



Occupied lives

16 Bedouin families in the northern Jordan Valley

Heiner Schmitz



Occupied lives

For one year now I have been dealing with the living situation of the Bedouins in the northern Jordan Valley. In 1947 and 1948, when Israel was founded, many of them fled from the Negev desert north to the West Bank, where they believed they could continue their way of life. Even then, the Bedouins only lived semi-nomadically. However, by 1967 at the latest, the occupation by the Israeli armed forces had massively restricted their freedom of movement. As a result, we can no longer speak of a traditional Bedouin life in which they use the sun and the stars served as aids to movement. Furthermore they were always thought of as excellent trackers, able to identify imprints in sand or soil. The Bedouins, who are known not only for their hospitality but also for their remarkable ingenuity, can cope with uncommon situations.

The Bedouins in the West Bank have had to adapt. Now they live mainly from their animals, but the extent to which they can only move around with their herds of sheep, goats or cows is very limited. The Israeli forces are making great efforts to block access to the valleys. As a result, they have often closed all but easily controllable accesses. The Bedouins repeatedly receive demolition orders for their tent settlements in an attempt to install them in permanent settlements. Today the Bedouin lifestyle is increasingly threatened by many influences in the

immediate vicinity. Even though many Bedouin families still live in tents under life the simplest conditions, most of them have replaced their camels and dromedaries by a car. Bedouins mostly live on bread, milk, cheese, vegetables, dates, pulses and olives. The majority of Bedouins live in the West Bank and those living in the northern Jordan Valley now dress in a very similar manner to that of the people living in nearby villages and small towns. The programme of permanent settlement and better control imposed by the occupying forces, combined with increasingly difficult living condi tions like extreme water shortages, are inevitably leading to their abandoning traditional ways of life. The restrictions imposed by the Israeli armed forces in the so-called Area C are hindering the construction and maintenance of vital infrastructure projects like health facilities, sewage treatment plants and even schools. It is not unusual for Bedouin agricultural land to be completely destroyed as the Israeli forces periodically misuse the living space of these people for manoeuvres. As a result, many people are living at subsistence level. The romantic idea of Bedouin here is now a thing of the past.

Abu Khayrie's family

My name is Abu and I now live with my family in the Al-Faresiya area, which is north-east of Tubas. Here we live traditionally from agriculture and our animals. In former times we drove our sheep into the mountains and fetched water from the "Ayn Al-Shaq" and "Ayn Ayaad" wells, and from "Um Tayounah". School was the best time of my life. I made it to the second grade. I learned English and Arabic. My first son was born 43 years ago. We named him Khayrie. He was for me a symbol of hope for a peaceful life. In the evening I liked to sing him a lullaby.

My children were all born in tents. My aunt was present as midwife. I am now the mother of four sons and two daughters. We used to live in a small tent. Twenty people, women, children and men shared the tent for sleeping purposes. One moonless night, Israeli soldiers came and tied our tent to a rope, and tore it down with their vehicle until it was totally destroyed. They demolished everything and mixed the salt with sugar.

An Israeli settler named Igie Dydie stole our land and planted olive trees on it. They won't let us graze our goats there any more. If we move east, the settler Igie comes and drives us out; if we move west, another settler

named Suheel comes and drives us out. The area to the north is now declared a Military Zone and we are not allowed to enter the land. We feel surrounded. There are now four settlements around us. We are feeling increasingly cramped. Today I can still leave my tent. Will that still be the case tomorrow?

One day, during an argument, my husband was attacked by a settler. After that the soldiers arrested him and threw him in prison. I now suffer from permanent headaches and have no energy left to cook for my children. In order to take the goats to pasture I would have to take my children out of school, because I no longer have the strength to do this alone.

I beg the world. We want to live in peace and quiet, in a relaxed way. Please help us. Peaceful life is impossible under the occupation, and as a result my children have no future.



