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev. He has a large flock of 600 sheep. Not many Bedouins in the Negev still have such large flocks. Although sheep are a mainstay of Bedouin culture and tradition, and one of the main reasons the Bedouin tribes were formerly nomadic, it has been very difficult for them to make a living since the establishment of the State of Israel. At first, there was military rule and the Siyag (restriction) area into which all the Bedouins were concentrated. In 1966, when military rule was annulled, and the Bedouins could again wander with their flocks to pastures outside the Siyag, the sheep growers benefitted. However, in 1977, the Likud Party came to power and the Green Patrol was set up, heralding the end of this relative benefit. Green Patrol inspectors began to enforce, among others, the Black Goat Law, an old law which prohibited the grazing of goats in open country and imposed stiff restrictions on the number of goats that could be kept. Most of the Bedouin flocks were confiscated at the time and sold by the state.

The situation has remained ever since. Lands that could be grazed on in the past were expropriated or nationalized. Now they must be leased. Ibrahim applies every year to the Agricultural Ministry and receives a grazing certificate valid for seven months, from February to October. He pays land leasing fees to the owners: the Israel Land Authority, the Jewish National Fund, or a kibbutz or moshav. In contrast to Jewish farmers in the Negev, who get a farm with grazing land the whole year round, Ibrahim cannot invest in the land or prepare the infrastructure that would reduce grazing costs the following year, as he does not know where they will let his flocks graze then. In November, he takes the flock back to the village, where feeding them costs him four times as much as in the grazing season.

Ibrahim would like to set up a farm with proper pasture and milking equipment, but the Bedouins simply do not get authorization to establish such farms. In several years' time, it will not matter. The Agriculture Ministry does not recognize the new Bedouin sheep growers and only issues grazing certificates to veteran flock owners. As the new generation replaces the older one, the Bedouin tradition of herding sheep may come to an end. Only Jews will raise flocks in the Negev.

In the meantime, many families in the unrecognized settlements continue to raise a few sheep and goats, primarily for their own use and in an attempt to preserve their traditions. Grazing certificates are not obtainable, and therefore they feed their animals with expensive purchased feed. "It is not profitable for most people," explains Ibrahim, "but they finance it out of their own pockets, because it is part of the tradition."



Bir Hadaj

Salman Ben Hahmid

On the road before the entrance to the village of Bir Hadaj stands a huge sign saying “Negev of Growth.” But there is little growth in Bir Hadaj. The sign is there thanks to one of the projects of the neighboring Jewish Kibbutz Revivim: some 1,200 dunams (4 dunams = 1 acre) of olive trees.

Bir Hadaj and Kibbutz Revivim are both in the territory of the Ramat HaNegev Regional Council, which has jurisdiction over 4.3 million dunams. It is the largest jurisdiction in the country, but with an official population of under 4,000. The 5,000 residents of Bir Hadaj are not counted. They live in the Council area, but are not officially included. The houses and shacks of Bir Hadaj stand on about 16,000 dunams, about 0.3% of the Council’s land. And yet, when the Planning and Building Committee discussed the future of Bir Hadaj, which is about to receive recognition, Councilman Shmulik Rifman, who also serves as head of the Ramat HaNegev Regional Council, refused to respond to the village representatives’ request to recognize its meager boundaries. Instead, the committee decided to advance the program prepared by the Bedouin Authority. This plan, prepared without any consideration of the villagers’ desires, offered the village only about 6,600 dunams of land. This is about 0.15% of the Council’s jurisdiction for a population whose size is about 130% of the Jewish population in the area.

Anyone considering Rifman’s determined opposition to recognize Bir Hadaj’s existing borders might think that Ramat HaNegev suffers from a shortage of land appropriate for settlement and building. A look at the Individual Farms project makes this doubtful. With the cooperation of the Ramat HaNegev Council, the Israel Land Authority and the Jewish Agency, some 30 individual agricultural farms have been approved in the area. Twenty of them are already populated and operating. Most of the farms are hundreds of dunams in size and given to individual families. A company hired by the Prime Minister’s office has prepared a program for about 100 more individual farms, to take up hundreds of thousands of dunams.

