

Negev Bedouin & the Begin Plan

After decades of debate over how to address the long standing construction and land issues of Bedouin in the Negev Desert, Israel adopted the Begin Plan on May 6, 2013 (updated version of the Praver Plan).¹ The Negev Bedouin, many of whom live in scattered encampments and unrecognized communities, are the poorest segment of Israel's population. The Plan is designed to improve their standard of living and opportunities while simultaneously resolving their land ownership claims, regulating the status of their unrecognized communities, and ending their widespread illegal construction in the Negev.² Israel has committed \$2.2 billion over a five year period to implement the plan.³ There were no easy solutions to the conundrum of how to preserve the Bedouin's customary culture while at the same time helping them modernize. The plan has been criticized by political groups on both the right and left.⁴ Its basic elements are:

The vast majority of Bedouin will remain where they are and all of them will remain in the Negev.⁵

Israel will retroactively legalize and fund upgrades for over half of the unrecognized Bedouin encampments and villages.⁶

- While 60% of the Negev Bedouin (120,000) live in legal, planned communities, the other 40% (90,000) inhabit 2,000 scattered encampments and 35 villages on land they do not formally own. These communities were built without authorization and as a result are not connected to basic infrastructure such as running water, electricity, and sewage.⁷
- Israel will bring infrastructure to most of these villages, including electricity, water, sewage, roads, and schools.

An estimated 30,000 Bedouin whose settlements cannot be legalized will be offered large, developed tracts of land in nearby communities or the opportunity to establish new communities.⁸

- 17,000 Bedouin live in settlements that cannot be legalized because they are in polluted areas, such as the Ramat Hovav industrial zone.⁹
- Other settlements cannot be legalized because they are too small or too scattered to bring infrastructure at a reasonable cost, or because they are in the path of other projects, such as a planned airport.¹⁰
- Those that live in polluted areas will have to move several kilometers away, the rest can move within meters or a few kilometers of their current residences.¹¹

Though most Bedouin do not legally own land that they claim, Israel is generously offering to compensate them with money and land to resolve the issue.¹²

- Israel's land law system is based on Ottoman, British Mandate, and Israeli law. Bedouin claims to ownership are not legal in any of those systems. The land was designated "mawat" or state land.¹³
- Nonetheless, every person claiming ownership will be compensated with land at least half the size of the land he or she is claiming, working on, or living on.¹⁴

Israel consulted with Bedouin communities and NGOs to develop and refine the Plan, and Arabic speaking mediators are negotiating directly with the Bedouin.¹⁵

- Kamel Jum'a Abu Nadi, a local Bedouin official, said that, "Overall, the plan includes the Bedouin, it is a comprehensive plan – there is housing, industry, infrastructure, schools. There is no doubt that we've been waiting for this plan... There is no land stealing... those who object wish that the Bedouin will remain shepherds and underdeveloped, poor and hungry... They have hidden motives... they want to ride on the Bedouin's back... until the Bedouin will vote for them in the Knesset."¹⁶

Israel hopes to balance the preservation Bedouin customs with improving their standard of living, ensuring their rights as citizens, and integrating them into modern society.

- Though historically the Negev Bedouin were nomadic, they began modernizing and settling at the turn of the last century. By 2011, only 10% of Bedouin continued to raise livestock.¹⁷
- Poor education and resources have been blamed for the Bedouin's low standard of living. Israel hopes to solve these problems by improving Bedouin schools in the newly recognized communities.¹⁸
- In 2008, 250 Negev Bedouin women defied traditional customs and attended Ben Gurion University. Their numbers are expected to double in the coming decade.¹⁹
- Israel plans to revitalize the economy of the Negev through a \$9 billion investment in military infrastructure. This will create many new jobs for the Bedouin and all other people in the area.²⁰

Some claim that the Bedouin are indigenous and should have land rights on that basis, but the Bedouin are not indigenous to the Negev.

- The Bedouin began settling in the Negev in the late 18th and 19th centuries, when they conquered the existing Arab population, plundering and scattering them.²¹
- With the exception of Jordan, Bedouin groups in other Middle Eastern countries have not claimed indigenous status. Instead they have acknowledged that they migrated from Arabia.²²

The state of Israel also has rights to the land in the Negev and the duty to ensure that all of its citizens have equal opportunities.

- The Negev accounts for two-thirds of Israel's land but only ten percent of its population. As its population grows, this vast land area is a vital resource.²³
- Israel is attempting to improve the quality of life for all of its citizens, and ensure that they have equal opportunities in healthcare, education, transportation, and infrastructure.

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- ¹ Times of Israel Staff, "Government bill aims to regulate Bedouin settlement," *Times of Israel*, May 6, 2013 at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/government-bill-aims-to-regulate-bedouin-settlement/>
- ² Doron Almog, "Israel is making an unprecedented effort to move the Bedouins into the 21st century," *i24News*, Aug. 21, 2013 at <http://www.i24news.tv/en/opinion/130814-the-struggle-for-a-bright-future-in-the-negev>
- ³ Doron Almog, "Israel is making an unprecedented effort to move the Bedouins into the 21st century," *i24News*, Aug. 21, 2013 at <http://www.i24news.tv/en/opinion/130814-the-struggle-for-a-bright-future-in-the-negev>
- ⁴ David Newman, "The politics of land ownership in the Negev," *Jerusalem Post*, June 4, 2012 at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/The-politics-of-land-ownership-in-the-Negev>
- ⁵ "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>
- ⁶ Ari Briggs, "Tower and Stockade settlements – Version 2.0," *Jerusalem Post*, Sept. 5, 2012 at <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Tower-and-Stockade-settlements-Version-20>
- ⁷ Alex Traiman, "Amid Global Focus on Jewish Construction, NGO Counters Illegal Arab Building," *Algemeiner*, June 12, 2013 10:40 at <http://www.algemeiner.com/2013/06/12/amid-global-focus-on-jewish-construction-ngo-counters-illegal-arab-building/>
- ⁸ "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>
- ⁹ Alex Traiman, "Amid Global Focus on Jewish Construction, NGO Counters Illegal Arab Building," *Algemeiner*, June 12, 2013 10:40 at <http://www.algemeiner.com/2013/06/12/amid-global-focus-on-jewish-construction-ngo-counters-illegal-arab-building/> and "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>
- ¹⁰ "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>
- ¹¹ "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>
- ¹² Alex Traiman, "Amid Global Focus on Jewish Construction, NGO Counters Illegal Arab Building," *Algemeiner*, June 12, 2013 10:40 at <http://www.algemeiner.com/2013/06/12/amid-global-focus-on-jewish-construction-ngo-counters-illegal-arab-building/> and "BICOM Briefing: Israeli government policy on the Negev Bedouin," *BIOCOM*, Jan. 20, 2012 at <http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis-article/11573/>; and Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, "Task Force Legislative Update: The Bill on the Arrangement of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev ("Praver-Begin Plan")," at <http://www.iataskforce.org/news/bill-arrangement-bedouin-settlement-negev-praver-begin-plan>
- ¹³ Havatzelet Yahel, Ruth Kark, and Seth J. Frantzman, "Are the Negev Bedouin an Indigenous People? Fabricating Palestinian History," *Middle East Quarterly* Summer 2012, pp. 3-14at <http://www.meforum.org/3254/negev-bedouin-indigenous>
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