



Safeguarding Bedouin Heritage: Land, Rights, and the Pursuit of Equality

CALL FOR INPUTS TO THE REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON MINORITY ISSUES
TO THE HRC ON THE RIGHT TO IDENTITY OF PERSONS BELONGING TO MINORITIES

Submission Statement: The Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (hereinafter NCF) respectfully submits this report to the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, with a focus on the right to identity of the Bedouin population in the Negev-Naqab region. This report aims to highlight key challenges and infringements affecting the Bedouin community in Israel, emphasizing the importance of preserving their cultural, social, and civil rights within the context of Israel's policies and international obligations.

Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality (NCF) is an Arab-Jewish organization, established in 1997 by a group of concerned Arab and Jewish residents of the Negev-Naqab, whose goal is to promote a shared society and provide a platform for joint activism to address civil rights inequalities. NCF recognizes the neglect of various Israeli governments and their authorities, who have denied full rights to the Bedouin community in the Negev-Naqab, and NCF acts to prevent further affliction and harm to recognized and unrecognized villages and their residents. NCF's activities are varied and include, but are not limited to: local and international advocacy, research, community activities, public protests, social media, collaboration with Israeli and foreign media. All activities are based on Arab-Jewish partnership.

Report Summary: This report examines the right to identity of Bedouin minorities in Israel's Negev/Naqab region. As an indigenous community with deep-rooted ties to their ancestral lands, the Bedouins face unique challenges in preserving their cultural identity within the context of State policies and broader Israeli society. The report explores how Bedouin identity is defined and impacted by these policies, particularly within unrecognized villages, and analyzes the interplay between Bedouin and Israeli national identities. It references relevant domestic legal frameworks and international protections, including the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Minorities. By highlighting the challenges faced by the Bedouin community—such as home demolitions, land disputes, and limited access to essential services—the report aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding Bedouin minority identity in Israel and promote a more inclusive society that respects Indigenous rights.

Introduction

The Bedouins in Israel, an indigenous and distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural group within the broader Arab minority, primarily reside in the Negev/Naqab region. Historically semi-nomadic, Bedouins maintain deep ties to their ancestral lands, tribal customs, and a unique way of life. Their Arabic language and Islamic faith further contribute to their distinct identity within Israeli society. However, this rich cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage faces numerous challenges, including systemic discrimination, socioeconomic marginalization, and political pressures stemming from land disputes, displacement, and restricted access to essential services, creating a constant tension between maintaining their traditions and striving for progress within the larger Israeli context.

This report will delve into these complexities, examining the core elements of Bedouin identity, the impact of State policies on their cultural survival, and the implications for their rights as an indigenous minority.

1. Main Elements that Define Bedouin Minority Identity

The Bedouin minority in the Negev/Naqab is defined by several key elements, each contributing to their distinct identity within Israel:

A. Historical Connection to the Land: The Bedouin community has deep ancestral ties to the Negev/Naqab, which have historically defined their former semi-nomadic lifestyle. Their relationship with the land is complex, involving both physical and cultural dimensions.¹ Traditionally, Bedouins engaged in grazing, agriculture, and animal husbandry, which shaped their way of life and connection to natural resources. While many Bedouins have migrated from Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank in recent generations and continue to move, their traditional practices and customs related to land use remain central to their identity. These practices, including grazing and farming, are vital cultural markers.

Modern State policies have often disregarded these historical connections, leading to land expropriation and limited settlement options for Bedouin communities. The resulting severance from the land has profound implications, as the Bedouin way of life is intrinsically tied to both their livelihood and identity.

B. Distinct Cultural Practices and Social Structures: Bedouin culture is characterized by unique tribal customs, social hierarchies, and oral traditions. Tribes are the core social unit, maintaining cohesion through family networks and communal decision-making. Tribal gatherings ("majlis") play a key role in resolving disputes, strengthening social bonds, and transmitting cultural knowledge. Referring to it as "folklore" oversimplifies its complexity. Studies in anthropology, linguistics, and

¹ Degen, A. A., Benjamin, R. W., & Hoorweg, J. C. Bedouin Households and Sheep Production in the Negev Desert, Israel. *Nomadic Peoples*, 4, 125-147.

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history reveal the depth of Bedouin culture and the sociopolitical dynamics spanning the Negev, Palestinian Territories, and Jordan, offering a nuanced understanding of their identity.²

C. Language and Oral Tradition: The Bedouins speak a distinct dialect of Arabic, which varies significantly from standard Arabic and other dialects spoken by Arab citizens of Israel. Their oral tradition is rich in poetry, stories, and songs that reflect their nomadic history, relationship with the land, and tribal values. This linguistic heritage plays a central role in maintaining their collective memory and cultural identity.