The website of the Ramat HaNegev Regional Council skips over hundreds of years of Bedouin residence and agriculture in the area. “There has always been agriculture here,” reads the description of the area’s history:

There were hundreds of individual farms during the Israelite period, the Nabatean era and the Byzantine period. Here thousands of dunams of agricultural land was tended. Thus it was then, and now... we return to ancient times.



Derijat

Graduates of the Young Leadership Project

Over 90% of the Bedouin women in the Negev are unemployed. In the traditional way of life, explain the members of Sidra—a Bedouin women's organization founded in 1997—they played a central role. Among other things, the women made the tents, tended the sheep and goats, raised crops and cared for the children. Losing the land and the ability to earning a livelihood from agriculture and herding has increased their dependence on men. Bedouin society is traditional and conservative, and most of the women are prevented from working outside the village. Lack of formal education prevents many women from helping their children in their studies.

The status of women in the family and in society has been hurt. In particular, their self-esteem has been wounded. Women's organizations and various initiatives have begun operating in the Negev to try to deal with the difficulties and problems unique to women. The projects strive to help the younger women in an effort to establish a new generation of more independent, educated and active women. The Sidra organization runs empowerment courses for women, helps them improve their education and matriculate, directs them towards academic studies, operates a weaving project which supplies employment and helps preserve Bedouin tradition, and has initiated courses for education and enrichment for girls on the subjects of family life, health and prevention of violence.

I met the group of young women from Derijat in the Sidra Association building in Laqiya, at the final meeting of the first stage of their becoming a group. Derijat seems to be the ideal place for receiving and supporting the young leaders and their programs. The village is known for its residents' effective social organization, perhaps because they are all one family. The village, which received institutional recognition in 2004, is now in a surge of planning and growth. Among other things, they have a professional Debka dance group and offer sightseeing and food tours—without a doubt, a role model for the possible future of the other unrecognized villages.

The present meeting is being held after three months, during which the young women have discussed social, feminine, economic and personal matters. This was the first stage. During the second stage, which will last about a year, each one of them will initiate her own personal project. Active Sidra members will advise and support them during the stages of planning and implementation. Some talked about setting up a women's center in the village. Others mentioned projects of hospitality and business enterprises, such as the manufacture and sale of *afiq*—dried goat-milk cheese.



Khirbet Al-Watan

Village children on the soccer field

It is Saturday afternoon. The children are in the middle of a wild soccer game. When I arrive, the boys stop the game and one of them organizes them all for the photo-shoot. Afterwards, the game resumes. Even though the soccer fields are used frequently, reasonable soccer grounds are also not to be found in any of the other unrecognized villages. It is simply not possible to set up and maintain sports facilities without recognition, budgets and a local council. About 1,000 children and teenagers live in Khirbet Al-Watan. They, and the children of the other unrecognized villages, cannot enjoy the benefits of extra-curricular activities, youth movements, sports facilities or cultural and enrichment activities. After school, they can busy themselves with homework, watching television or shepherding. Many of their parents live off allowances from the National Insurance Institute; by law, they are prohibited from keeping or driving a car. No matter. In any case, they could not afford to take their children to extra-curricular activities in Beer Sheva, Arad, Omer or Metar (nearby Jewish localities).



Tel Al-Milh

Khadija and Sabrin Abu-Mesa'ad in the kindergarten (the only clinic in Tel Al-Milh)

An army jet plane soars over Tel Al-Milh. The kindergarten children continue to play, indifferent. Once again the ragged doll comes for her check-up at the clinic. The five-year-old doctor will check her pulse and write a prescription. The doll will get well, until the next time.