Jamalat Garwan's family

I am a married woman, born in 1969, and a mother of five children: two daughters and three sons. The youngest are twins. They are 12 years old. I live in my father-in-law's house in the Fasayel village near Jericho. We are refugees from the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel in 1948. In 1958, my father-in-law started working as a farmer with Fahmi Nimmer's family in the Fasayel village. The Nimmer family owns large areas of land. They have access to water, wells and several cisterns.

Our living conditions are not easy. In summer we suffer from major heat waves and high temperatures. We have no electricity so cannot run air conditioners. The children cannot study in the dark.

Another major problem is drinking water. Israel controls access to water and what we get is not enough for us. Life in these climatic conditions is very difficult, especially in summer. Our village is situated directly between two Israeli settlements. The settlers are not short of water. They can enjoy themselves in large swimming pools in the summer.

We are not allowed to build houses because the Israeli

military authorities very frequently destroy newly built houses or force us to demolish them.

I would love to have a house of my own that is not threatened by destruction so that we can finally lead a dignified life, with unrestricted freedom of movement and no more constant monitoring at Israeli checkpoints on our soil. When will the day come that we can decide freely and move freely?





Suleiman Rahayla's family

My name is Suliman. I am 30 years old, married and proud of my four little daughters and my son. Since child-hood I have been a shepherd and I was out and about every day with the goats in our beautiful mountain landscape. With my family and the animals we led a happy life.

Then came Friday the 26th of February 2018. After breakfast I was back on the road with my goats and in the distance I saw my brother, who also herds his animals. Around 3 p.m. three hooded and armed settlers suddenly appeared and began cursing and harassing me. There was a violent exchange of words and suddenly one of the men pointed his gun at me. Sadly, all Israeli settlers are armed. I thought he was only trying to scare me, but he pointed his gun at me and shot me in the leg. My brother saw the incident from a distance and called for help. Of course, the settlers had disappeared after the incident. I was taken to Jericho, where they couldn't tend to my shot leg, so I was taken to Ramallah. But my leg could not be saved and was amputated. I not only lost my leg. Due to the high costs of the hospital treatments I also lost my goats and thus my work as a shepherd.

Now I'm a cripple, selling coffee and sweets by the side

of the road. I am in desperate need of help and dream of being out with the animals again. There is nothing I wish for more than a good prosthesis and a herd of goats again, because that is my life as a Bedouin.





Abun Reyed's family

Our lives have always been hard. Every day we had to fetch water from the well in Shablah with donkeys. But we were free, started the day early and returned late at night. On the way we sang and were very happy. After we built a cistern, we planted vegetables and various citrus trees. Water was our elixir of life. We lived happily until the occupiers came. They dried up our well, destroyed our cistern and confiscated our water. From then on we were forced to change our lives. Suddenly we had no more water to grow our vegetables or to irrigate the citrus trees. We had to adapt and started to grow wheat, which could manage with the little rainwater. For our daily needs we had to pay a lot of money for water and transport it in water tanks. The water tanks have to pass checkpoints and we are sometimes held there for more than three hours or more. I do not want my children and my animals to die of thirst. We have given up the citrus trees, they have all withered away.

One day an Israeli company came and laid a large water pipeline very close to our house. I tried to tap the pipeline. Our village was immediately attacked by soldiers from the Israeli army. I simply wanted to take a drop of our stolen water, nothing more. Yes, this is our land and our water.

I want us to have the right of access to water, like everybody. I would not leave my land even if the Israelis forced me to carry water drop by drop in a tea glass.





Abu Ahmad's family

My oldest son's name is Ahmad. I enrolled him at the school in Tubas because there was no school here in Bardalah. After some years he decided to leave school because he wanted to become a shepherd. Because of his nature he could be described as very social, sociable and loyal, so he had many friends.

One day, on his way to the well to fetch water for the family, he met his future wife and fell in love with her. He asked her parents for her hand and married her. A happy time began for both of them. Ruaah was their first daughter and three more children followed. As a father, Ahmad was warmly welcomed by his children when he came home from work every day, and the children were happy because he made their wishes come true.

