

A New Israeli Government Could Mean Help for Neglected Bedouin Villages

An Arab party in the emerging government is pushing it to recognize communities that have long existed in a sad state of limbo.

By Adam Rasgon

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KHASHAM ZANA, Israel — When Rakan al-Athamen puts his son and daughter to bed in their tiny three-room home in a small Bedouin village on a dusty hillside in the Negev desert, the daily power supply has often already run out.

During the blackouts, he tries to comfort his children, who are deeply fearful of the dark. But it usually takes them hours to fall asleep.

“They are terrified,” said Mr. al-Athamen, 22, who said his family-owned tourism business shut down because of the pandemic. “I light candles, but it still takes them a long time to calm down.”

For decades, dozens of Bedouin villages in the Negev, including Khasham Zana, where the al-Athamen family lives, have been in limbo. Without the state’s recognition of their communities, they have long suffered from a lack of planning and basic services like running water, sewers, electricity, trash collection and paved roads.

But the emerging Israeli coalition government that is expected to be sworn in on Sunday intends to take significant strides to address the plight of these villages, according to Raam, an Arab party that said it agreed to join the coalition on a number of conditions, including that more benefits are provided to the Bedouin.



Rakan al-Athamen in his tiny three-room home in Khasham Zana, a Bedouin village in the Negev, this month. He says the power supply often cuts out at night. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

The new government will recognize Khasham Zana and two other villages in the Negev in the first 45 days of its term, Raam said in a statement, and it will prepare a plan to deal with other unrecognized villages in the area within its first nine months in power.

But even if such a deal goes through, it's unlikely to bring quick change to the ramshackle communities, said Eli Atzmon, an Israeli expert on the Bedouin, who are part of Israel's Arab minority. Few of the villages recognized by Israel in recent decades have seen drastic improvements to their livelihoods, he said.

There is also no guarantee that a new initiative to address inequities between the southern Bedouin and other parts of Israeli society will be more successful than previous attempts. In December, the government appeared poised to recognize the village of Khasham Zana and two others, Rukhma and Abda, but the effort stalled because of political infighting.

Some right-wing members of the prospective government, which is made up of a diverse set of political parties, have suggested they would not accept efforts to recognize many villages in the Negev. That raises questions about whether the new government will be able to muster enough support to make such moves. “We will not abandon the Negev. Period,” Nir Orbach, a member of the hard-right Yamina party, tweeted last week.



Inhabitants of Bedouin villages often depend on makeshift pipes to transport water to their homes. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

The Bedouin, who say they have lived in the Negev for centuries, were once a seminomadic group. But in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, most were forced out of the desert or fled to other parts of the region. Israeli authorities concentrated those who stayed in a smaller area of the desert, and later built meager townships for them.

Today there are roughly 280,000 Bedouin in the Negev, about half of them under 18. They once relied on herding sheep, goats and camels and harvesting wheat, barley and lentils, but more recently they have become part of the labor market in

cities like Beersheba. They suffer from widespread poverty and high unemployment rates, and they are a fast-growing population, in part because some practice polygamy.

While many have moved into the seven townships established by the Israeli government, which have their own problems with infrastructure, about one-third remain in the unrecognized villages.

Israeli officials have argued that Bedouin in unrecognized villages do not have valid claims to the land, and courts have backed up that view. But Bedouin leaders have said Israel has unfairly demanded that they produce physical land deeds — something they historically did not use.

“We are citizens of Israel, one of the most advanced countries on earth, but when we look at the unrecognized villages, we can see places that resemble the third world,” said Waleed al-Hawashla, a Raam official who lives in the Negev. “They are like refugee camps.”



Atiya al-Asam, director of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, a civil society group. He said that the participation of Raam, an Arab party, in the emerging coalition might be an opportunity. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Khasham Zana, set off the main highway between the cities of Beersheba and Dimona, is a typical unrecognized village in the Negev. Its roads are mainly rocky dirt paths. Some of its homes are made of cinder blocks, while others are tin shacks.

Mr. al-Athamen said the power shortage takes a toll not only on his children, but on him and his wife, too. During the height of the summer, they often sweat profusely and have no easy way to cool down, he said, and sometimes his phone dies, leaving him unable to communicate with friends and relatives.

“It’s very frustrating to live this way,” he said, looking around his home, which is made of tin exterior walls and a tin rooftop. “It causes lots of stress for me, but I can’t leave because my family is here.”

Many inhabitants rely on solar panels and batteries to turn lights on at night, run their refrigerators and watch television, and they use makeshift pipes to bring water to their homes from a nearby distribution point.

Bedouin activists said they felt “cautiously optimistic” about the emerging coalition, which includes an independent Arab party for the first time in Israel’s history. But they emphasized that they would be content only when they saw substantial improvements in their communities.



Many residents of Khasham Zana rely on solar panels and batteries to turn lights on at night, run their refrigerators and watch television. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

“We believe the participation of Raam in the government is an opportunity, but we have heard discouraging voices on the right, too,” said Atiya al-Asam, the director of the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, a civil society group. “The most important thing is tangible change on the ground.”

The struggle over the land is a reflection of a clash between a traditional society that values its independence and a modern nation-state that seeks to extend its control — a battle that has played out in other parts of the Middle East like Saudi Arabia, said Clinton Bailey, an eminent scholar of Bedouin culture in the Negev.

Israeli officials, however, have shown greater willingness to compromise in recent years.



A school bus dropped off a student near a Bedouin village this month. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Yair Maayan, the director-general of the Israeli government institution tasked with developing Bedouin communities in the Negev, said he believed most would ultimately be able to stay in their villages legally. But he said that around 30 percent, especially those living in military training zones and national parks, beside large factories and along planned roads, would need to relocate — a prospect that many Bedouin vehemently oppose.

Oren Yiftachel, a professor of geography and urban planning at Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, said a solution that works for all sides could be achieved, but it would depend on whether the Israeli government can cooperate in “good will” with the Bedouin community and try to achieve an “equal” and “dignified” outcome.

For Fatima Abu Kweider, a kindergarten teacher, the most frustrating aspect of living off the grid is the ubiquitous mounds of trash surrounding her community.

“The smell is overwhelming,” said Ms. Abu Kweider, 43, a resident of Al Zarnouq, a densely populated unrecognized village. “There are days when I don’t want to spend time outside.”



Fatima Abu Kweider, left, surveying trash near her house in the unrecognized village of Al Zarnouq. She said the most frustrating part of living off the grid was the garbage mounds: “The smell is overwhelming.” Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

While some Bedouin in unrecognized villages transport their trash to dumpsters at nearby schools and supermarkets, many in Al Zarnouq simply leave it on the edge of town.

Ms. Abu Kweider’s husband, Saad, said he was concerned about finding a way to build a home for his 23-year-old son — a requirement for any bachelor looking to get married in the Bedouin community.

“We’re not sure what to do,” said Mr. Abu Kweider, who works as a laborer building a high-tech security barrier for Israel along the blockaded Gaza Strip. “If we build him a home, it could be demolished. If we don’t, his life is left on hold.”

Adam Rasgon reports from Israel for The Times’s Jerusalem bureau. He previously covered the Palestinian territories and the Arab world for The Times of Israel. @adamrasgon