After a peace agreement was signed with Egypt and the Israelis left Sinai, the military airfield in Sinai was closed down. In 1982, the air force base of Nevatim was built on the land of Tel Al-Milh. To build it, over 80,000 dunams (4 dunams = 1 acre) of land were evacuated of their Bedouin residents, who owned the lands. Most of the evacuees were forced to "reach an agreement" with the Bedouin Authority and to move to Ksayifa. In theory, this agreement was to determine the amount of compensation landowners receive. In effect, through the Bedouin Authority, the State of Israel obtained Bedouin lands at bargain prices. In return, the state allowed the Bedouins to purchase much smaller and much more expensive lots in one of the seven Bedouin towns. Many landowners would not agree to these conditions and so received no compensation at all for the loss of their lands.

When the base was built, the clinic and school that served the Bedouin tribes of the Tel Al-Milh area were closed. The patients' files were moved to the clinic in Ksayifa, and the Ksayifa schools took in the children. Over 1,000 residents remained in Tel Al-Milh. The adults requested that the four and five year olds be spared the long, bumpy daily journey outside the village and petitioned the Ministry of Education. By law, the Ministry is obligated to operate the kindergarten, but for years they have refused to do so without a written permit from the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of Interior officials refuse to listen, and so, for years, the residents of Tel Al-Milh have been operating the kindergarten by themselves, with no budget for equipment or teachers.

In the skies above, expensive planes, state-of-the-art technology, fly overhead. Below them, the children of the unrecognized kindergarten continue playing in what is the village's only clinic.



Tela Rashid

Sheikh Mussa Al-Hawashla

In 1933, Araf Al-Araf, the Commissioner of the Beer Sheva district under the British Mandate 1929–1939, published his book *Law of the Bedouins*. Al-Araf researched the many Bedouin tribes in the Negev, their traditions and culture, and in his book he describes in great detail Bedouin law, the various kinds of court, the judges' roles and their rulings on a number of subjects. As a representative of British rule, Al-Araf also discussed how the foreign government had received the Bedouin culture and way of life. During the British Mandate, tribal courts were established and headed by Bedouin judges. The High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, came to Beer Sheva specially to participate in the official inauguration of the judges, who received their wages from the government.

Sheikh Mussa Al-Hawashla is a Kadi—a Bedouin judge. He receives those who wish to be tried before him in his *shiq*, the Bedouin hospitality tent. People come to him from various tribes, and sometimes he receives Jews who have a dispute with Arabs. "First of all, one needs faith," he says, and means not only the faith of those on trial that he will rule in justice and wisdom, but also religious faith; Bedouin law rests on faith in God and in Islam, and the oath of faith is one of the Kadi's main tools.

Sheikh Mussa was born in 1936 and began trying cases as a Kadi during the 1970s. From an early age he took an interest in the settlement of disputes and in Bedouin law. His father was an important member of the tribe, and many meetings were held in his *shiq*. Trials were often discussed, and even as a youth, Sheikh Mussa would listen to the Kadi during a trial—listen and learn. After the death of his father, people would come to sit in his tent, to consult with him and ask for help. In time, he began to serve as a Kadi.

When I ask Sheikh Mussa about various kinds of offenses and punishments, he tells me that the most serious crimes are murder, crimes over women and crimes over land. When I ask him what he thinks, as a judge, about his family's disputes with the state over land, he smiles. His family has thousands of dunams (4 dunams = 1 acre) that were expropriated by the state in 1948. Some of them adjoin the Jewish settlement of Omer, and soon a large industrial park will be built on them. He replies,

"The case is clear. There can't be a ruling in favor of the state, because these are private lands, owned by the family. They lived there during the British Mandate, and even before that. We had wells and a flour mill there. The state wants them for itself."



Um Al-Hiran, Atir

Raed Abu Al-Qe'an and his son Rani, residents of Um Al-Hiran

Raed studies geography at Ben Gurion University in the Negev, but even before his studies he could teach anyone about the relation between the Ben Gurion legacy and the geography of the Negev. He could tell, for example, about the day he was notified that bulldozers secured by policemen and soldiers were coming to destroy his house. When he received the notice, he was in reserve duty; dressed in an IDF (Israeli army) uniform; he was standing guard over Jewish settlers' homes in Gaza.