It had rained heavily the previous night. That morning I asked Ahmad to relieve me and go out with the goats. He told me that he did not want to because he had already fed the goats. I was surprised when he suddenly changed his mind and nevertheless went out with the goats. Before he left the tent he said goodbye to his wife, who reminded him not to come back too late because she wanted to cook Malfuf for dinner, which he liked very much.

Several hours later there was a lot of noise outside. Neighbours rushed to us shouting "Your son Ahmad is dead." He had stepped on a mine and it exploded. We all ran to the spot and found a gruesome scene. Our son was torn to pieces, there were parts of his body everywhere and his blood was everywhere. For us, a world was falling apart.

My daughter-in-law loved my son more than anything. She is now alone with her four children and has to earn a daily income from the goats. We have all lost a loved one because the Israeli occupiers left mines on our pastures. We will not forget Ahmad.



Muhammad Bani Odeh's family

Muhammad Bani Odeh is 42 years old and lives in Al-Hadidiya. He is the head of a family of eleven. Abu lyad is engaged in cattle breeding and seasonal agriculture. He grows wheat, barley, chickpeas and pecans. He and his wife make cheese from his goat's milk, make a living from farming and can feed their family.

Like all inhabitants in the Jordan Valley he is deprived of basic water supplies for a decent life. The Israeli army does not allow them access to their own water. Consequently he is forced to transport the necessary water from neighbouring towns. The surrounding villages have also been deprived of access to water sources, although water is the backbone of human and animal life in the area.

The area where he lives has no connection to roads and the occupation authorities refuse to allow the inhabitants to build their own connecting road. This means that this area is inaccessible for vehicles in winter because the existing tracks are impassable due to the mud. It is not only the bad roads, but also the constant control by the army and the settlers. Every movement is controlled, they block tracks and build gates, so that our freedom of movement is getting more and more restricted. And of

course they prohibit us to use the roads, which are only meant for settlers.

The treatment of the Palestinian population by the army and the settlers is a form of discriminatory racism and makes us feel like we are living in a prison.





The Turky family

My name is Alyah and I was married 16 years ago. I am the mother of six daughters and three sons. Since my marriage I have been living with my family in Ibziek. We live in a tent and have no direct access to a water pipe. As soon as it gets dark in the evening we use a petroleum lamp for light. One day while we were all sleeping, this lamp fell over and set fire to my son's bed. To make matters worse, that same night one of my daughters was bitten by a scorpion. I cannot forget that terrible night, also because we were without light for a long time.

I baked my own bread for us, milked the goats and made cheese from the milk. I did the laundry and cooked our meals without electricity. For many years I had to do all these activities without electricity. I had to heat water on the wood fire. All this took me a lot of time and my day always started before sunrise.

My constant dream was to finally have electricity to make many jobs easier to do. About one year ago we finally got a solar system. From then on it was easier for me to bake bread, make cheese and prepare breakfast for my children. And the electricity gave me time to rest at noon.

This winter it rained very hard, and the tent under which

we all slept, suddenly collapsed. The fact that we had some light in the night helped us to erect the tent quickly. Without the solar system this would not have been so easy.

My children have grown up under hard living conditions. They have often had to suffer from severe cold in winter or extreme heat in summer. Feeding them was also simple. They mostly got vegetables, lentils and beans to eat. Our life is simple, but we are content.

The constant presence of the Israeli army scares me. At any time we expect Israeli soldiers to come and take away our solar system or destroy it. The thought of having to live without electricity again preoccupies me every day.



Abdelrahman Bsharat's family

Abu Saqr is 70 years old. He's lived in the area since he was a kid. Today his lodging is a plastic shack. He has to put up with unbearable heat in summer and cold in winter. In 2015 his hut was demolished and his tents were confiscated several times in two weeks.

Abu Saqr's family consists of 27 people. They live in the Alhadidah tent camp. He is a farmer and leads a Bedouin life. Like all Bedouins he is excluded from every government service, has no connection to schools, health services, electricity, water or roads. He lives from seasonal grain cultivation. He cultivates his land with wheat, spelt and chickpeas. He breeds goats and his wife produces cheese and other milk products. They sell these products in the neighbouring towns. His son Kashief, who is 9 years old, went to school in Tubas, about 20 km away from Alhadidah.

