

Exploiting Israel's Negev Bedouin

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Gerald M. Steinberg

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While many believe that a successful peace process will end demonization of Israel based on incendiary terms such as “apartheid” and “racism,” and in accompanying boycott campaigns, the evidence suggests that this hatred goes far deeper. Indeed, the organizations that lead these campaigns are not focused on the post-1967 “occupation,” but rather target all of



A boy in the Bedouin village of Bir Ms has h in Is rael' s s outhern Negev on Dec. 10. Photo by Am ir Cohen/Reuters

1948 Israel, from Kiryat Shemona, along the border with Lebanon (and Hezbollah), to Eilat at the southern tip. For these groups, any form of Jewish self- determination and sovereignty equality, is, in their language, a form of racism, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. And Israeli Jews who live in the Negev or Tel Aviv are "settlers".

For example, a number of political non- governmental organizations (NGOs) recently launched campaigns that exploit the complex issues surrounding land claims on behalf of Israel's Negev Bedouin population. The Negev, with the city of Beersheva, Ben Gurion University, and Soroka hospital, constitutes over half of the country's territory. As the Israeli Bedouin population grew significantly in recent decades, partly due to the practice of polygamy and very high birthrates, illegal building, without planning or environmental considerations, has expanded widely. As is true for any other competent government, the Israeli leadership has sought to change course, in form of assisting the Bedouin by creating new towns, with schools, clinics and other necessary facilities.

In response, anti- Israel NGOs that cynically use the cover of human rights hit the road with global tours, including in the United States and Europe, attacking the plan, repeating labels such as “ethnic cleansing”, “racial discrimination,” and “human rights violations”. In slick publications, videos, and presentations before the UN and European parliamentary groups, NGOs have falsely referred to the Negev Bedouin as "Palestinian victims", and Israeli Jewish residents in the Negev as “settlers”. The campaign erases 4000 years of Jewish history in the Negev (from the arrival of Abraham in Beersheva), thereby delegitimizing Israeli sovereignty. Noted Israeli columnist Ben- Dror Yemini reviewed a slick propaganda video produced by Rabbis for Human Rights, portraying Israel “as the cruel anti-Semitic ruler, expelling and disinheriting and destroying and robbing...” (Funding for this video and for other campaigns of radical NGOs that exploit Bedouin issue is provided by groups such as the US- based New Israel Fund.)

Similarly, a radical organization calling itself “Jewish Voices for Peace”, which supports BDS (boycotts, divestment and sanctions) has suddenly discovered the Bedouin Negev issue. Little is known about JVP’s membership or its sources of funding (over \$1 million dollars annually), but its primary agenda is to promote anti- Israel and anti- Zionist propaganda, in order to “drive a wedge” over support for Israel in the American Jewish community. In particular, JVP targeted participants in the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) Biennial conference, taking place in San Diego.

With little knowledge of the details, “progressive Jews” are deemed as likely to accept and sympathize with the campaign to “help the Negev Bedouin” stand up to the “powerful Israeli state which seeks to deprive them of their land”.

In contrast, American Jews are unlikely to hear the Bedouins themselves, unfiltered by officials of political NGOs, because their leaders lack the resources for these global tours and press campaigns. For example, Abed Tarabin, leader of one of central clans in the Negev, recently noted that “The opposition to the plan comes from belligerent politicians, making noise for their own purposes. It doesn’t come from real Bedouin leaders who are concerned with their people. There is plenty of room in the Negev for everybody, and it is good that the government is working to improve things and is investing money in us”.

These views rarely make it into many journalists writing about Israel simply repeat the unsupported NGO allegations, and exclude the Bedouins themselves. In a major article based on NGO claims, and accompanied by emotionally moving photos, the *New York Times* correspondent greatly exaggerated the number of individuals that would be affected by the Israeli plan. She also quoted radicals who again referred to “insidious racism, ethnic cleansing or even apartheid”, as well as “a land grab that ignores their culture and traditions.”

The prevalence of such campaigns regarding the Negev, within Israel’s 1948 “Green Line”, suggests that a peace agreement with the Palestinians will not end the demonization and boycotts. For Israelis and American Jews who support a two- state solution, the need to oppose such misleading and hate- based campaigns should be a major priority.

Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg is the president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institute and recipient of the 2013 Menachem Begin Prize.