The members of the Abu Al-Qe'an tribe have served the needs of Israel's security since its establishment. The villages of Um Al-Hiran and Atir, where the tribe members live, were established by the military government in the early 1950s. The tribe, evacuated forcibly from its lands north of Beer Sheva (lands on which Kibbutz Shoal was later established), was dispersed along the Israel-Jordan border. The lands were expropriated, and the tribe members were given weapons by the state; until the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, they served as border guards and prevented Jordanian infiltrators from entering Israel.

From Raed's house one can hear the huge bulldozers excavating along the Green Line. About three kilometers from there, the Separation Wall is being built between the southern Hebron hills and the Yatir Forest. Many Bedouins from the Negev are working on this awesome project. They cannot be selective about work when their settlement is first on the list of settlements with high rates of unemployment. At any rate, the work with bulldozers building the wall is no guarantee that, when you return home at the end of a working day, you won't find similar vehicles tearing your own home down.

There is a wall winding through the lyrical landscape of the Negev. It is not made of concrete, but it clearly divides an unrecognized Bedouin village from a Jewish neighborhood of villas. It divides private swimming pools from rusty water tanks; an air-conditioned community center from a rundown mosque at the end of a dirt road; individual farms with government grants and private roads from Bedouin wheat fields ravaged by the state, weeks before their harvest.

A wall passes between neighbors, between Arabs and Jews.



Um Metnan

Zenab Al-G'anami

I photographed Zenab on one of the buses used to transport children to school. It looks like the bus has been used for this purpose since the 1960s. It is hard to believe that it still runs; it is even harder to believe that it is used to bus small children. The door is rusty, broken and half open. The windows are stuck in various positions. The upholstery of the chairs is old, completely torn; some do not even have any foam left. The ceiling is made of plywood; the floor, of corroded iron.

Children are bused to school in two cycles. The bus collects children, lets them off at the school and returns to pick up the rest. The first ones get up much earlier and have to wait at school almost an hour before classes start. Zenab, a third grader, is bused in the second cycle. After twenty minutes of driving along potholed roads, she arrives at school at 07:50.

The school consists of several prefabs, serving approximately 1,000 students. Some 18,000 students of elementary school age live in all the unrecognized villages, but they only have ten elementary schools between them. The Bedouin Education Authority, set up in 1981, is supposed to deal with the enforcement of the Mandatory Education Law in these villages. Among other things, it is responsible for busing children and is therefore supposed to issue a tender for the service and to oversee the standard of that server. Committees and inspectors appointed by the Education Ministry from time to time have found fault with the management of the Authority and, in 2003, the former head of the Authority, Moshe Shohat, was dismissed after reports were published about his racial statements against Bedouins. It was also discovered that Shohat had used the Authority's money for his own personal needs. Despite requests that the position of the head of the Authority be sent to tender, and despite requests that a Bedouin in the field of education be appointed to the position, it was ultimately awarded to Hanan Afuta, a Jew from Kiryat Gat, without a tender.

The children's parents claim that, because the roads to the villages are unpaved and because most are very difficult to navigate, the bus operators use the worst vehicles in their possession. They do not want to destroy their good buses. Many parents complain about too many children being jammed onto one bus, compromising safety and in contravention of the law. Many protest that tenders are not fielded, as required by law, and point to the absence of supervision of the bus companies and their drivers.

At the beginning of 2005, the Education Ministry announced its intention to disband the Bedouin Education Authority and transfer its responsibilities to a new council that had been set up—the Abu Basma Regional Council. To date, nothing has been done.