One day in 2002 Abu was on the road with his tractor. On the way he met his son Kashief, who was on his way home from school, and took him with him. On the way Kashief fell off the tractor without his father noticing. When he got home, he noticed that his son was missing. So he drove back to look for him. He found him lying on

the ground bleeding with severe head injuries. He called an ambulance, which was stopped at Checkpoint Tayaser by the Israeli forces and prevented from entering the area

Sad to say, Kashief bled to death at the scene of the accident. Our family is still mourning for him.





Jehad's family

My name is Jehad. My parents, my siblings and I lived in Tamrah and worked on a cucumber plantation. In those days I used to sleep with my children on the ground among the plants. I worked there for three years and saved up money to build a house for our family. It was rather a dangerous time for me because I did not have a work permit. During this time I also took care of my father, who became seriously ill and had to have an operation. I was finally able to realize my dream of building a house, getting married in 2010 and starting a family. One year later my first daughter was born. This was a great gift which brought us happiness.

That year I received a notice from the Israeli military authorities telling me to tear down my house, even though I had received a permit from the Palestinian Authority before the construction. On September 2nd 2003 my mother-in-law was waiting outside our house for a taxi to take her to the doctor in Jericho. When she saw Israeli military vehicles and bulldozers approaching our house, she tried to intervene. But the soldiers immediately started tearing down our goat stall. My mother-in-law cried out in horror and asked the soldiers not to destroy our house. Women from the neighbourhood rushed over and

formed a human chain to prevent the house from being destroyed. The menfolk were all at work.

The soldiers fired tear gas at the women and brutally continued destroying our property. My mother-in-law and my daughter, who were both pregnant, were beaten so badly that they had to be taken to hospital. That same day my daughter gave birth to a daughter named Haalah.

A few years later soldiers brought my brother, who wanted to build a house near us, an immediate order to stop the building work. They told him that his land was not building land and that he should build it a few hundred metres away on the spot where my house once stood. When the soldiers were told that his brother's house had been destroyed there a few years ago, they replied: "We can destroy things wherever we want - whether it be here in the Jordan Valley, in Hebron, in Nablus or in Jerusalem. Your brother's house might have been destroyed by mistake.

We are hoping for international resistance to put an end to this arbitrary terror. We shall stay here. It is our country.



Ahmad Aasiy's family

My name is Ahmad. I was born in 1936 in Be'er Sheva and now live near Jericho in the Jordan Valley. Our misfortune began in 1948, when our family was expelled from the Negev following the creation of the state of Israel. We had a good life in Be'er Sheva and were able to make a good living from our agricultural activities. Both in winter and in summer we were able to plant and harvest wheat, barley and seasonal vegetables for our own use. It was a happy time for us.

A British military force tried to resettle us in Jordan. They told us that if we left the country we would get enough land in Jordan and be issued supply cards for refugees. We refused. We are Palestinians and we want to stay in Palestine.

All this changed with the expulsion in 1948, when I was forced to leave the Negev with my mother, my three brothers and my three sisters. Together with our tribe "Erteemat" and the tribe "Ertiemat" we found a place south of Hebron in a village called Terqumyah. We lived there in makeshift tent camps for almost 10 years. It was a difficult time for us.

In 1958 we moved with our family to a village called Deir Hijleh near Jericho. Our living situation was very stressful

at that time. But I was able to earn money as a road construction worker; and after some time I was able to lease a piece of land from the Al-Hussynie family. We were very happy that I was able to cultivate and plant the land again with my mother, my brother and my niece. We earned our living from the yield and lived on it the whole year.

At the age of 35 I married Myaser. Together we have four daughters and five sons. To secure the future of my children I have bought land near Jericho to enable them and their families to have a secure life. After the death of my wife Myaser I remarried in 2000. Today we live with five daughters and two sons in the Aqbat Jaber refugee camp near Jericho. My youngest daughter is 22 years old. With my children and grandchildren my family numbers 75 people.

