



AL ARAKIB: A BACKGROUND PAPER ABOUT THE SUMMER OF DEMOLITIONS

Current as of 25 October 2010

The purpose of this background paper is to provide an accurate description of recent events in the unrecognized village of Al Arakib in the Negev-Naqab, the southern desert region of Israel. These events mark a distinct turning point in the State of Israel's treatment of its Bedouin citizens and the future looks bleak.

The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (the Forum) has supported the Al Arakib community for almost a decade in their struggle for recognition of land rights and has formed a strong working relationship with the village's leaders. Thus, members of the Forum are able to provide a first-hand account of the government's actions.

Al Arakib is located about 7 kilometres north of Be'er-Sheva. It is unrecognized village and as such does not appear on any map, nor do any official signs mark its existence.

Heavy-handed response during the first demolition (27th July)

During the early dawn of 27th July 2010, an estimated 1,500 Israeli police, supported by helicopters and bulldozers, surrounded Al Arakib. Within three hours, the Israeli Land Authority (ILA) razed the entire village to the ground, **leaving 300 people including women and children without shelter or water** in the peak of summer in the desert. In total, 46 structures (including 30 homes) were completely destroyed along with sheep pens, chicken coups, orchards and olive groves—the source of the villagers' livelihood. More than 1,000 trees were uprooted and discarded. Residents were given no time to recover their belongings from their homes and assets such as generators, cars and tractors were seized.

All police were fully equipped with firearms, tear gas and stun grenades and hundreds of Special Riot Police (many of whom concealed their identity) wore full protection gear. There were a number of physical encounters between the police and activists and residents although no one required medical attention.

The destruction of the village was carried out despite ongoing legal proceedings regarding the ownership of the land before the Be'er Sheva District Court. Residents of Al Arakib are neither squatters nor invaders as commonly portrayed in the media. Al Arakib existed many years before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Second and third demolition (4th and 10th August)

Following this event, many of the residents refused to leave the land that has been in their family for generations and began to immediately rebuild makeshift shelters despite police threats. Once again, during the second and third demolition (which was carried just one day prior to the commencement of Ramadan), everything was destroyed by government bulldozers and buried. Building materials were also removed to deter the residents from rebuilding. Further, the road to the village was seriously damaged to impede access and the unofficial sign was removed. Water trucks and tanks were removed and are still being held in an unknown location.

The police were again dressed in full riot gear and supported by mounted police and a water cannon to disperse the crowd. During the second incident many residents and activists (including members of the Forum) were severely beaten by the police and seven people were arrested. Four residents, among them the leader of the village, Sheik Sayach Al-Turi, were released under the condition that they do not return to Al Arakib for about 10 days. He moved with others to live in the cemetery mosque.

Fourth demolition during Ramadan (17th August)

This demolition occurred during Ramadan, the holiest month for Muslims when the people of the village are fasting. Policemen and bulldozers arrived at dawn and began demolishing the shacks built by the villagers. This was an unprecedented act as the State of Israel has never before demolished houses belonging to its Muslim citizens during Ramadan. Historically, this was a period respected by the authorities. This demolition took place during an extreme heat wave that forced some of the residents to break the fast.

A government spokesperson declared on 23rd August on national news that the attacks on the village would continue once Ramadan concluded. This did not deter the residents from remaining on their lands and rebuilding.

Fifth demolition (12th September)

The most recent demolition came only a day after the three-day Muslim festival Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Dozens of policemen descended again on the village shortly before dawn with bulldozers to destroy the tents and all other structures in the village. The village residents resisted peacefully, however, without success.

Sixth demolition (13th October)

During the sixth demolition the entire village was again bulldozed to the ground, however, the residents rebuilt their homes in days from light materials. During this demolition, Haia Noach, Director of the Forum, was violently assaulted by police and arrested upon requesting that they present the court order authorising the demolition of the village. Ms Noach was ordered not to enter the village for a period of 10 days. The Forum suspects that this demolition was carefully timed to take place following the Jewish National Fund conference in Atlanta, US, to minimise public scrutiny. The conference concluded just one day before the demolition.

Current situation and fears about what the future holds

The demolition on 27th July was the largest mass demolition that has ever occurred in the Negev. In the face of increasing hostility towards the Bedouin population, there is now great fear among residents of other unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev-Naqab that the events just witnessed in Al Arakib mark the beginning of a brutal and unrelenting campaign to displace them from their ancestral lands. There is speculation that this heavy handed response was a trial run for other villages. In the government's attempt to compel Bedouins to relocate to government-planned towns (which suffer from high unemployment and crime rates and a severe housing shortage), it is feared that thousands of other Bedouins will experience the same fate.

Currently, many of the residents, including dozens of children, are living in the village's cemetery in temporary shacks covered by tarpaulins. The demolition orders on which the government is relying to level Al Arakib do not extend to the cemetery and thus this is viewed as a somewhat of a safe haven. The new school year commenced in late August and the children have been forced to live in the cemetery and complete their homework in these conditions. The cemetery's mosque remains the only structure left standing and most of the social life now centres around the mosque.

The government's defence

The government has defended its actions by saying that the villagers lost their case before the courts according to *Public Land Law (Expulsion of Invaders)* of 1981 and that they must evacuate and remove all possessions including the structures which were illegally built. However, the residents of Al Arakib, like the other 45 unrecognized villages scattered across the Negev-Naqab, have no hope of receiving building permits. As their villages are considered illegal by the government and lack development plans, they have no option but to resort to illegal construction.

