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They're destroying citizens, too

By Ron Gerlitz, guest contributor

Despite their bitter dispute, Israel should engage the Negev Bedouin leadership in systematic, ongoing negotiations rather than destroying their homes. Ron Gerlitz reminds us that Israel must be a state shared by all its citizens

Last Saturday (July 31, 2010), together with a large group of Jewish and Arab activists, I visited the razed and obliterated Bedouin village of Al-Arakib – north of Beersheba and five minutes from Rahat. It appeared as if some natural disaster had struck, but there was no supreme force involved. This disaster was man-made. The previous Tuesday, in the early hours, a large force of police and others arrived and, pursuant to a demolition order backed up by court rulings, they systematically destroyed all the houses, every single one, and uprooted hundreds of the village's trees. Within a few hours, a community with dozens of homes, housing hundreds of people – elderly, children, infants – was physically expunged by the State of Israel, our state. The bulldozers destroyed a long-term effort by the villagers along with their hopes and dreams. All these people, remember, are citizens of Israel.

For many years, the state has treated Bedouins like second-class citizens. Developing the Negev is one of Israel's strategic goals and great efforts have been expended in assisting its "good" citizens, the ones Israel wants, i.e., the Jews. But the state treats the Bedouins, in the best case, as a nuisance and they suffer from continuing, systematic discrimination. After losing their homes, all that the people of al-Arakib had left was that hollow, partial citizenship. The main feeling one gets from visiting the destroyed village on a hot Saturday and meeting the people, the children, is that the state is doing

everything it can to make sure that whoever is left there will be people with nothing left to lose.

The scene was dreadful. But what I heard about was even worse. Village residents recounted that the large force that arrived to carry out the demolitions included a group of very young people. Children, they said. Perhaps these were police volunteers or employees of a manpower company in charge of taking the belongings out of the houses. Several witnesses said that each time a bulldozer came to demolish another house, some of these people applauded enthusiastically and sang “Am Yisrael Chai” [the People of Israel lives]...”

This is hard to imagine, but that’s what was alleged, time after time, by villagers who were there on that bitter, harried morning when their houses were razed to the ground. So, the People of Israel lives. That’s true. And I am happy to be a member of the Jewish people. But this image of youngsters singing “Am Yisrael Chai” while bulldozers demolish the homes of Bedouin citizens is horrifying.

No more “Am Yisrael Chai”

I would like to hope that the authorities who initiated these demolitions and pursued the legal struggle “successfully” all the way to the demolition, did not sing that night. But they are the ones responsible for a process that harbors no potential for constructive change for the Negev. The residents of Al-Arakib are already rebuilding their homes. They must find somewhere to shelter their children and they currently have nowhere else to go. The State of Israel cannot overcome by force, in the absence of any consensual resolution, the need of Bedouin citizens to have a home to reside in.

Instead of this destruction, the government should enter into an orderly and prolonged process of discussion with the Bedouin of the Negev. The land dispute between the government and the Negev Bedouin is complex, and absolute justice is not attainable

for either side. This must be acknowledged. But only dialogue, undoubtedly complicated and difficult, can achieve a resolution that is consensual, fair, and sustainable.

The State of Israel must be shared by all its citizens. Both Jewish and Arab. But we, the Jewish citizens of Israel, who wish to survive, must do everything in our power to make sure that, among the burning hills of the Negev, the song “Am Yisrael Chai” will no longer be heard as Bedouin homes are being demolished. Not ever. The only thing presaged by such singing is a future of confrontation, conflict, hatred and death.

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