

## Letter from Jerusalem

# Khan al-Ahmar: The Onslaught against Jerusalem Bedouins

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On the morning of 2 April 2015, I witnessed the confiscation of Bedouin land known as “Jabal West” in the West Bank. Since Jabal West is in a military-controlled zone known as Area C, the Israelis deemed it illegal for anyone to live on this land. This prohibition apparently only applies to non-Jews since a Jewish settlement had been constructed a few meters away. We spent almost an hour fruitlessly trying to convey to the soldiers that it is against international law to displace the inhabitants of the area.

Afterward, we traveled about twenty minutes west to visit Khan al-Ahmar, another Bedouin village. Khan al-Ahmar was a larger problem. Upon our arrival, I noticed a large number of Israeli soldiers and policemen with their military tanks – that meant there was unrest. The Israeli military were preventing NGOs and media from entering Khan al-Ahmar. One of the many protestors, Arik Ascherman, the director of Rabbis for Human Rights (an NGO that opposes the demolition of homes and displacement of villages) stood out from the crowd with his loud recitation of verses from the Old Testament that oppose such unlawful confiscations. The Israeli authorities used the designation of Khan al-Ahmar as Area C as an excuse to force the Bedouins off their land.

The purpose of this particular attack was to confiscate twelve solar panels that had been installed a few weeks earlier. These panels, the sole source of electricity in the community of Khan al-Ahmar, gave the small village a few hours of electricity daily. Unlike their neighbors, the Israeli settlement of Ma’ale Adumim suffers no lack of electricity or water. Comparing to these neighbors, it is very clear that Israeli policy denies the Jahalin Bedouins access to the power grid and prevents any possibility for construction.



Figure 1. Young Jahalin Bedouin girls from Jabal West community lost their homes when their families were evicted by Israeli authorities to expand settlements in the West Bank (photo by author).

The real reason behind Israeli authorities forcibly removing the Bedouins from Khan al-Ahmar and their plan to erase Khan al-Ahmar is no secret. A United Nations official protesting against the confiscation of the panels put it simply: Israel wants to expel the Bedouins from Khan al-Ahmar in order to connect the Israeli settlement Ma'ale Adumim to Jerusalem. The connection of the settlement to Jerusalem is part of what Israel calls the E1 plan, which aims to divide the West Bank into two parts. To achieve the E1 plan, twenty-three Palestinian Bedouin villages will be destroyed and some 2,300 men, women, and children will be displaced and resettled in Abu Dis next to a municipal garbage dump.

Ma'ale Adumim is the third largest illegal Israeli settlement in the West Bank, established in 1979 on confiscated land from the Palestinian village of 'Anata. According to a B'Tselem report, between 1975 and 1977 Israeli authorities confiscated more than three thousand hectares of the village lands of al-'Ayzariya, al-Tur, al-'Isawiyya, 'Anata, Abu Dis, Khan al-Ahmar, and Nabi Musa to build Ma'ale Adumim.<sup>1</sup> While its population consists of a mix of religious and secular Jews, Ma'ale Adumim remains a Jewish-only settlement and achieved status as a city in 1991.

Despite the presence of many NGOs, media organizations, and outside observers in Khan al-Amar during protests against the confiscation of the solar panels, the Israelis removed the panels forcibly and coerced the Bedouins to leave their small village. The community spokesperson, Eid Abu Khamis, explained that the confiscation of the solar panels would not pressure him and his family to leave his home: "My tent is my freedom and the open space is my culture. I will not leave my tent." Despite the multiple confiscation threats that Khamis faced from the Israeli authorities to demolish their homes



Figure 2. Abu Fahd, expelled from his land in Tel Arad area in the south Naqab in 1950 – now Israel – has been living for more than thirty years on Bayt Ikhsa land owned by al-Sha‘ir family. His home is now under threat to be demolished any day: “The Israeli authority began to shoot our sheep. They are not allowing us to graze and if we are caught we have to pay fines.” He considers the Palestinian Bedouins as the Native Americans of Palestine (photo by author).

and school, he and his community remained steadfast on their land. Khamis explained that he lived with his family in a place called Khirbat al-Murassas, east of al-‘Ayzariya and a few kilometers from Jerusalem. His family raised flocks and farmed the land until the establishment of the settlement Ma’ale Adumim, when, he said, “My family was displaced to a nearby site and we lost most of the land that had wells and water.” Khamis and his family were then expelled to a nearby location where the Israeli forces again began sending them demolition orders and forcing them to move once more in order to expand the settlement that is illegal under international law.

