

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“Control and Allocation of Grazing Lands among the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev”

Aref Abu-Rabia

Nomadic Peoples, Number 20, March 1986

The Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) is collaborating with the Ford Foundation to digitize, preserve and extend access to the journal of *Nomadic Peoples*. For more information regarding the journal *Nomadic Peoples* visit the Commission on Nomadic Peoples website at [www.nomadicpeoples.info](http://www.nomadicpeoples.info) and the Berghahn Books website at [www.berghahnbooks.com](http://www.berghahnbooks.com)

## CONTROL AND ALLOCATION OF GRAZING LANDS AMONG THE BEDOUIN TRIBES OF THE NEGEV

by Aref Abu-Rabia

In this paper I discuss how the Bedouin acquire areas for grazing. It is commonly believed that the nomadic pattern of the Bedouin is mainly conditioned by ecological factors, such as rainfall, vegetation, drinking water, etc. These factors are, indeed, important but, as we shall see later, the social relations of the Bedouin are also important, especially their connections with the authorities. These connections are formed on the basis of each side's interest, and they create a network of patronage (Gellner 1977). I wish to demonstrate how these patronage relationships fix the control of grazing areas and their allocation, and how the control of grazing areas and the method of their allocation support the continuity and stability of the patronage relationship.

### Area of Study

The Negev comprises 12,500 sq. km., 60% of the area of the state of Israel. The Negev Bedouin dwell in an area of 1,000 sq. km. Of this, about 400 sq. km. are dry-farmed, and the remainder, some 600 sq. km., are rangelands. Movements of Bedouin with their flocks out of this area requires a special permit from the authorities. This can be obtained only in certain seasons (Marx 1967).

This area is defined as semi-arid and it serves the Bedouin for dwelling, grazing and dry-farming. The area varies topographically from flat to rolling hills to hilly. Most of the area is covered with loose soil, but the hills are composed of brown lithosols. All the soils support only sparse natural vegetation (Ben-David 1982).

The climatic conditions in the Negev are harsh for the vegetation; they also vary greatly from year to year. The amount of rainfall decreases gradually from North to South, with increasing distance from the centers of Mediterranean barometric depressions and from West to East toward the dry areas of the Arava Valley and the Dead Sea (the Rift Valley). The amount and distribution of rainfall varies each year. This instability and variability has a great influence on vegetation, domestic animals, Bedouin life and livelihood. It is important to mention that dew is an important source of water for vegetation. The amount of dew recorded in the Negev Highlands was of the order of 26-36 mm. In some years, the amount of dew exceeded the amount of rainfall (Evenari, et. al 1968; Danin 1974). The average rainfall in the above area varies from 100-200 mm.

### Population

The Bedouin population is about 60,000, comprised of 30 tribes. About 30,000 live in permanent urban settlements planned by the authorities. Some 20,000 dwell in wooden or tin huts or concrete block houses, scattered within the various tribal areas. Approximately 10,000 still live in tents and wander with their flocks. It must be pointed out that some of those who live in huts and even some of those who dwell in permanent homes, do wander with their flocks during the nomadic season and return to their permanent homes when the season is over.

Nomadizing with the flocks outside the Bedouin dwelling area of 1000 sq. km. is dependent on obtaining a permit from the authorities. The Bedouin are required afterwards to return to their permanent dwellings. Nomadizing is allowed only between mid-February until the beginning of October. Although 93% of the land in Israel, including almost all of the Negev, is owned by the Lands Administration, the grazing areas outside the Bedouin area are controlled by a number of bodies: the Israel Lands Administration, the Jewish National Fund, cooperative villages moshavim, collective villages kibbutzim, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Israeli army, and the Nature Reserves Authority. Each one of these authorities has a different policy concerning the allocation of grazing areas to Bedouin, and each one requires a separate set of negotiations. In these negotiations, the relationship that the specific Bedouin has established with the officials of each authority is of utmost importance. A good relationship helps the Bedouin to obtain good grazing areas and access to sources of drinking water, as well as preferential government work contracts. If a Bedouin does not have suitable connections, he requests the services of brokers (Boissevain 1969: 379-386) who help him to obtain the valuable resources he needs. The brokerage imparts many advantages to the broker. It also serves well the various officials and helps to create and stabilize the patronage relationships between the three parties (the Bedouin, the sheikh and the authorities). I shall present a case which I observed closely for a period of two years, which demonstrates the pattern of relationships between the Bedouin, the broker and the authorities.