D. Religion and Tribal Customs: Bedouins practice Islam, but their religious customs are uniquely intertwined with tribal traditions and local customs, differing from Islamic practices in urban areas and agricultural villages, creating a distinct form of religious practice within the Bedouin community.³ Specific traditions, such as burial customs or inscriptions on walls in valleys, are integral to their religious expression and serve as markers of their unique spiritual heritage. Additionally, Bedouin customary law is a critical component of their social and legal norms, and its role in shaping daily life should be recognized.

E. Socioeconomic Challenges and Marginalization: The socioeconomic challenges faced by Bedouin communities are integral to their identity. A significant proportion of Bedouins live in unrecognized villages, where they face poverty, limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and exposure to home demolitions. Bedouin local authorities are often categorized as having a low socioeconomic status. These realities create a lived experience that is markedly different from the rest of Israel's population and reinforce their distinct minority status. Marginalization and State policies have aggravated the struggle of Bedouins to preserve their cultural identity and access equal rights.

F. Complex National Identity: Bedouins hold diverse perspectives on national identity, with some fully integrating into Israeli society, while others identify strongly with a Palestinian identity. The growth of Palestinian identity—linked to Arabness and solidarity with Palestinians in the Palestinian Territories and diaspora—and civic Israeli identity can coexist without inherent contradiction. Many Bedouins view themselves as full Israeli citizens yet also embrace their Palestinian roots. Research highlights the evolving and multifaceted nature of Bedouin youth identity, as Arabness and Palestinian identity add complexity to their sense of self within Israel⁴.

2. Articulating Bedouin Minority Identity within the Israeli National Context

The Bedouin community in Israel faces the intricate challenge of articulating its identity within a nation-state that prioritizes a different cultural narrative. This dynamic is shaped by historical events, legal frameworks, and sociopolitical realities that both complement and compete with the Bedouin sense of self. While some Bedouins find avenues for integration and contribution to Israeli society, many others experience marginalization and struggle for recognition within the existing power structures.

² Eisenberg-Degen, D., Nash, G. H., & Schmidt, J.. Inscribing History: The Complex Geographies of Bedouin Tribal Symbols in the Negev Desert, Southern Israel.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Smoooha, Sammy. "Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel: Alienation and Rapprochement." The Jewish-Arab Center, University of Haifa

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A. Historical Displacement and its Legacy: The establishment of the State of Israel, the 1948 war, and its aftermath led to the displacement of a significant portion of the Bedouin population. It is believed that only 11,000 of the original 65,000 to 100,000 Bedouins remained in the Negev after 1948, with many being displaced or expelled to neighboring countries.

However, this displacement is part of a longer history, as many Bedouin families had migrated to the Negev from Egypt, Gaza, and Jordan during the 18th and 19th centuries, contributing to the broader Palestinian identity.

Before 1948, the Bedouins were largely semi-nomadic, but their traditional lifestyle was disrupted by forced urbanization and State-imposed relocations. They were concentrated in a confined zone, known as the 'al-Siyā' under military administration, often far from their ancestral lands. This severance from traditional territories continues to impact their sense of belonging and cultural preservation, threatening agrarian and pastoral traditions central to Bedouin identity.

B. Legal Frameworks and Land Rights: A Source of Contention: The legal framework governing land ownership in Israel lies at the core of tensions between Bedouin identity and state policies. Historically, Bedouin land claims were based on ancestral ties and traditional land use, often lacking formal documentation from the Ottoman period. However, Israeli land policies, which prioritize Jewish settlement and development, frequently fail to recognize these claims, leaving most Bedouin villages as officially "unrecognized," i.e. without any representation on maps, census reports, and other official documents.

Two key aspects of land rights contribute to Bedouin marginalization: the denial of legal recognition of their claims to land, as seen in Supreme Court rulings like Al-Hawashleh, and the lack of recognition of villages within the State planning system. These related issues leave villages without legal status, denying them access to basic infrastructure and services, making residents vulnerable to home demolitions, and fostering instability.

Although the legal system formally guarantees equal rights to all citizens, it has faced criticism for upholding policies that favor State interests over Bedouin land rights. In 2013, the Praver Plan⁵ proposed relocating tens of thousands of Bedouins into urban townships, which human rights groups condemned as forced urbanization and a violation of Bedouin cultural identity. This was part of a broader pattern of State practices that often undermined the Bedouin lifestyle by denying access to agricultural lands and grazing rights.