Um Ratam

Muhammad Al-G'oul beside the quarry on the lands of Al-Mazra'a

Ali and I are sitting with Muhammad Al-G'oul in Um-Ratam. I ask questions in my hesitant Arabic and Muhammad answers me in faltering Hebrew. Instead of helping us with translation, Ali sprawls on the cushions beside us, chuckling to himself. Still, I understand the main points of the story. Muhammad's father had about 1,000 dunams (4 dunams = 1 acre), in two lots, in the area of Al-Mazra'a. About two years ago, his heirs, Muhammad and his brother, decided to divide it between them. They brought a surveyor and marked the places on a map. After a while, one of the brothers set up a tent on one of the lots in order to tend sheep and goats, but inspectors from the Green Patrol destroyed the tent and removed it from the lot. The family decided to petition the court with a claim for ownership of the land. No Bedouin to date has ever won such a suit. With no official purchase deeds, the Israeli judges have never recognized Bedouin ownership of land, even when the claimants were able to prove that their family had lived there for many generations, worked the land and had even paid taxes on it to the Ottoman and British governments.

At our second meeting, we go out to take pictures on the family lands in Al-Mazra'a. Muhammad navigates as I drive up the dirt roads of a dry, rocky mountain, full of stones. At the mountain top, he tells me to stop the car, and we continue on foot. Suddenly he bends over, moves a stone and reveals a small iron stake. I follow him, and he shows me more stakes and small hills of stones, marking the boundaries of the family territory. He knows the place well; after all, he has been coming here since he was a child. He used to come this way on a donkey or on foot, going kilometers from his father's home to tend the flocks. On the way back we see the great quarry set up on the family's land during the 1970s. The rocks are ground fine, their white dust covering the land, bright and blinding in the Negev sunlight. When the quarry was built, Muhammad's father said, "It's all right, they'll take some sand and they'll leave." Meanwhile his father has passed away, and the quarry still operates, grinding the mountain to powder. I stop the car and have Muhammad pose amid the white dust. Through my lens I see a miraculous sight: a Bedouin in snowy landscape.



Wadi Al-Na'am

Abdallah and Huda Jarbe'a and their children, Elmaz and Nabil

"The right to health, included in the Bill of Human Rights, includes not only the right to health services, but also the right to live a healthy life," says a report by Physicians for Human Rights in 2003. The report exposes the alarming state of health in the unrecognized Bedouin villages of the Negev. A visit to Wadi Al-Na'am demonstrates that well. In the 1980s, the Israel Electric Corporation built a power station in the heart of the village numbering 4,500 residents. High voltage lines pass low and close to the shacks. While the inhabitants of Wadi Al-Na'am are not hooked up to the electricity grid, they are exposed to the health risks posed by it. According to medical studies, high voltage lines close to homes result in a higher incidence of aborted pregnancies, leukemia in children and other types of cancer.

On the other side of the village, only several hundred meters from the homes, is the Ramat Hovav Industrial Park. The site, established in the 1970s, incorporates 18 chemical industry plants. Some have been classified as heavy polluters. Ramat Hovav also hosts the only site in Israel for hazardous waste storage. The plants release toxic substances into the air, fumes rising from the evaporation ponds scald respiratory airways, and the smell permeates the village. Over the years, the plants have suffered dangerous mishaps, explosions, leaks and fires. In June 2004 the first study to examine the environmental and health effects of the site found that people living within a radius of 20 kilometers from the site are more prone to severe birth defects, respiratory illnesses and cancer. Village representatives submitted proposals to the Bedouin Authority suggesting several alternative locations for an agriculture-based village for them. All the proposals were rejected; the only solution offered was to relocate to Segev-Shalom, one of the Bedouin towns established by the state in 1979—an absurd proposal, as it would double the population of a town suffering from under-development and located at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

In 2000, following a petition to the High Court of Justice, the state undertook to set up a clinic in Wadi Al-Na'am. The Bedouin Authority objected, arguing that a center offering services would be established outside the village in the future. The objection was accepted, but the center was never set up. In April 2003, hundreds of volunteers from different organizations headed by the Bustan organization converged on the village and built an alternative clinic there. The clinic was constructed from organic materials and designed from an ecological perspective.

Like many of the Bedouins in the area, Abdallah works in Ramat Hovav. He packages hazardous materials. Abdallah works for a contractor and does not receive the social benefits enjoyed by workers employed by the plant itself. Two of Huda's pregnancies, like those of many other women in the area, have ended in stillbirth.