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The Naqab/Nagev, Israel: Rebuilding Demolished Homes

This is Ḥākma after her home had been demolished. She is sitting under a tree with some of her children and relatives, encircled by piles of sand.

It is June 21, 2014. Ḥākma Abu-Mdighem A-Tūrī has eight children and lives in Al-'Araqīb, a tiny Bedouin village. As an 'unrecognized village,' officially it does not exist: there is no electricity, no water or sewage, and no social services; only repeated demolitions of the shacks people have built for shelter. The village is located in the northern Naqab/Negev, the semi-desert region of southern Israel, some ten kilometers north of Beer Sheba. Worse things happen in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, in the West Bank and Gaza. Arab inhabitants of the Negev/Naqab, however, are Israeli citizens.[1]

Nine days earlier, on June 12, 2014, a large force – police, special squads, and bulldozers – arrived in the village. By then, after seventy demolitions of the improvised shacks, the few remaining families of Al-'Araqīb were living within the cemetery compound. Now the bulldozers tore down

1 I have seen many demolished houses in the West Bank and Gaza. This piece engages with one aspect of the life of Palestinian citizens within Israel, often rendered invisible. The report is based on activities undertaken by members of Tarābut–Hitḥabrūt – an Arab-Jewish movement for social change, including myself. Photo: Michal Warshavsky.

the cemetery fence and the security forces marched in. The inhabitants, including old women and a young mother with her baby, joined by some thirty activists, gathered in the only structure still standing – the village mosque. We were surrounded for hours, while the bulldozers razed everything to the ground in front of our very eyes.[2]

It seemed at the time that this shock treatment would spell the end of the struggle of the people of Al-ʻAraqīb. The following weeks brought constant harassment by riot police and the special police unit trained to secure house demolitions. It was a very hot summer, a few days before Ramadān. From a distance we could hear Gaza being bombed: another 'military campaign' began and no one paid any attention to the plight of a few Arab citizens. During the demolition, the only water tank had been confiscated. Agriculturalists in the area were warned not to sell any water to the people of Al-ʻAraqīb. The families whose shacks had been torn down gathered under two trees and tied a net between the branches to provide shade. Before noon, 'Green Patrol' inspectors – a government unit entrusted with protecting state land from encroachers – came to report the continued presence of these 'encroachers.' They also cut the net with scissors. On several occasions, police cars entered the compound. They drove up and down on the sandy ground, blowing up as much dust as possible in the direction of the families gathered under the trees, causing coughing and shortness of breath, especially among the children.

Slightly further afield, right in front of the area where the police cars were patrolling, Ḥākma sat under her tree, surrounded by the sand heaps created by the bulldozers, joined by her youngest children, Ali and Sujūd, her adult children, and other relatives. She was fearless. She shouted and cursed at the policemen. When two of the boys, aged thirteen and fifteen, were illegally detained for two days, she protested with all her might that they had no right to take her children into custody. It was clear she was at the forefront of the conflict; it was not always easy for the men to accept this.

I have known Ḥākma and her family since 2010. I recorded her talking that day, sitting under the tree:

'Each time you come here, you shall see my eyes'

"If they come to evict us, I'll be sitting up in the tree. I'll wave to them 'hello' from up there. This tree is my new home at Al-ʻAraqīb. I'll make a sign saying: 'My New Home,' with words about what happened here and how they demolished the place, in Hebrew, English, and Arabic, and I'll hang it on the tree. So that everyone can read and know.

"They [the policemen] come here in their cars to cover the children with dust. I told them, they can blow as much dust as they please. I'm ready. The dust of my land won't hurt me. When my strength leaves me, I breathe in the air of my land. This gives me strength. I'm ready to live under the sun, me and my family. I have two married children, and six are here, sleeping under the tree, homeless. This land is my mother, it has kept me, it will keep me all my life. Who would sell his own mother? Only a mad person would. [As if speaking to an Israeli policeman:] 'How long have you been here? 70 years? My grandmother was here before me. This tree is a gift from my grandmother. It has been here more than 120 years.'

2 See the photo essay by Silvia Boarini, "In Photos: Israeli Bulldozers raze Bedouin Community," *Electronic Intifada*, https://electronicintifada.net/content/photos-israeli-bulldozers-raze-bedouin-community/13478, accessed July 10, 2018; the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rNv_zBixJ0.