C. National Symbols and the Narrative of Belonging: The lack of representation of Bedouin identity in Israeli national symbols and narratives complicates their sense of belonging. In the national education system, there is little to no focus on the history and civil rights struggles of Palestinian citizens of Israel or the unique history of the Bedouin community.⁶ Moreover, the teaching of Palestinian history and the distinct Bedouin culture is often limited to material culture like clothing or traditional tent construction, while contentious issues such as the Nakba are rarely addressed.

The 2018 Nation-State Law, explicitly defining Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, has reinforced the perception of exclusion among non-Jewish minorities like the Bedouins. By emphasizing

⁵ <https://justvision.org/glossary/praver-plan>

⁶ HRW: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/israel2/ISRAEL0901-12.htm>

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the Jewish character of the State and its development priorities, this law deepens the divide between the Bedouin community and the national identity.⁷

D. Navigating Identity: Between Integration and Marginalization: Despite these challenges, the Bedouin community navigates its identity with resilience within the Israeli context. Bedouin youth and young adults often experience internal conflicts in forming their identities.⁸ Many adhere to principles of civic equality and strive to be active and influential Israeli citizens, yet simultaneously perceive themselves as a marginalized group, subject to State policies and private-sector practices that limit their equal participation. Some Bedouins integrate into mainstream Israeli society by serving in the military, participating in civic life, and engaging with State institutions. However, this integration is complex, as many maintain a dual identity—balancing attachment to their Bedouin heritage with a desire for equality and full civic participation, often negotiating between cultural preservation and broader societal inclusion.

E. Advocacy and the Struggle for Recognition: The Bedouin community has seen the rise of advocacy groups and NGOs challenging discriminatory policies and promoting their rights. Organizations such as the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages represent Bedouin interests, working for legal recognition, while grassroots movements advocate for social and cultural preservation. Civil society efforts, rooted in principles of civic equality, aim to strengthen Bedouin communities, support their leadership, and provide platforms for democratic and legal advocacy. Advocacy for Bedouin rights plays a vital role in asserting their identity within Israeli society and striving for full equality. This active engagement reflects the Bedouin community's determination to preserve its cultural heritage and secure its place within Israel's social and political landscape.

F. Language and Cultural Preservation: The Bedouin Arabic dialect, distinct from other Arabic forms in the region, is a vital marker of cultural identity and a link to ancestral heritage. However, the dominance of Hebrew in education and public life in Israel challenges the transmission of this dialect to younger generations. Promoting and preserving the Bedouin dialect is essential for maintaining the richness and diversity of Bedouin culture.

G. The Role of Women in Identity Preservation: Bedouin women face challenges in preserving their identity within the patriarchal structures of both Bedouin and Israeli societies. They are often responsible for transmitting cultural traditions to future generations but face restricted access to education, employment, and public life. Despite this, they play a crucial role in maintaining cultural practices, advocating for their communities,⁹ and challenging traditional gender roles, making their contributions vital to the resilience of Bedouin identity.

3. Reflection of Minority Identities in Laws, Constitutions, and National Symbols

The legal and symbolic frameworks of a nation often reflect its values and the position of its diverse communities. In Israel, these frameworks offer limited acknowledgment of Bedouin identity, impacting the recognition and protection of their cultural, religious, and linguistic rights. This chapter examines

⁷ Adalah's Position Paper: Proposed Basic Law: Israel - The Nation State of the Jewish People UPDATE - 16 July 2018

⁸ Elbedour, S., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Jiao, Q. G., Abu-Rabia, A., Morad, M., Hallaq, E., & Merrick, J.. Ethnicity and ethnic identity among Bedouin adolescents in Israel, 2013.

⁹ UMM-AL HIRAN by Ayshah Abu al-Qian and Ruqayyah Abu al-Qian (Israel - 2022 – documentary - 11), A NCF project of documentation

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this representation within Israel, highlighting the disparities and their implications for the Bedouins' sense of belonging.

