

Human Rights Watch, *Off the Map: Land and Housing Rights Violations in Israel's Unrecognized Bedouin Villages* (Human Rights Watch, New York, 2008), Vol. 20, No. 5(E), 126 pp. (<http://hrw.org/reports/2008/iotp0308/>)

Human Rights Watch is one of the most prestigious international human rights organizations, dedicated to protecting the human rights of people around the world. It strives to prevent discrimination, to uphold political freedom, to protect people from inhumane conduct in wartime and to bring offenders to justice. Importantly, it challenges governments and those who hold power to end abusive practices and respect international human rights law. The organization has a well-recorded impact on the global and national levels around the abusive world and contributes to the promotion of contemporary international discourse on human rights and rights of indigenous people.

Off the Map is a detailed report that focuses on “unrecognized Arab villages” in the Naqab (Negev), one of the most painful issues of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict.¹ For the many decades of Israel’s existence, about 60,000 Arab Israeli citizens continue to live in dozens of villages and small towns that are unrecognized by the state. These citizens have been repeatedly uprooted from their homes in 1948 and subsequent years and concentrated in the Siege Area (*Ezor Siyag*) by the Israeli military, where they have developed their permanent settlements.

These “Arab Bedouin, the indigenous inhabitants of the Negev region, live in informal shanty towns,” suffering discrimination in major aspects of their lives. Formal Israeli policies towards this indigenous people have impoverished their basic living conditions, altered their lifestyle and displaced them, making them dispossessed refugees in their own lands. *Off the Map* concisely summarizes their harsh conditions:

Discriminatory land and planning policies have made it virtually impossible for Bedouin to build legally where they live, and also exclude them from the state’s development plans for the region. The state implements forced evictions, home demolitions and other punitive measures disproportionately against Bedouin as compared with actions taken regarding structures owned by Jewish Israelis that do not conform to planning law (p. 1).

The report examines these discriminatory policies and their impact on the life of Arabs in the Negev. It is based on field work that Human Rights Watch carried out during March–April and December 2006 in 13 unrecognized Bedouin villages and three government-planned Bedouin townships in the Negev. Bedouins were interviewed “in their homes in order to get a sense of life in the unrecognized villages and to witness directly the aftermath of home demolitions” (p. 8). The study faced many hardships: “[as] the unrecognized villages are not marked on any Israeli maps, nor signposted from Israeli roads, nor connected to the paved road network, locating and reaching the villages was part of the research challenge” (p. 8). Human

Rights Watch interviewed activists, community organizations, non-governmental organizations, academics and lawyers in Israel. In addition, the organization obtained information from Israeli authorities regarding their policy toward the unrecognized villages.

The report is comprised of nine main chapters. The first summarizes the findings, and the second chapter sets the methodology of the field work. Chapters 3 and 4 provide historical background, describe the existing conditions of the unrecognized villages, analyze the legal basis for land confiscation, depict the struggle over land ownership and examine discrimination in land allocation and access. Chapters 5–7 analyze discrimination in planning, home demolition and the lack of adequate compensation, respectively. The eighth chapter describes Israel's obligations under international law and provides some interesting comparative and recent practices of other governments around the world—mainly examples from New Zealand, Canada and Australia. These examples “illustrate what is possible when governments make a good faith attempt to negotiate just solutions to contested land claims. Israel has an opportunity to create such a mechanism to adjudicate the outstanding claims in the Negev” (p. 107).

The final chapter draws some important and detailed recommendations directed to the government of Israel, the United States and other international donors. To the latter, the report makes some interesting recommendations, one of them being to “ensure that any aid funds allocated to, or used by, Israel for development of the Negev region are not used for further home demolitions and are conditioned on non-discrimination in planning, land allocation, and development” (p. 111). Finally, the report calls on Israel to place an immediate moratorium on home demolitions in the Negev and to establish an independent mechanism to investigate the discriminatory and often unlawful way in which land allocation, planning and home demolitions are implemented.

To sum up, *Off the Map* is a unique report carrying a human cry and message to the international community to take some steps and put pressure on the Israeli government to cease its cruel discriminatory policies against the indigenous Arabs of the Negev. Importantly, this is the first time that a major international human rights organization focuses on this human issue—the unrecognized villages—and hopefully brings it to the global scene for serious consideration.

NOTE

¹ A word from Human Rights Watch on terminology:

Palestinian Arab Bedouin see themselves as a part of the larger Palestinian Arab minority inside Israel. Some Bedouin prefer the label Palestinian or Palestinian Arab rather than Bedouin.... While Palestinian Arab Bedouin

share many characteristics with the Palestinian Arab community in Israel, Bedouin have a distinct history of a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle throughout large areas of the modern Middle East, and some historians date Bedouin presence in the Negev back 7,000 years, when the Bedouin roamed back and forth between the Sinai and Negev. In this report we have adopted the short term “Bedouin” when referring to the Palestinian Arab Bedouin population of the Negev (p. 9).

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Bedouins: A theatrical project at Tel Aviv University (Nola Chelton, director, 2008)

During January–April 2008, the theater department of Tel Aviv University staged a documentary show, *Bedouins*, that presented the lives of the Bedouins who resided in unrecognized villages in the Negev, the southern part of Israel. It was the final project of the class of the community theater program, and the show was, therefore, more than an ordinary theatrical event. The preliminary research, the rehearsal process, the public conference that preceded the premiere and the photographs that were exhibited at the university hall during the run of the show turned the project into a social and political event as well.

The person responsible for launching this complex event was Nola Chelton, an American-born theater director and drama teacher with a radical agenda, who initiated the tradition of documentary theater in Israel with shows such as *Coexistence* (1970), on the Israeli-Palestinians of the north of Israel; *The Coming Days* (1971), on people who lived in a home for the aged; and *Bicycles for a Year* (1979), on the North-African born, Jewish inhabitants of the under-developed town Kiriath Shmona. Chelton’s method usually consists of forming an ensemble of actors who conduct interviews among the members of the community that is the subject of the show; then, with the help of a professional playwright, they create together a theatrical event during a long period of rehearsals. The process of working on *Bedouins* was similar.

The gathering of material for the show began in fall 2006, when the students of Chelton’s class went to the Negev to collect information and conduct interviews with Bedouins who lived in unrecognized villages. The research and interviews were guided by members of three NGOs whose aim was to change the status and living conditions of the Bedouin population: Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, the Regional Council of the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev and Physicians for Human Rights. For several months, the students made themselves familiar with the harsh conditions of the residents of the unrecognized villages, who lived without any