### Case Study

Basem is 50 years old, married to one wife, aged 48, and has nine children of ages 25, 23, 21, 20, 17, 14, 13, 7, and 6. His permanent home, a wooden hut, is in the eastern Beersheva plain (rainfall 120 mm). Next to his hut is a small tent. The family lives in both, but the main daily work is done in the tent, including housing the lambs, storage of feed for the flock (barley, bran) and preparation of food for the family, etc. Basem has a flock of 150 sheep. He possesses a pick-up truck, two donkeys, three dogs, one cat, 15 hens, and two roosters.

At the end of January, Basem begins preparing for nomadizing. He pulls down the tent and folds it for transportation; it will serve as the dwelling during the nomadic season. He prepares a bag of flour, one gallon of oil, lentils (3-5 kg.), 10 tomato concentrate tins, three mattresses, three blankets, three pillows, cooking and baking utensils, two water containers, a tea kettle, a coffee pot and cups, tea, sugar and coffee beans. In addition, he must obtain suitable permits from the authorities to provide access to the grazing area or areas and access to suitable drinking water. To get these permits, he must show a certificate that the flock has been under veterinary

care and is free from communicable diseases (e.g. brucellosis). Basem requests a visit from a government veterinarian, who examines the sheep and vaccinates them. Basem pays \$50.00 for this and receives the veterinary certificate. The dogs in his possession also are examined and each receives a dog tag.

With this certificate he applies to the "Bedouin Unit" of the Ministry of Agriculture. This unit has the job of allocating grazing areas and issuing appropriate certificates. Basem is not very conversant with bureaucratic matters and calls at the office on a day when there is no reception for the public. When he comes back on the proper day there is a long queue, and he has to wait about two hours. The lady clerk receives him and checks his papers and the veterinary certificate. She then gives him information about grazing areas that are still vacant. She directs him to another office, the Jewish National Fund (JNF). From there he must go back to the "Bedouin Unit." After he has paid the lease for the grazing period, he must show the receipt and the map of the leased area. Basem goes first to the areas available for leasing and checks the conditions of the vegetation.

The following day he goes to the offices of the JNF, this time in the company of the sheikh. The sheikh is the head of an extended family, the largest and most powerful of the tribe. He possesses some 2,000 dunams of dry-farm land and leases another 1,000 dunams from the JNF. He has a flock of 300 sheep, 50 goats, five cows, one horse, three donkeys, three dogs, 30 hens, three roosters, and two cats. He also possesses two trucks, a tractor and two cars. He has long term connections with senior politicians, army and police officers, and officials in various institutions.

The sheikh goes into the JNF offices without waiting in the queue. He asks for the area preferred by Basem, which lies in Wadi Shallaleh (rainfall 200 mm) and happens to adjoin the one leased by the sheikh. The official marks the size of the area (some 500 dunams of woodland grazing) on the map and calculates the lease fee (\$120). Basem pulls out \$150 and wants to hand it over to the official, but is directed to the cashier. The sheikh takes the money, goes to the cashier and pays. Basem looks in wonder while the lady cashier presses various keys of a machine, prints some chits of paper, signs them, and gives them back to the sheikh with the \$30 change. He then goes back to the official and receives an approved map of the leased area and a receipt for the payment. With these documents, the two go back to the "Bedouin Unit" of the Ministry of Agriculture. The sheikh and the official separate with a handshake. The sheikh thanks the official for his help and invites him for a visit with his family, and the official promises to do so. When Basem finally returns to the "Bedouin Unit," he does not wait in a queue because the sheikh enters the office directly, fixes the remaining formalities, comes out and gives Basem the required grazing certificate.

The close, well-established relations between the sheikh and the official are especially noticeable when Basem and the sheikh go into the office. The lady secretary asks the sheikh to tell Basem to wait outside because he smells of (woodfire) smoke. During the discussion, the sheikh sits next to the official, while Basem stands waiting.

A week later Basem goes out with his flock of sheep, two donkeys and three dogs to the leased area, which is approximately 60 km. from his permanent abode. The drive takes three days. In this he is joined by the

sheikh's shepherd and flock of sheep. The sheikh's 50 goats remain in the tribal area, under another shepherd, because The Black Goat Law does not permit goats outside the tribal areas. The sheikh's shepherd also takes 25 sheep of his own. He sleeps in Basem's tent and eats Basem's food. Basem's wife and his two younger children join him in the leased grazing area. They travel in the family Peugeot pick-up truck, which is loaded with a small movable tent izbeh, food supplies, cooking and baking utensils, and water containers. The pick-up is driven by Basem's eldest son. This son comes to the leased area every weekend during the nomadic period, bringing news as well as essential food. The sheikh, or his sons also visits the area and performs these tasks.