"They now demolish [our shack], so that when the Supreme Court decides whether Al-'Araqīb belongs to the Bedouins, they can say: 'There are no longer homes in Al-'Araqīb.' This is why we stay here. We won't let them decide over our land.[3]

"They [the police and the special squads] come during the night, they disturb us in the morning; all night I did not sleep. They put pressure and more pressure, so that the women and the men leave the village. But we don't go away. We shall either live here as we should, properly, or [as I live now] under the tree, or we die here. [We shall live] Under the tree, in the valley, in a car – no difference, I'm ready for anything. I shall not move. I told the officer of the riot police: Each time you come here, you shall see my eyes. In your dreams you'll see Ḥākma.

"I won't forsake my village. No power in the world can make me leave my village. [...]. I said it time and again: I don't need a fancy house in Tel Aviv, I want a little tent for me and for my children. Let us build a small tent. What does a person want? To live peacefully. Jews and Arabs are brothers. Why should they treat their brother like this? [...]

"They don't want just Al-'Araqīb. I wish it was only Al-'Araqīb. They don't want the Bedouins. I used to work, my children were working hard, I worked until the eighth month of my pregnancy to pay for a lawyer to stop the demolition [of my home]. What's the point? In the end they lied and demolished everything.

"And then [when all the village is demolished] they'll say: 'Nothing ever existed here ...' You know, they clean everything [after demolitions the debris and remnants are removed].

"The policeman told me: 'I am under pressure from above' [to demolish]. [I tell him:] 'Is this how you make your living? Off people?'

"I could talk for a whole month about what they did this week, and it won't be enough."

Nomadization and Expropriation

Al-'Araqīb is not a new squat. Bedouins lived here before the founding of the State of Israel. Some of them managed to stay after the War of 1948; those who remained were subject to a sustained campaign of deportation by the military, which took place mainly between 1949 and 1952 and went almost completely unnoticed. The Bedouin were cut off from the media and means of communication, their movement restricted by the military governor. Since many of the Bedouin remaining in the Negev occupied its northwestern, most fertile part, they had to be evicted to make place for new Jewish settlements. The people of Al-'Araqīb were among them.

Even though the Bedouin in this area had been practicing extensive agriculture and were integrated in regional economic networks as workers and traders, after 1948 they were routinely represented as free-roving nomads. Nomads cannot own land. Prior to the founding of the State of Israel, however, Zionist organizations bought land from the Bedouin. This stopped after they assumed power: Bedouin land could now be confiscated, or rather 'acquired' by the state. The new doctrine – not unanimously adopted – was that Bedouins, as such, have no land rights. Most of Israel's southern half was now officially defined as 'state land,' to be allocated to Jewish settlements. The state occasionally signaled its readiness to offer Bedouins some partial compensation

3 The people of Al-'Araqīb, led by Sheikh Sayāḥ Abu-Mdighem A-Tūrī, are involved in a long and protracted legal battle for recognition of their land rights.

as an act of grace, to subdue resentment, but refuses to recognize – other than in few exceptional cases – their land rights.[4]

Bedouin 'unrecognized villages' did not emerge until 1965, with the enactment of the Planning and Building Law, which regulated land-use in Israel for the first time. By almost completely ignoring existing Bedouin settlements in the Negev, they were retroactively transformed into 'illegal settlements.' After some hesitation, the official policy adopted was to drive the Bedouin into new townships by promising them access to infrastructure and education. Those who refused would be denied access to all services. But 'modernization' turned out to be illusory: the townships became synonymous with unemployment, high criminality rates, and oppressive social conditions. As the Bedouin realized that moving from their ancestral lands to townships paved the way for the alienation of their land – the little that remained – many decided to hold on to it: to stay in the 'unrecognized villages' and pay the price. Every Bedouin mother knows what this means in terms of raising children, access to medical services, and schooling. As this form of orderly production of suffering proved insufficient, the state turned to demolishing Bedouin homes built without a permit. In an 'unrecognized village,' construction is forbidden and all houses are hence 'illegal.' By 2008, there were more than 50,000 such houses. It is estimated that about a third of the Bedouin population now still lives in thirty-six 'unrecognized villages.'[5]

