

Israel refuses to recognise Palestinian villages it plans to confiscate



Tel Aviv, February 28 (RHC)-- Israel is building a town exclusively for Jewish Israelis. To do so, it is building over homes it destroyed in Umm al-Hiran, a Palestinian Bedouin village in southern Israel.

In January 2017, security forces stormed the village to bulldoze homes and evict inhabitants. They killed a resident, Yaqoub Abu al-Qiyan, accusing him of attacking the forces with his car which spun out of control when they shot at it.

Most of the villagers were forced to leave their land and relocate to Hurra, a larger Bedouin village nearby, leaving tracts of destruction behind for Israel to “claim” after it had caused it. But some 200 people refused to leave their homes and remained in Umm al-Hiran, which is one of 35 towns “unrecognised” by Israel.

“We’re fighting for our rights,” said Mourad Mohamed, 23, Abu al-Qiyan’s nephew. “We’re hoping to eventually come to an agreement with the government ... to remain here.” About 120,000 people are living in “unrecognised” villages across the desert, predating the existence of Israel.

Umm al-Hiran is an exception since Palestinians moved there in 1956 after they were uprooted from their villages during the Nakba – their forced expulsion during the creation of Israel in 1948. Since then, Israel has continued confiscating Palestinian land, including from Bedouins with Israeli citizenship.

The government uses the “unrecognised” status to deny basic rights and services to these villages as well as to justify confiscations, residents and activists told Al Jazeera. On February 27, as Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel voted in municipal elections across the country, Palestinian Bedouins from “unrecognised” villages were not allowed to vote.

Khalil al-Amour, a Bedouin activist from the “unrecognised” village of Khan al-Sira, said such towns do not belong to a municipal district. The government instead views them as public land – denying private ownership and giving them legal cover to confiscate properties at any time.

The precarious legal status of “unrecognised” villages denies them municipal services, as well. In Khan al-Sira, al-Amour said residents have compensated by installing solar panels for electricity and arranging their own garbage collection.

“We never know [if they might choose to build a Jewish settlement here]. It’s always possible because we are not part of the planning system,” he told Al Jazeera. “Nobody [in the government] takes our opinions into account. That’s the problem.”

In 2006, al-Amour nearly lost his house when police authorities issued a demolition order against him and other residents in Khan al-Sira. Al-Amour contacted human rights lawyers and activists who went to court on his behalf, where they argued that the state was unnecessarily destroying a village to build a new airport.

Al-Amour did not expect the court to rule in their favour. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) from 2008, most Bedouin landowners give up challenging demolition orders since no Israeli judge had ever ruled to protect an “unrecognised” village.

But Khan al-Sira proved to be an exception. The legal battle lasted six years, but al-Amour and his community eventually won. “Other villages weren’t as lucky,” he told Al Jazeera. “After we won, I invited our lawyers, and some Jewish Israeli friends that helped us in our struggle, over to our village for dinner.”

Palestinian Bedouins are traditionally semi-nomadic people and animal herders. But over the years, with successive limitations placed on their freedom of movement and livelihoods, most have adopted a more sedentary lifestyle and rely on agriculture to sustain their communities and way of life.



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