Throughout the nomadic period Basem is the responsible authority concerning the flocks with regard to grazing procedures, watering arrangements, medical treatment, and bringing drinking water from a pipeline belonging to a nearby kibbutz. Basem's son helps with the watering. Basem obtained the privilege of using the Kibbutz's water by means of a gift of a fat sheep to the watchman, not a Kibbutz member, who guards the fields and orchards. Basem also makes a commitment to the watchman that the flocks will not make incursions into the Kibbutz's sown fields.

Certain tasks and chores are done by both Basem and the sheikh's shepherd or by each in turn. Every night one of them remains awake to watch the flocks. When the lambs are weaned in March, they are separated from their dams so that milk can be drawn and processed into leben, samna and cheese. Therefore, the lambs of Basem's flock join those of the sheikh's flock and vice versa. In this way all the lambs are with strange ewes and do not suckle.

Towards the end of April, the grazing becomes exhausted; the lease will soon end at the beginning of May. Basem again needs the sheikh's services to get him a new grazing area in the area of Plugot, Alfaluja, (450 mm rainfall). Basem bought 500 dunams of beqah (vetch stubble) for which he paid \$3,000. (This includes the right to water the flock from a pipeline in that field). The beqah is considered by Basem to be an excellent feed which improves the rate of conception of the ewes, as well as the percentage of twins. Basem, his wife and children, and the sheikh's flock and shepherd remain in this area until the end of the nomadic period in mid-October.

From then on until the beginning of the new period in February, the flock remains in the permanent abode direh in a corral in the tribal area and is fed on barley, bran and straw. The straw and barley were purchased by Basem from the sheikh, whose crop last year exceeded the needs of his own flock. Basem did not want to reveal how much he paid for the barley and straw, claiming that this was a personal matter between him and the sheikh. (From other sources I learned that he paid the sheikh \$350, when the market price was \$400). He also bought two tons of bran for \$360 in Hebron and transported it in the sheikh's truck. During this time, the flock drank from cisterns owned by the sheikh.

### Analysis

The control of grazing lands and the manner of their allocation to the Bedouin in the Negev are a central factor in the formation and continuity of patronage relationships. These relationships are formed because of the differential control of resources of those participating in these patronage relationships. The character of these relationships conditions the processes of allocation of the various resources. The authorities are not monolithic, but they control most of the lands. They can give or withdraw access by different criteria and preferences. Because the Bedouin need those lands for a large part of the year, the authorities have the power to control the Bedouin to a large extent. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the ordinary Bedouin is powerless and lacks resources. In our case, Basem is an expert sheepraizer; he has know-how in recognizing different kinds of grazing lands. He has his own ties in the nomadic grazing areas which enable him to obtain vital resources (e.g., drinking water).

The connections between the authorities on the one hand and the individual Bedouin on the other are through the sheikhs, in the manner described above. A sheikh is an owner of land and other property, has status and political leverage in his tribe, and has connections with the authorities which in turn strengthen him within his tribe. These connections enable him to impart favours to people who depend on him. In our case, we saw how the sheikh obtains, relatively easily, a preferred grazing area. The Bedouin who has no connections with the authorities is not capable of achieving many things by himself. Still, he has resources of his own and the sheikh needs him. For example, Basem takes the responsibility of overseeing the sheikh's flock and shepherd throughout the nomadic season and thus frees the sheikh for other activities, including the cultivation of his connections with the authorities.

Therefore, patronage relationships are reciprocal and take place in various social networks in which each participant -- the officials, the sheikhs, and the Bedouin -- contributes to continuity and stability.

### Bibliography

- Ben-David, J.  
1982 STAGES IN THE SEDENTARIZATION OF THE NEGEV BEDOUIN: A TRANSITION FROM FORMER SEMI-NOMADIC TO SETTLED POPULATION. Ph.D. Thesis. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Hebrew).
- Boissevain, J.  
1969 "Patrons as Brokers" In SOCIOLOGISCH GIDS. No. 6.
- Danin, A.  
1974 THE VEGETATION OF THE NEGEV. Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Hapoalim, pp. 11-12.

- Evenari, M., Shanan, L. and Tadmor, N.  
1968 "Runoff farming in the desert." AGRONOMY JOURNAL 60:  
29-32.
- Gellner, E. and Waterbury, J. (eds.)  
1977 PATRONS AND CLIENTS. London: Duckworth, pp. 1-6.
- Marx, E.  
1967 BEDOUIN OF THE NEGEV. Manchester: Manchester University  
Press.

Aref Abu-Rabia  
The Social Studies Center  
The Jacob Blaustein Institute  
for Desert Research  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev  
Sede Boqer Campus, Israel 84 990