A. Legal Framework and the Nation-State Law: A Legacy of Exclusion: Israel's legal framework, lacking a formal constitution and explicit protections for minority cultural and linguistic rights, leaves the Bedouin cultural heritage vulnerable to policies that may not fully consider their unique needs. While the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty aims to protect human rights in general, it does not offer specific safeguards for minority identities.¹⁰

This vulnerability is heightened by legislation such as the 1965 Planning and Construction Law, which classifies most Bedouin land as agricultural and deems almost all Bedouin construction illegal. This criminalizes the Bedouins' housing rights and traditional land use, leading to displacement and limiting community development. For instance, the village of Umm al-Hiran has faced repeated demolition orders (Off the Map Land and Housing Rights Violations in Israel's Unrecognized Bedouin Villages, n.d). The number of Bedouin home demolitions in the Negev doubled in 2017 (Bedouin home demolitions in Israel doubled in 2017, 2018), and preemptive demolitions—where Bedouins destroy their own homes to avoid penalties—further underscore the severity of this issue.¹¹

The 2018 Nation-State Law reinforced the marginalization of non-Jewish minorities, including Bedouins¹². By emphasizing the Jewish identity of the State and prioritizing Jewish symbols, language, and settlement, the law does not fully reflect Israel's diversity, raising concerns about equal citizenship for Bedouins. It has faced criticism for institutionalizing discrimination and contradicting international protections like Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which safeguards minority cultural rights.

B. National Symbols and Cultural Exclusion: A Symbolic Divide: The lack of Bedouin representation in Israel's national symbols reinforces their marginalization. These symbols largely center on Jewish heritage, overlooking Bedouin contributions, which creates a symbolic divide and makes it difficult for Bedouins to see their culture reflected in the national narrative. The absence of Bedouin history in national museums, educational curricula, and commemorations contributes to this cultural exclusion. Additionally, the focus on home demolitions in the Negev further underscores the State's disregard for Bedouin land rights and heritage.

Addressing the Disparities: Some government programs aim to support Bedouin cultural preservation, yet their impact is limited. While initiatives to improve access to services exist,¹³ issues related to land rights and unrecognized villages persist. Bridging the representation gap in legal frameworks and symbols is vital for fostering an inclusive society that values all citizens. A nuanced understanding of historical context, legal complexities, and Bedouin perspectives is necessary.

¹⁰Adalah's Position Paper: Proposed Basic Law: Israel - The Nation State of the Jewish People UPDATE - 16 July 2018

¹¹ NCF, [Home Demolitions in Bedouin Communities in the Negev-Nagab, Israel 2021 - 2022](#)

¹² Enshrining Discrimination, NADIA BEN-YOUSSEF and SANDRA SAMAAN TAMARI: *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 48, No. 1 (189), SPECIAL ISSUE: 1948 AND ITS SHADOWS (Autumn 2018), pp. 73-87 (15 pages)

¹³ Replies of Israel to the list of issues in relation to its combined fifth and sixth periodic reports, to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023

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4. Legislative and Policy Measures for the Protection and Promotion of Minority Identities for Bedouins in Israel

A nation's laws and policies should protect its diverse communities. This chapter assesses whether Israel's measures adequately protect and promote Bedouin identity in the Negev/Naqab. While Israel offers formal recognition and some protections, implementation often falls short, creating discrepancies between the law and reality. This chapter examines these discrepancies, exploring how formal recognition coexists with systemic discrimination against Bedouins.

A. Land and Housing Policies: A Legacy of Dispossession: A central challenge to Bedouin identity stems from land and housing policies. Historical land dispossession, coupled with ongoing disputes over land ownership¹⁴, has created a precarious situation for many Bedouin communities, especially those residing in unrecognized villages. The Praver Plan, though ultimately withdrawn, exemplifies the tension between State policies and Bedouin land rights. While the government has initiated some resettlement programs, these often fail to adequately address the cultural and social needs of the Bedouin, leading to further marginalization and disruption of traditional lifestyles.¹⁵ The continued practice of home demolitions¹⁶ exacerbates this issue, creating a climate of insecurity, and undermining efforts to preserve Bedouin cultural heritage.

B. Access to Essential Services and Infrastructure: Systemic Inequalities: The disparity between Jewish and Bedouin communities is starkly evident in access to essential services. Unrecognized villages often lack basic infrastructure such as clean water, electricity, and proper roads, hindering their development and perpetuating a cycle of marginalization.¹⁷ While there have been some improvements in Bedouin education, significant disparities remain in terms of quality and access, particularly in unrecognized villages. These disparities further contribute to the socioeconomic marginalization of the Bedouin community and pose significant challenges to the preservation of their cultural identity.

D. Positive Initiatives and the Need for Systemic Change: Projects like Wadi Atir demonstrate the potential for culturally sensitive development that empowers Bedouin communities while preserving their heritage.¹⁸ However, such initiatives are often limited in scope and rely heavily on private funding. To effectively protect and promote Bedouin identity, systemic change is needed. This includes meaningful consultation with Bedouin communities, recognition of land rights, equitable access to essential services and quality education, and the integration of Bedouin history and culture into national narratives. These measures are essential not only for the preservation of Bedouin identity but also for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all citizens of Israel.

