

'I Guess Everything Is Allowed': How the Systematic Eviction of Israel's Bedouin Works

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The Netanyahu government, which has already demolished Bedouin villages, has crafted a plan to evict thousands into trailer homes

Contents

- [Left out of town](#)
- [A political decision](#)
- ['How can this happen?'](#)

The Bedouin village of Ras Jrabah, in November 2023. Credit: Elyihau HersHKovitz / Photo editing: Roni Nova

As 2024 came to a close, the anxiety in the Bedouin village of Ras Jrabah only worsened. About six months ago, a court ordered the village to be demolished on December 31 to make room for the expansion of the nearby city of Dimona – and the villagers just couldn't let that happen.

Ras Jrabah was founded before Dimona, which is famous as [the home of Israel's nuclear research center](#). Aerial photographs filed in court show that the village was already there in 1956. Early last week the villagers felt a bit of relief when the Supreme Court granted their appeal to delay the demolition.

The stay is only for 30 days, but even that is encouraging considering the current government's resolve to [demolish unrecognized villages](#) in the southern Negev region and replace them with Jewish communities.

The Bedouin village of Ras Jrabah, with the city of Dimona behind it, in November 2023. Credit: Eliyahu HersHKovitz

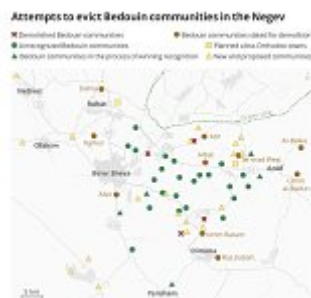
Benjamin Netanyahu's [hard-right government](#) has demolished the unrecognized villages Wadi Khalil and Umm al-Hiran, a neighborhood in the town of Arara and two neighborhoods in the unrecognized village of Umm Matnan – and the efforts are still in full swing. Also, the ministerial committee for Bedouin affairs has been shown data indicating that last year saw a five-fold increase in the carrying out of demolition orders in the south.

In that same session, the committee approved the expansion of a “zoning plan” crafted by [hard-line minister Amichai Chikli](#). This blueprint seeks to cram residents of unrecognized villages into a few Bedouin towns and ignores land-ownership claims.

The government is also moving ahead with a plan to allow the relocation of thousands of Bedouin

from unrecognized villages [to trailer parks](#). The parks will be set up in recognized communities where the infrastructure is substandard.

The villagers are due to live there for a maximum of five years, but the plan has no requirement to develop permanent infrastructure. Opponents say the plan is designed to allow rapid evictions and transform the northern Negev into a region of displaced people suffering inadequate living conditions.



Attempts to evacuate unrecognized villages or establish communities to hem them in aren't unique to the current government. But resolutions by previous governments were often left on paper. In fact, not since the evacuation of the unrecognized village of Al-Arakib - which was evacuated in the '50s, rebuilt, demolished in 2010 and rebuilt dozens of times - have so many demolition operations been carried out. And, a few decades ago, whenever the authorities asked Bedouin to leave their villages, the two sides agreed on the alternative housing.

For example, six weeks ago, the government [evacuated Umm al-Hiran](#) without reaching an agreement with the people, ahead of the establishment of the Jewish community of Dror. Most evicted residents relocated to the Hura local council nearby; some managed to build new houses there. Others are living in improvised housing that may also face demolition orders.

With the razing of Umm al-Hiran, 35 unrecognized Bedouin villages remain in the Negev, 10 of which are slated for demolition: Al-Bakia, Umm al-Badun, Ras Jrabah, Tel Arad, Atir, Albat, Umm Ratam, Dahia, Karkur and Alsir. The government plans to replace some of them with either a new Jewish community or the expansion of an existing one.

In other places, the idea is to replace demolished villages with infrastructure such as roads, or to expand industrial zones. Either way, this is done as part of a long-standing policy to stifle the recognition of Bedouin villages and block their natural expansion.