We want to have our rights and our land back. But apparently there is no justice in this world. No one seems to care that the Israelis are now cultivating our land and living in our houses. What other people in this world have lived under occupation for more than 53 years? We want our freedom back.



Hamdy Ebayat's family

I am 42 years old, married and the father of two children. I live in a village called Fasayel. After eight years hard work I was able to fulfil my wish and build a house. We were very happy to finally have our own house. In 2017 the Israeli Civil Administration gave us an order to demolish our house and my brother's house. I have appealed against this decision. I can hardly sleep because I am constantly thinking of the day when the Israeli bulldozers will arrive to throw me and my family out of the house and destroy it.

How am I supposed to live and take care of my family and children if I can only work as a cheap labourer in an Israeli settlement? What I can earn there is just enough for our livelihood. As workers in Israeli settlements we are not insured and have no holiday or pension rights. We are simply slaves working on Palestinian land annexed by Israeli settlers. At any moment we are expecting the soldiers to come and tear down our house and throw us onto the streets. This nervous pressure is a constant burden on our family. We long to live in peace and freedom once again. Life under military occupation is simply unbearable.





Abu Yussef's family

Before 1967 Abu Yussef's family, which belongs to the extended family of Al Ahthiyat, lived in An Seerat on the River Jordan. They were one of fifteen extended families and led a normal life filled with farming and herding their sheep and goats. They had unrestricted access to land and water. They made a living by exporting their produce, like grain and vegetables, to Jordan.

Life changed in 1967. On September 20th 1967, seven members of the Al Ahtiyat family died in the war between the Israeli army and the resistance fighters from Palestine and Jordan. At the end of 1967 the Israeli military informed the families that they could no longer live on their land and should move to Jordan and the village of Al Auja, 5 km away. Their land was fenced in and they were only allowed to enter it through a gate guarded by soldiers between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. for cultivation. But shortly afterwards the army also broke this agreement. Access was repeatedly made more difficult by their not observing the opening hours or not opening the gate at all. It was pure harassment. In 1968 the families were completely denied entry and they were recommended to emigrate to Jordan.

The theft of land was justified by Israel's need for security

and the land was declared a closed military zone. This measure now forced many families who had been deprived of their land to work under extremely poor conditions as day labourers for Palestinians who still owned land or for illegal settlers. The land which had been declared a military zone, was then handed over to illegal Israeli settlers who set up large date plantations for export, with free access to water resources.

The confiscation of their land has robbed Abu Yussef's family of the basis for their traditional life. In this way Israel is gradually trying to make life for the Palestinians no longer worth living in their homeland.



Imu Mohamed's family

Imu was married at the age of 16. In 1988 she was 25 years old and living in Auja in the Jordan Valley when her husband was arrested during the first Intifada. At that time they already had five children - two daughters and three sons - and she was five months pregnant. Her house had only two adobe rooms at that time - a small bathroom and a kitchen were outside these rooms. The two rooms were used for everything - for eating, sleeping or as guest rooms.

After her husband's arrest, Imu learned through the Red Cross that he was in prison in Hebron. After a month she was finally able to visit him there. When she arrived she was told that she could not see him because he was in solitary confinement and the interrogations were not yet completed. It was a terrible day for her to have to leave her children and be forbidden to see or speak to her husband. It was three months before she was allowed to see her husband for the first time again, thanks to the Red Cross. After a further three months she was allowed to see her husband again. She could only show him his new-born son Moussab through the bars. Weeks later, in winter, she was granted another visit, but only the children were allowed to see him. Imu was not allowed to be

present. Even today Moussab remembers that when he was two years old he was allowed to visit his father once and touched his father's hand with his fingers through the iron bars

As a result of her husband's arrest Imu was soon destitute, and could only survive and pay any necessary medical expenses with the help of her relatives. She was also given some sheep, and gradually tried to cover her living costs by making cheese. She built herself a traditional oven and could now feed her children by baking her own bread. Mouad, one of her sons, became seriously ill but was fortunately able to be treated in a Fatah hospital in Jordan to prevent his leg from being amputated.