In October 2015 I again visited the Jahalin communities only to learn that Bedouin communities in the Jerusalem area face daily assaults by the Israeli army and police. I met with Eid Abu Ghaliya from al-Jahalin. He was displaced from Khan al-Ahmar and relocated to Abu Dis next to the garbage dump. Eid Abu Ghaliya summarized the predicament of the Jahalin in this area:

During the six-day war [1967], half of the Jahalin tribe moved to Jordan and the other half stayed in Khan al-Ahmar where Ma’ale Adumim now sits – the Abu Dahuk clan, the Salamat clan, and the Sarayi’a clan. They lived in areas that stretch between Jerusalem and Jericho. The clan that was affected and faced forcible displacement and pressure to leave was the Salamat clan. The Salamat clan lived in Murassas area. In 1979, the Israelis started building

the Ma'ale Adumim settlement. The Israelis began a displacement plan for individual families, to make it less obvious to the Palestinian communities and the media. They succeeded in this because the land was spacious and a small number of families lived in it. They kept this strategy of displacing the Bedouins until 1993, when the eastern side became a military zone and three fourths of the land came under the domain of the Ma'ale Adumim administrative area. The Jahalin Bedouins ended up without land.

The confrontations started between the settlers and the Bedouins. The Bedouins protested against the shrinking of their land. I remember living in an area called Umm al-Ghalin, in the middle of Ma'ale Adumim. We used to have around two hundred goats; we did not need to be workers and search for jobs. Most of the Bedouins lived off of the livestock they owned. They were happy, but unfortunately, when the land started to shrink on them and the Israelis forced them to leave the area, they went to the Israeli courts, but the Israeli courts were always on the settlers' side. The courts ruled against the Bedouins and supported the displacement policy. They did offer an alternative, but what alternatives? God knows. Families who used to live on forty to fifty dunams [about forty to fifty thousand square meters] were offered an exchange of five hundred square meters of land, and next to a garbage dump.

In 1994, the Israeli Civil Administration displaced dozens of Jahalin Bedouins from Khan al-Ahmar to a site near the municipal garbage dump where more than 1,500 tons of garbage is trucked daily, mostly from Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> In an interview conducted in early 2018, Abu Fahd, who now lives in Bayt Ikhsa, explained:

The reason behind all of this is that Israel wants to empty the land from the Palestinians in order to replace them with new Jewish settlements. These sheep that you see are part of our tradition; it's part of our connection with this land. We inherited this land and this lifestyle from our grandparents and ancestors. This land was rich and it was the land of honey [*'asal*]; today it's the land of onions [*basal*], due to the occupation. The occupation aims to empty this land from villages, deserts, and cities in order for new settlements and newcomers to take over. In 1981, I built a house and it was registered and legal but the occupation demolished it. Until today I am not allowed to visit my land and to build anything. The Israeli authorities demolished it. Even the tent that I am living in now with my family is under threat to be demolished – I don't know when. But we live with the fear of not knowing what our fate is for tomorrow. I dream to go back to al-Naqab and live in a tent and stay poor all my life but with dignity and with a homeland. [Here] I feel as a stranger.



Figure 3. Jahalin children witness the confiscation of the solar system that once provided them with electricity (photo by author).

During the 1948 war the Israeli army's Negev Brigade harassed the Naqab Bedouins and carried out full-scale clearing operations in the area. This operation occurred after the demolition of the town of Bir Saba'.<sup>3</sup> Many were expelled and left the town on foot and in busses toward Hebron, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem following repeated bombing. Immediately after the war of 1948, Israeli authorities forcibly transferred Bedouins into reservations that Israel defined as "closed military areas." The Bedouins lived under movement restrictions in order to sever them from their land by preventing them from returning to it or cultivating it.<sup>4</sup>

In 1953, after the displacement of the Bedouins from their land, Israeli law declared that any land unsettled or uncultivated as of 1 April 1952 would be expropriated. This law came into effect after the removal of most of the Bedouins in the Naqab from their land. Despite the Bedouin's attempts at providing ownership documents, the Israeli government enforced their new laws and classified all Bedouin land in the Naqab as state-owned land.

In March 2016, I met with Shaykh Sayih al-Turi in his village al-'Araqib. His children were playing around the rubbish and rubble of their demolished houses. I had my camera and took several pictures while Shaykh Sayih was on his phone. Shaykh Sayih explained, "We have the right to stay on this land; we own it. I have documents to show you." He pointed to the wall of the guest tent where I was welcomed to sit with him and his family. He said, "Look at all these documents on this wall. They are the legal proof showing that I am on my land and no one can take this right away from me." The documents were tax papers indicating proof of ownership of the land since the Ottoman era. Shaykh Sayih made copies and prints, filling his guest room wall with the documents as wallpaper.



Figure 4. Khadra, who was 110 years at the time the photo was taken, is originally from the Naqab. She was forcibly displaced with her family to the West Bank after the 1948 war. She died in 2016 but never gave up her dream to return to her home in the Naqab (photo by author).

After the interview, Shaykh Sayih walked with me around al-‘Araqib village and, pointing to the cemetery, said, “Look at our cemetery. It is older than the state of Israel, dating from 1914.”