Al-'Araqīb is such a village. Its people enjoyed two important advantages when reclaiming their land rights: some of them were evicted to a location just a few kilometers away and they were able to re-assemble around their cemetery, founded in 1914. The state has conducted a long war of attrition against them. In 1999 the Jewish National Fund began forestation works on their land, using trees to mark ownership claims and make Bedouin land uncultivable. Aerial spraying with herbicide was also used between 2002 and 2003 to destroy Bedouin crops and drive them away, with long-term implications for their health. This was followed by demolitions, law suits, fines, and harassment. In July 2010 the whole village was demolished. In an act unheard of since 1949, some 350–400 people lost their homes. I still remember M., a school teacher, showing me his children's toys and the broken pieces of their computer in the debris. The shock was supposed to bring an end to their resistance, but the families of Al-'Araqīb held on and built improvised shelters again and again, after each subsequent demolition. In January and February 2011, the authorities sought to solve the problem through an intensive series of daily attacks on the remaining inhabitants: tear gas, beatings, sponge bullets, and detention. Most families with little children left the site; a few remained and sought refuge in the Muslim cemetery compound. June 2014 was another escalation in a long campaign.

So, this is not just about having a home, a roof over one's head. Home stands for much more. Refusal to relocate to a township, stubbornly holding on to one's land, living without essential services and under the imminent threat of demolition and harassment is a way of asserting rights and struggling for dignity. Of making a home.

As I write these words, four years later (February 2018), three families are still holding on in Al-'Araqīb. Ḥākma is among them. By now, the shacks have been demolished more than 125 times, only to be rebuilt anew each time. The people of the village are required to pay a horrendous sum

4 See Alexandre Kedar, Ahmad Amara, and Oren Yiftachel, *Emptied Lands: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

5 For a map, see Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality, 'On the Map: the Arab Bedouin Villages in the Negev-Naqab', https://www.dukium.org/map/. 10 of among 46 'unrecognized villages' won recognition, but their situation hardly improved as a result.

to cover the costs of the demolition of their own homes. The case for recognizing their land rights in Al-'Araqīb is still pending, but they are persecuted as encroachers of 'state land' facing imprisonment.

A Common Home

For several years, mostly between 2010 and 2016, we focused our grassroots work on bringing together people without a home in Israel: Palestinian citizens in poor neighborhoods suffering from discrimination and gentrification, Jewish single mothers struggling to make ends meet as neoliberal policies erode the little that remains of Israel's public housing, and Arab residents of 'unrecognized villages' paying with deprivation and demolition for their attachment to their lands, their water wells, and trees.

Their suffering was comparable, perhaps related, but far from identical, shaped by very different histories, truly and often tragically entangled. Some believed they that they were denied essential rights as citizens, mothers, human beings. Some claimed that they were entitled to a home because they were Jewish, because they were not Arabs, because they served in the army, served the state. Others, mostly Palestinian citizens, often just hoped the state would forget about them for a while, let them be, and stop destroying their fragile existence. It took us a while to realize that 'home' was an image, a memory, a yearning at once connecting people and dividing them. Access to a home was conditional, blatantly unequal, and depended on the mercy of rulers and the willingness of subjects to exhibit loyalty: a gift dispensed by those up above (the Hebrew expression is to be 'bound' or 'trapped' by gratefulness) rather than an equal and universal right. Above our heads, the outright nationalist party of the Neo-Zionist right gathered force and adopted a new name for itself: 'The Jewish Home.' Unlike our own, this was more than just a fragile vision for a different future. Jewish citizens without a true home and unable to rely on democratic and equal entitlement had good grounds for yielding to this vision of an exclusive fortress, armed to the teeth, in which you trade loyalty for some consideration.

Homes in Israel do not have a similar shape across ethnic divisions. Palestinian citizens often cling to privately owned houses in over-crowded settlements. They have never had significant access to public housing. Privately owned one-family houses remain the privilege of the Jewish middle class and its upper echelons. But traditionally, most Jewish citizens have not lived in privately owned houses; rather, they would work years to buy, rather than rent, an apartment in an apartment block. Such a communal residential building is called in Hebrew a 'common home' or a 'shared home' (*bayit meshutaf*). It often means endless quarrels among residents about paying bills and renovation work and over shared responsibilities. There are always some who do most of the talking at residents' assemblies and get to shape decisions, to be sure, but the 'common home' knows no institutionalized privileges and no single owner dominates the rest.

This would indeed be something: for all people of this torn, bleeding country, without distinction, to have a home, a common home – not an exclusively Jewish state, not a settlers' bastion with green lawns and a stolen Arab olive tree for authenticity's sake. A common, shared home.