In 1994 her husband was released under the Oslo agreements. But in 2001 he was arrested again for two and a half years. During this time it was not easy for Imu to bear the sole responsibility for her children. In 2008 her husband was arrested once more and one of her sons also had to go to prison. Her family's resistance to the increasing harassment and restrictions in daily life by the occupying forces have resulted in a joyless life.



Ouday Al Shahied's family

My brother Ouday was born in 2001. We were eight siblings and he was the third son. He loved animals, especially quails. When he was very young, he raised a small goat by himself by feeding it with milk every day. And the goat always accompanied him, even when he was out and about, tending the sheep.

Ouday was a very kind and helpful person and relieved my mother in many activities. He helped in the household, baked bread, prepared sweets for everyone and helped with the laundry when it was necessary. Ouday was also courageous. On some days we could not sleep at night because of manoeuvres by the Israeli forces near us (aircraft noise and noise from shooting practice and explosions). So we could only take our goats out to graze in the morning when the manoeuvres had finished.

One day we - my brother Ouday, my uncle and I - drove our goats near Waad Al-Machaba. In the early evening, just before we were about to return home, I heard an explosion. At first I naturally assumed that the army was continuing the previous night's manoeuvre. I shouted loudly for my uncle and my brother Ouday. My uncle

answered me but my brother Ouday didn't. I was very worried and ran to the tree under which Ouday liked to sit when he tended the goats. I shall never forget that terrible sight. My brother was completely torn to shreds - there were parts of his body everywhere. As it turned out later, he had found a land mine that the Israeli military, for some reason or other, had placed near the tree and Ouday had probably tried to remove the mine to protect other people or animals. We grieve for Ouday because he himself was a victim of the mine.

Ouday loved life. I still remember very clearly that one day he gave me an acacia seed in a small pot. We planted the sapling outside our tent. It has now grown into a big tree. Whenever I sit under this tree, I think of my beloved brother Ouday.



Omar Al-Aref's family

Omar is now 69 years old and lives as a farmer from cattle breeding and agriculture. He has been able to feed his family from his work. Before the Israeli occupation they led a happy life.

Then something terrible happened. In 1982, while he was doing his daily work, he trod on a mine that the Israeli army had buried in his ground. He was seriously injured by the explosion and still carries some splinters in his body. These injuries not only cause him pain, but are also responsible for his severe walking disability, which makes his work very difficult.

The occupation and the constant harassment are unbearable. In 2004 his first house was demolished by bulldozers and on the 28th of February 2020 the military arrived to demolish his second house. The occupying forces also confiscated all his tents along with some animals, leaving his children and sheep outside without shelter for twenty days. Today he is living with his family once again in makeshift tents.

The military terror has made life not worth living for him and his family. He has long since ceased to understand

what the Israeli military is doing on his land, but is determined not to be expelled.





Omar Rahajlah's family

I am married and the father of three children. I live with my wife and children in a one-room apartment. For twelve years I worked hard and saved money to be able to build a house for us all. I finally fulfilled my dream and built a house with two floors.

While we were still furnishing our house and preparing it for the move, my wife called me. She was very upset and told me that Israeli soldiers, equipped with bulldozers, were surrounding our house and had hermetically sealed off the neighbouring area. Of course I hurriedly headed home. But there the way was blocked and the soldiers forbade me to enter my property. All I wanted was to try to speak to the person in charge to explain that I had a building permit. I was given no chance, not even when I said that I wanted to call in a lawyer. The soldiers denied me access and started shooting in my direction. Nevertheless I got out of the car and walked towards the soldiers because I still believed that I could clear the matter up by talking to them. But they refused to enter into a discussion and immediately began to assault me physically.

They beat me and finally arrested me. Afterwards they threw me in jail for two months without any reason. My car is still confiscated and our house has been demolished, although we had all the necessary permits.

There is no justice for us. They treat us in our own country like second-class citizens to be expelled from here. In many places harassment has made our lives difficult, but we refuse to leave. It is the land of our fathers and we love it.





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