We believe that the government's actions against the residents of Al Arakib are connected with a statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu during a cabinet meeting held the day before the first demolition. Netanyahu sounded a warning about "a situation in which a demand for national rights will be made from some quarters inside Israel, for example in the Negev, should the area be left without a Jewish majority. Such things happened in the Balkans, and it is a real threat." The Bedouin citizens of Israel have been branded as 'a real threat' in order to legitimize the expulsion of Israel's Bedouin citizens from the Negev and to 'Judaize' the region.

International media & footage

Below are links to reports of the demolition by major news offices around the world and Israel:

- *Haaretz* (Israel) - <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/police-destroy-dozens-of-buildings-in-unrecognized-bedouin-village-in-negev-1.304443>
- <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/amos-oz-situation-of-bedouin-in-negev-is-ticking-time-bomb-1.308671>
- *The Guardian* (UK) - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/28/ethnic-cleansing-israeli-negev>
- *The New York Times* (US) – http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/world/middleeast/26israel.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1&emc=eta1
- Human Rights Watch - <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/08/01/israel-halt-demolitions-bedouin-homes-negev>
- BBC (UK) - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10777040>

Recent criticism by the United Nations

The State of Israel carried out these demolitions despite the fact that it was scrutinized by Human Rights Committee (HRC) as recently as in July 2010 for its mistreatment of Bedouins. Forum board member, Mr Khalil Alamour, attended the 99th session of the HRC to report on how Israel fails to fulfil its responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil its human rights obligations without discrimination towards its Arab-Bedouin citizens in the Naqab-Negev. In its Concluding Observations handed down two days after the first mass demolition in Al Arakib on 27th July, the HRC stated that it was "concerned at allegations of forced evictions of the Bedouin population based on the Public Land Law (Expulsion of Invaders) of 1981 as amended in 2005." It continued by stating that Israel "**should respect the Bedouin population's right to their ancestral land and their traditional livelihood based on agriculture.**"

Israel's actions also attracted criticism at its previous review before the Human Rights Council in 2007 during the 70th session:

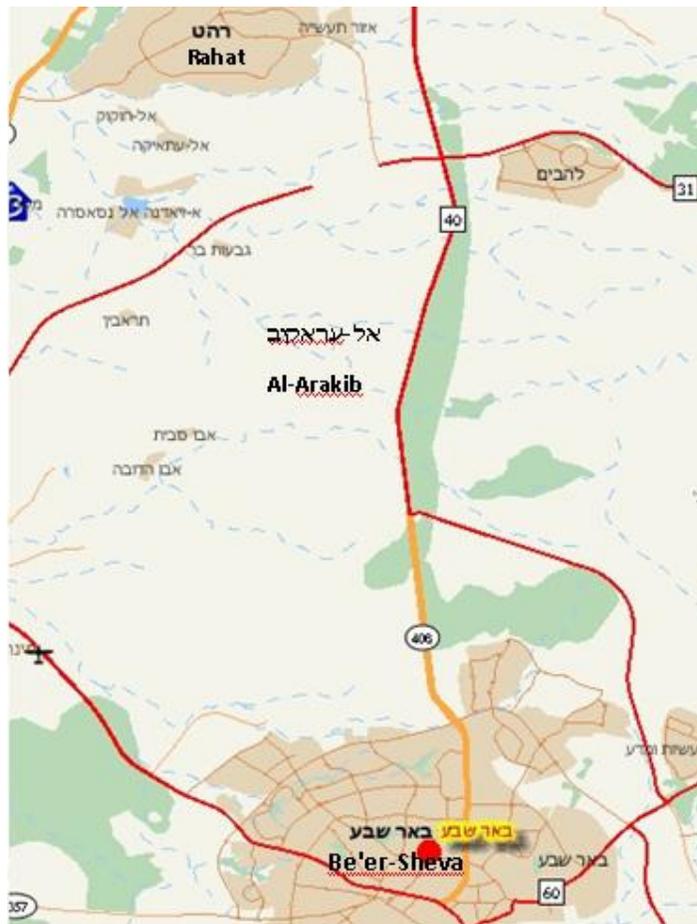
The Committee recommends that the State party enquire into possible alternatives to the relocation of inhabitants of unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev/Naqab to planned towns, **in particular through the recognition of these villages and the recognition of the rights of the Bedouins to own, develop, control and use their communal lands**, territories and resources traditionally owned or otherwise inhabited or used by them.

The history of Al Arakib

The residents of Al Arakib were evicted from their historic lands in 1951 by the Israeli army under the pretext that the lands are needed for training. Army officials promised the leaders of the village that they will be able to return to their lands after six months. The promise, however, was never kept and the people of the village are still waiting to return to their lands which were confiscated in the 1960s for purposes of security and settlements. The army never used the lands, nor was it used for other purposes. The lands remained almost vacant and the villagers, although living in other places, kept burying their deceased in the cemetery.

During the years the Al Arakib people made attempts to claim back their land from the state but all their requests were turned down. Some of the people lived not far from their lands for years and some have been living since 1958 on the village's lands. Some people chose to move temporarily to Rahat in order to lead a normal life, raise children and care for their education, hoping that in the future they would be able to establish an agricultural village on their lands. It was not an easy decision to move to Rahat and the Al Arakib people never gave up on their lands. Their claims to ownership of the lands are still before the courts.

In 1998 when the Jewish National Fund (JNF) began to show interest in Al Arakib lands, villagers were afraid they would lose the land to a forest. Thus, they returned in order to defend their land from the afforestation activities of the JNF.



Photographs of the first demolition



Activestills.org