The Bedouins who were forced to leave the Naqab moved into the West Bank around Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, and Jericho. The Jahalin Bedouins settled around villages such as Nabi Musa, Abu Dis, al-‘Ayzariya, and Khan al-Ahmar. These new areas were spacious and were distinguished by many pasture and water sources nearby, which allowed the Bedouins to resume their way of life. Today many Bedouin communities are scattered in al-Jib, Za‘atara, al-Za‘ayim, Jabal al-Baba, Bayt Iksa, and Nabi Samuel in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. These communities are known as ‘Arab al-Jahalin. Although the land in these areas is owned by the nearby villagers, the Bedouins settled with their tents and animals and made a home on the basis of lease agreements with local Palestinian landowners. Abu Fahd, who lives in Bayt Iksa with his family, explained to me that after al-Jahalin were expelled from Naqab they became refugees and settled on privately-owned Palestinian land. He said, “The land is owned by a Palestinian family, al-Sha‘ir family. We have an agreement with them to live on their land.” The Jahalin had open access to the markets in Jerusalem and became dependent on them to sell their products, which included meat, cheese, and yogurt.

After the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, the Jahalin Bedouins were exposed to another wave of displacement, when the occupation forces began to restrict the land



Figure 5. Young Bedouin girls from the Khan al-Ahmar community (photo by author).

inhabited by the refugee Bedouins. In 1963, former defense and foreign minister of Israel, Moshe Dayan told *Haaretz*<sup>5</sup>

We should transform the Bedouins into an urban proletariat – in industry, services, construction, and agriculture. Eighty-eight percent of the Israeli population are not farmers, let the Bedouin be like them. Indeed, this will be a radical move, which means that the Bedouin would not live on his land with his herds, but would become an urban person who comes home in the afternoon and puts his slippers on. His children will get used to a father who wears trousers, does not carry a Shabaria [a dagger], and does not search for vermin in public. The children will go to school with their hair properly combed. This would be a revolution, but it may be fixed within two generations. Without coercion but with governmental direction . . . this phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear.<sup>6</sup>

The primary focus of Israeli colonial demographic policies was to concentrate the Bedouins in one area. Under this policy, the Bedouins suffered harsh military procedures that restricted their movements. They became unable to enter or leave their own area without army permission. They were isolated from pasture areas and their access to any water supply was totally cut off, creating a new demographic reality. For over sixty years they lived as refugees and suffered extreme poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, regular home demolitions, forced displacement, and, most importantly, loss of their



Figure 6. If the Jahalin Bedouins build any permanent homes, the Israeli authority demolishes them. Israeli construction for settlement expansion leaves no place for the Bedouins (photo by author).

customary way of life. Currently, around forty thousand Bedouins are living in occupied territory in the West Bank.<sup>7</sup> Seventy years after the birth of the Israeli state, the Bedouin situation remains unresolved and Israeli policy continues to violate the indigenous rights of the Bedouins.

In May 2018, the Israeli High Court ruled against the Khan al-Ahmar and all the Bedouin communities in Area C: Khan al-Ahmar's school and homes may be demolished anytime due to the Israeli High Court rule. Khan al-Ahmar's school is famous for its construction. It is made out of mud and tires, because Palestinians are forbidden from building with cement in Area C. The school was built in 2009 with the support of an Italian nongovernmental organization, Vento di Terra. The school educates more than 160 children from Khan al-Ahmar village and from nearby Bedouin communities.

On 4 July 2018, the Israeli Civil Administration, escorted by Israeli police, attacked Khan al-Ahmar in order to pave a road to transfer the Jahalin Bedouins out of the area. During the forced transfer, eleven people from Khan al-Ahmar were arrested for resisting the demolition, and dozens of Palestinians were wounded.<sup>8</sup> The Civil Administration announced plans to build a road on the land and closed the area around Khan al-Ahmar to the general public.

On 6 September 2018, the European parliament passed a resolution calling Israel's decision to demolish and displace the Jahalin Bedouins of Khan al-Ahmar a breach of international law. In addition, they demanded compensation from Israel for the destruction of European Union-funded infrastructure in Khan al-Ahmar. Nevertheless, the Israeli High Court of Justice denied a petition filed by the residents of Khan al-Ahmar and gave

the state the green light to evacuate the entire village. In mid-September 2018, Israeli bulldozers began to level the entire Bedouin village to clear the area of any Palestinian presence. Jahalin Bedouins in Khan al-Ahmar received evacuation orders informing them they must leave within a week, by 1 October 2018. The Jahalin have been forced to resettle in the village of Abu Dis next to the garbage dump. Not only will they lose their land, the forced relocation would not permit them to continue to live their traditional nomadic lifestyle. Animals cannot graze next to the garbage.