The goal is to strengthen the Jewish presence in the Negev and attract Jews from the center of the country. As the government designates large areas for new Jewish communities, it's shrinking the living space of Bedouin.

The Bedouin village of Ras Jrabah, in November 2023. Credit: Elyiahu Hershkovitz

Left out of town

Ras Jrabah is likely to be next for demolition. This village of 500 people was founded on land that once belonged to the Alhwashla clan and is now designated as public land. It's east of Dimona, where a new Jewish neighborhood is planned. The villagers received their eviction orders in 2019.

In response, the residents asked to become a neighborhood within the Dimona East plan, like certain Arab neighborhoods in other Jewish towns. Rights groups like Bimkom and Adalah helped draw up one such blueprint, but the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev objected.

Atiya Alassm, director of the Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev. 'The government plans to seize land from Bedouin citizens and prevent them from starting families.' Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

The authority offered residents to relocate to the Bedouin community of Qasr al-Sir northwest of Dimona, but they refused because other Bedouin had claimed ownership of the land. A Be'er Sheva court then granted the Israel Land Authority's claim that Ras Jrabah's residents weren't interested in accepting proposals and ruled that, unless the people left the area by the end of 2024, the land authority could evict them.

But the court didn't rule on the possibility of integrating Ras Jrabah's residents into a new Dimona neighborhood. They appealed to the Supreme Court, which delayed the village's demolition and ordered the land authority to respond within 30 days. Meanwhile, the Dimona East plan was approved.

In addition to Ras Jrabah, the government also seeks to raze the villages of Atir and Tel Arad; the latter would be replaced by Mevo'ot Arad, a name for five new communities, one of them Bedouin. Tel Arad has thousands of people, not all of whom are expected to find a spot in the planned Bedouin community. About 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from Atir, the government plans to build the community of Yatir for [Chabad Hasidim](#).

Atiya Alassm, director of the Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, says the government plans to "seize land from Bedouin citizens and prevent them from starting families. This is evident in their razing of entire villages, not allowing construction and not planning new housing even in recognized communities.

"There are around 30,000 Bedouin residents in recognized communities, but the government only allows the construction of four new houses a year. In the end, the government wants to fight Bedouin demography."

A political decision

Over the last decade, the government has approved the establishment of 18 new communities in the Negev, (16 of them intended for Jewish Israelis): five communities in Mevo'ot Arad, five along Route 25, two urban communities for [the ultra-Orthodox](#) and six more communities around the Negev. The government has also recognized the Bedouin villages of Khasham Zana, Abda and Rahma.

But the decision to build a new community doesn't ensure that this will happen; often political maneuvering is involved. In fact, the vast majority of planned communities in the Negev haven't reached the initial phase at the district planning and building committee.

Also, the Planning Administration and the Finance Ministry object to the establishing of new communities, which is expensive. They consider this a waste of public funds that will damage open spaces and weaken existing cities in the Negev.

The site of Umm Ratam in November, 2023. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

The worst potential flash point is the string of planned communities along Route 25 between [Be'er Sheva](#) and Dimona; nearly all are set to go up on the land of unrecognized Bedouin villages or immediately next to them, with the current residents sent to live in existing Bedouin communities. Ownership claims will not be considered.

According to planners and activists, this move is political and ignores the opinions of professionals who support investment in existing cities rather than the building of suburbs.

Maigal Alhwashla, a field coordinator for the Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, says the council does not object to the establishment of new Jewish communities. "There's enough room in the Negev for everybody. We're against uprooting Bedouin villages and replacing them with Jewish communities," he says.

"We've drawn up an alternative plan, in cooperation with experts on unrecognized villages, and filed it with all the authorities in Israel. We filed it for the first time in 1999, revised it four years ago and filed it again. We've received no response."