In conclusion, while Israel's legal framework includes minority rights provisions, the lived experiences of the Bedouin community in the Negev reveal significant disparities in implementation. Land dispossession, lack of essential services, and limited cultural recognition in education create barriers to their right to identity. Addressing these issues requires legislative reform and a shift in

¹⁴ NCF, [Violations of Human Rights of the Arab Bedouin Community in the Negev/Naqab](#) 2022

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ [NCF infographic on Home demolitions through the years, 2023](#)

¹⁷ NCF, Sidreh; ADDITIONAL SUBMISSION TO THE UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD – 2024 "[Unrecognized: Assessing Bedouin Children's Rights Infringements in Israel's Negev-Naqab](#)"

¹⁸ [Intro to Ecosystem Restoration at Project Wadi Atir](#)

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policies toward genuine recognition and respect for Bedouin cultural heritage and self-determination. Only through such comprehensive change can Israel fulfill its obligations to protect and promote Bedouin identity.

5. Barriers to the Expression and Enjoyment of Bedouin Minority Identity

Legislative and policy barriers hinder the Bedouin community's ability to express and preserve their cultural identity, encompassing land policies, discrimination, and limited access to essential services.

A. Denial of Land Rights and Cultural Disruption: Israel's 1965 Planning and Building Law,¹⁹ classifies most Bedouin land as "agricultural," thus criminalizing traditional housing, leading to demolitions and forced relocations. This disrupts communities, severs ties to ancestral land, and violates the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Articles 10, 11, and 26) protecting land and cultural practices. Forced urbanization policies further exacerbate the situation by resettling Bedouins into townships while disregarding their traditional lifestyles.

B. Systemic Discrimination and Marginalization: Systemic discrimination marginalizes Bedouins, particularly in unrecognized villages, by excluding them from urban planning and limiting access to essential services such as water, electricity, and roads. Institutional barriers restrict access to education, healthcare, and employment, hindering cultural expression. Bedouin schools lack culturally relevant curricula, and inadequate healthcare services exacerbate health disparities.

C. Health Inequities and Food Insecurity: Systemic discrimination marginalizes Bedouins, particularly in unrecognized villages, by excluding them from urban planning and limiting access to essential services like water, electricity, and roads. Institutional barriers restrict access to education, healthcare, and employment, hindering cultural expression. Bedouin schools lack culturally relevant curricula, and inadequate healthcare services exacerbate health disparities.²⁰

Conclusion: The cumulative impact of these barriers — land dispossession, forced relocation, discrimination, and health inequities collectively hinder the Bedouin community's ability to preserve its cultural identity and achieve equality. Protecting their rights to cultural expression and self-determination requires comprehensive action aligned with international human rights standards, including Article 27 of the ICCPR.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To protect and promote the identity of the Bedouin community in Israel, comprehensive legislative and policy reforms are urgently needed across the following areas:

1. **Land Rights and Recognition:** The Israeli government should recognize Bedouin land claims and provide full services to unrecognized villages. Involving Bedouin leaders in decision-making is

¹⁹ Planning and Building Law, 1965 (Summary)

²⁰ NCF, Nagabiya, ADVA; [Food Insecurity in Bedouin Communities in the Negev-Naqab: Assessing The Multi-Dimensional Impact of Crises on the Most Vulnerable Israeli Citizens](#), 2024

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crucial for community-based solutions that respect their cultural needs and heritage, preserving their traditional lifestyle and connection to the land.

2. **Education and Language Support:** Education reforms should ensure equal investment in Bedouin students, promoting the Arabic language and culture through relevant bilingual programs and materials that reflect Bedouin history and rights. Civic education must include Bedouin perspectives. Expanding adult education, especially for women, is key to enhancing social and economic opportunities.

3. **Healthcare and Mental Health Services:** Culturally sensitive healthcare facilities should be established, especially in unrecognized villages. Mental health services should align with Bedouin cultural values, particularly for children and families affected by trauma. Efforts should focus on training and recruiting Bedouin healthcare professionals to provide culturally competent care.

4. **Cultural Preservation and Representation:** The State should support Bedouin cultural traditions through artists, initiatives, archives, and heritage projects. Bedouin history and traditions must be represented in national symbols, education, and media, fostering a more inclusive identity that celebrates Bedouin contributions to Israeli society.

Advocacy from the Human Rights Council is critical in urging the Israeli government to protect Bedouin land rights, provide essential services, and support the preservation of Bedouin culture. Addressing these disparities is crucial to fostering a just and inclusive future, where the Bedouin identity is recognized and valued as an integral part of Israel's social fabric.