Israel is destroying the once-mobile pastoralist people's social, economic, and cultural roots, resulting in general social disintegration, increased mortality, morbidity, domestic violence, and instability. Husayn Abu Dahuk, who represents the Khan al-Ahmar Bedouin community, said,

the role of occupation is to cleanse the Bedouin culture through what they call "urbanization." The Bedouin identity will vanish with the displacement policy. If you ask me, "What is the solution?" I will tell you that the Jahalin Bedouins would want to stay in Khan al-Ahmar, or be sent back to their original homeland in al-Naqab.

"We are next," is what Atallah Mazarah of the Jahalin tribe in Jabal al-Baba told me. Similar to Khan al-Ahmar, Jabal al-Baba is located in Area C and at risk of forcible transfer. I met Atallah at his home in Jabal al-Baba on 29 March 2018. He explained that Khan al-Ahmar's struggle is their struggle:

I was in prison for five years; I was shot twice. When the Israeli army attacks our community we protest against their demolition orders and during the protest some of us get arrested, hurt, or shot. My identity is Arab Palestinian Bedouin. As Bedouin, the Palestinian cause is our cause. As a human I stand for justice regardless of who we are talking about.

I live in Jabal al-Baba which is considered Area C. The area is called Jabal al-Baba (Pope Mountain) because in 1964 the first trip of the Pope from the Vatican to Palestine took place and the Pope visited Jerusalem during that time. Jerusalem was then under Jordanian rule. The Pope visited this area because it has refugees, from Dayr Yasin village and other villages, who were expelled by the Israelis in 1948. Next to us there is an area called Dayr Aban.<sup>9</sup> The Pope built a couple of houses for the refugees there. In return, King Husayn gave the Vatican a grant of thirty-six dunums, which is this land that we call Jabal al-Baba (Pope Mountain).

The Israeli plan is to displace the Bedouins in order to stretch Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. They want the Dead Sea to be the border of Jerusalem. This is a plan to achieve what they call "Greater Jerusalem" or what they call the E1 plan. In order to get their aim they want to change the demography of the region. That's why they want to expand the settlements so the Jewish

population becomes greater than the Palestinians. This area we are in is called the heart of Palestine. The connection between the north and south is Jerusalem, without the apartheid wall that was built by Israel. But today, since we have the apartheid wall, the link or the connection between the north and the south is this area. When Trump announced Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel we had a demonstration rejecting the announcement. We raised our Palestinian flag to show them that Jerusalem is Palestinian. In December we decorated a Christmas tree and the message was to say: enough demolishing, attacks, and displacement. My messages are peaceful and I want to continue this way and I try to send this message to the international communities, but I have to say that if the international voice gives up on us, and we don't get any support, I will fight until the end.

Unfortunately, at this moment, the Jahalin Bedouin's life is vanishing through displacement, leading to loss of their tradition and culture.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Bimkom and B'Tselem, "The Hidden Agenda: The Establishment and Expansion Plans of Ma'ale Adumim and their Human Rights Ramifications" (December 2009), online at [www.btselem.org/download/200912\\_maale\\_adummim\\_eng.pdf](http://www.btselem.org/download/200912_maale_adummim_eng.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2018).
- 2 B'Tselem, "Acting the Landlord: Israel's Policy in Area C, the West Bank" (June 2013), online at [www.btselem.org/download/201306\\_area\\_c\\_report\\_eng.pdf](http://www.btselem.org/download/201306_area_c_report_eng.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2018).
- 3 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 446.
- 4 Safa Aburabia, "Land, Identity and History: New Discourse on the Nakba of Bedouin Arabs in the Naqab," in *The Naqab Bedouins and Colonialism: New Perspective*, ed., Mansour Nasasra, Sophie Richter-Devroe, Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queeder and Richard Ratcliffe, (London: Routledge, 2015), 95.
- 5 Moshe Dayan as quoted in *Haaretz*, 31 July 1963, cited in Ronen Shamir, "Suspended in Space: Bedouins Under the Law of Israel," *Law and Society Review* 30, no. 2 (1996): 231.
- 6 Mansour Nasasra, *The Naqab Bedouins: A Century of Politics and Resistance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 202.
- 7 United Nations Development Program, "Infocus: Bedouins in the Occupied Territory" (September 2013), online at [www.undp.ps/en/newsroom/publications/pdf/other/Bedouins%20in%20the%20occupied%20Palestinian%20territory.pdf](http://www.undp.ps/en/newsroom/publications/pdf/other/Bedouins%20in%20the%20occupied%20Palestinian%20territory.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2018).
- 8 Yotam Berger, "Clashes as Residents of West Bank Bedouin Village Warned of Impending Demolition," *Haaretz*, 4 July 2018 (accessed 11 November 2018).
- 9 The land was named by refugee families from the destroyed village of Dayr Aban in the western area of Jerusalem.