The planned community of Omrit is set to separate Al-Zarnug from the unrecognized village of Bir al-Mashash (pictured). Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Meanwhile, the communities earmarked to go up along Route 25 have received temporary names: Nevatim South, Omrit, Givot Adarim, Telem, Talma and Talia. The government plans for the newcomers to be well-off; some of the communities will be for both secular and religious Israelis, some for just one community.

Omrit, for example, is slated to be built on the land of the unrecognized village of Al-Zarnug (population 5,500), including schools, a preschool compound and a clinic. Talia is planned for the site of Umm Ratam (population 1,900), and Talma and Telem for land near the village of Umm Mitnan (population 1,500).

Alassm, the director of the Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, calls the planning of new Jewish communities on Bedouin land "the height of racism. You uproot people who have been on the ground since before the establishment of Israel just for being Bedouin, while looking for Jews to settle in their place.

"I don't know if something like this could happen in another democratic country, but in Israel with this government, I guess everything is allowed - racism, uprooting people, demolishing houses, and all this just to the Bedouin."

The unrecognized village of Al-Zarnug in November 2023. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Omrit is set to separate Al-Zarnug from the unrecognized village of Bir al-Mashash (population 3,500). About one-third of the land for the planned community is privately owned by Jews, but half belongs to a Bedouin family. For years the government has tried unsuccessfully to relocate Al-Zarnug's residents to [the nearby Bedouin city of Rahat](#). It doesn't plan to recognize the village, but it hasn't informed the people that they have to leave.

Near Omrit, around 10,000 Bedouin live in two unrecognized villages without infrastructure. “What were they thinking when they planned Omrit? To evict all 5,500 residents?” asks Dafna Saporta, an architect at Bimkom - Planners for Planning Rights.

“Build some fancy infrastructure-rich community next to slums? Obviously, what went through their heads was to evict the entire Bedouin population and establish a Jewish community.”

The community of Talia, meanwhile, is set to go up south of the town of Arara and northwest of Umm Ratam, which is slated for demolition. Around 1,900 people live in Umm Ratam, which has existed for decades; residents negotiated with the authorities for years in an attempt to get the village recognized.

The government plans to relocate the people of Umm Ratam to Arara. The threat of eviction increased recently when a new road was approved - a road that will cut the village in two.

A mosque in the unrecognized village of Al-Zarnug in November 2023. About 5,500 people live here, and the village has schools, a preschool compound and a clinic. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

“There was a process with the Authority for Development and Settlement of [the Bedouin in the Negev](#), then we met and there was even an agreement to halt the demolition orders,” says attorney Kais Nasser, who is representing the people of Umm Ratam.

“They asked residents to consolidate [their homes] within a certain area, and there were no objections. But the authority suddenly canceled everything and said it wasn’t interested in recognizing the village.”

The people then appealed to the district court regarding the construction of the road. They lost and appealed to the Supreme Court and filed a request to have their village recognized.

“In our appeal we said it was unthinkable that they weren’t considering recognizing a village like Umm Ratam, which has existed for around 60 years, but they’re considering establishing a new Jewish community nearby,” Nasser says.

“If this space is right for establishing a community, this means that Umm Ratam too can be legalized, and no planning problem prevents this.”

The case of Telem and Talma is similar. Near the site planned for Telem stands the unrecognized village of Umm Mitnan, earmarked for evacuation. This year, the authorities demolished two neighborhoods in the village, comprising some 45 houses.

This area is also home to the Bedouin village of Abu Qrenat, where Talma is due to go up. Over the years, Abu Qrenat residents sought to extend the village’s borders to include Umm Mitnan, but the government refused. Today, the residents of Umm Mitnan are requesting the expansion of Abu Qrenat to include them, but the government is still refusing.

“When the state planned Abu Qrenat and drew an arbitrary blue line around most of the population, it really expected all Umm Mitnan residents to move to Abu Qrenat,” says Saporta, who through Bimkom has been helping in the village’s efforts to be legalized.

“Over the years, the state objected to legalization, then it suddenly approved Telem and Talma. It’s the same story as with Umm Ratam. If you realize that it’s possible to establish a community, come help communities that are already living in this area. Why won’t you find a solution for them in one of the Jewish communities, Talma or Telem?”

Alhwashla, the field coordinator for the Regional Council for Unrecognized Villages in the Negev, adds that the council is “fighting for the most basic things and has been fighting the demolition of unrecognized villages in court for years. But this isn’t helping because we face state agencies like the Israel Land Authority, the Planning Administration and the National Unit for Enforcing Planning and Construction Laws, which have funds and staffing and are coming up against a weak population.”

‘How can this happen?’

Among the communities earmarked along Route 25, some are clearly planned to prevent the expansion of recognized Bedouin villages. One planned community is Nevatim South, due to be built near the Segev Shalom area and the village of Hashem Zana, which was recognized in 2023.

“This is another method of telling those Bedouin villages, ‘You can’t stay here because a Jewish community is about to be built,’” Saporta says. “They put up those Jewish communities to block the development of Bedouin communities.”

She adds: “The road where at least five Jewish communities are to be established is just 20 kilometers long. Around 20,000 Bedouin live there in unrecognized villages, and together with recognized villages and towns, around 80,000 residents live along this road. Now they want to introduce 20,000 residents who will live in Jewish communities along Route 25. In terms of planning - infrastructure, roads, traffic jams - how can this happen? Obviously, this is a political decision.”

The recognized village of Hashem Zana, whose street plan is still being drawn up, already faces an obstacle: The establishment of Jewish community Nevatim will halt its development. In fact, Hashem Zana is hemmed in on all sides. Route 6 will pass east of it, Route 25 is north of it and Nevatim South will be built to the southeast. The village will thus have no land for natural growth. Nevatim South will also limit the development of Segev Shalom.

“There was a small parcel of land for development between Hashem Zana and Segev Shalom, but they chose to locate Nevatim South there, for some unclear planning reason,” Saporta says.

The same holds for Givot Adarim, which is planned for the site of the unrecognized village of Al-Madbah between recognized villages Abu Tlul and Abu Qrenat. According to Saporta, this was done to prevent the development of Abu Tlul and Abu Qrenat, including their possible merger.

For its part, the Construction and Housing Ministry said that “the decision for establishing new communities and their location is made by the government. Not a single community mentioned is planned for land designated, or under the process of designation, for Bedouin. Work is being done in complete coordination with the Bedouin authority and its plans.”

Regarding the possibility of integrating Bedouin into the planned new towns, the ministry said: “These communities are designated for specific communities; the same rules will apply to them as to rural communities in the Negev and the Galilee. A community in Mevo’ot Arad is slated for the Bedouin, and another community will have a neighborhood for the local Bedouin.”

The Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev said that it is “not responsible for establishing Jewish communities but for settling the status of the Bedouin population living illegally both inside and outside communities.

“As for the possibility of integrating Bedouin into Jewish communities, this is not the authority’s role,

nor is it within its power. In addition to Marva, to be established as part of the Mevo'ot Arad communities, it was decided in 2015 to establish Wadi al-Na'am, while in 2022 it was decided to establish Rahma, Abda and Hashem Zana. Also, in 2006 it was decided to establish Alfura'a."

The authority added that "about two decades ago, it was decided to establish a number of communities within the (then) regional council of Abu Basma. Some have been left undeveloped because of objections by residents, particularly some who claim ownership, so that, as of today, huge communities stand empty mainly due to the conduct of the Bedouin population.

"The policy of concentrating a population into recognized communities is designed mainly to allow better services for that population, from basic infrastructure to education and welfare services, which cannot be done under the wide geographic dispersal today."

Eden Solomon

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 12, 2025 2:30 pm IST:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/i-guess-everything-is-allowed-how-the-systematic-eviction-of-israels-bedouin-works/00000194-46cb-db19-abdd-6ecfa4a80000>