

The Link

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About This Issue

Earlier this year, I received a phone call from a cable TV programmer in Manhattan. He asked if I'd like to see a documentary on the Bedouin of Israel. It's rather extraordinary, he said.

The day after viewing Ron Kelley's documentary, I phoned him at his home in Michigan and invited him to tell his story to our *Link* readers. He agreed in the hope that "the article can draw a little attention to the problem at hand."

"The problem at hand" is the destruction of a people.

Ron Kelley, 47, is a professional photographer with a degree in anthropology. In 1991, he photographed Kurdish refugee camps in Iran for Relief International. His photographs have been shown in many venues, including the Smithsonian in Washington.

The Wall Street Journal of July 24, 1998 reported that the federal government, in a sole exception to its "open skies" policy, has banned U.S. satellite-imaging firms from taking certain high-resolution images of Israel. What Ron Kelley offers us is a high-resolution glimpse of despicable crimes in a far-away desert.

The photos in this issue are by the author, with some photos rendered as still shots from his documentary film, *The Bedouin in Israel*. Quotes under photos on pages 1, 5, 6 and 7 are from the documentary's narration. To order Ron Kelley's two-hour video, see page 16.

Israel's Bedouin

THE END OF POETRY

BY RON KELLEY

Staring out over the empty Negev desert, I wondered what the attraction was. There's no oil out here. Not much green. No shade. My steady sweat the only discernible water.

We stopped at the peak of the hill and surveyed the whole scene. Only here could I sense why people struggled for this contested wasteland in southern Israel. It was the SPACE, the endless, timeless, majestic, awe-inspiring space of the desert, the mirage of Paradise eternally beckoning over the next rocky rise. Only a vaguely blue silhouette, probably of Jewish desert settlements, loomed on the farthest horizon.

(Continued on Page 2.)

*"Look at my house. Oh,
my house! How many
nights did I sleep in you?
In the name of the
Merciful God, my home!
Only God can bring us
back to our land. They
wouldn't even let us take
our tools out of here.*



*I remember it was October of 1950. They pulled our things out
and destroyed our house. Israel claims that 4,000 years ago
it had this land and they came back to it. I was thrown
off my land only 40 years ago. How can I forget?*

What do they expect me to feel?

How can I forget it?"

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A bittersweet smile creased Sheikh Audeh Jaber Abu Srihan's leathered face. He paced slowly about, his long white gown lifting like a king's in the slight breeze. Then he gestured to the rocky rubble about us where two resilient pillars shot like defiant exclamation points into the sky.

"This was my grandfather's house," he said quietly.

And there was the old cemetery, mostly buried in the undefined countryside. Abu Srihan searched through the scattered rocks, giving human names to other spots lost to obscurity: the ruins of an old school house, a long abandoned communal well.

When the Jews came, the Abu Srihan clan—like other Bedouin—lost their land and lifestyle. Returning home in the car, we asked the sheikh about traditional *ghassida* poetry. He told us it had become extinct, like much of Bedouin culture. All the old men who knew the forms had died off and no written or audio records were preserved.

Young generations of Bedouin were ashamed of the "primitive" one-string Bedouin fiddle, the *rababa*; more and more Bedouin youth dreamed of electric guitars and synthesizers. Traditional forms of Bedouin poetry were not being passed on. Israeli pressures (and laws) to conform to urban, western forms of socialization steered them away from learning their own traditional art forms.

I will never forget what Sheikh Audeh said as we drove out of the desert. "Poetry died," the sheikh said sadly, "when the state of Israel came."

Background: Story and Film

My encounter with the Bedouin began in September 1992 as a Fulbright scholar at Ben Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, Israel. My project was to photograph three minority groups in Israel and to record the social changes in their respective communities: the Ethiopian and Russian Jewish immigrants to Israel and the indigenous Bedouin—the nomadic (Muslim Arab) inhabitants of the desert.

Like most Americans, my knowledge of Israel was rather limited; unlike most Americans, though, I did know something about Muslims and immigrants, having done research projects on Iranians in Los Angeles, Muslims in southern California, and Yemeni farm workers in California.

The first sign I had that something was seriously amiss in Israel was when I heard from a "reputable source," as they say, that two academics at Ben Gurion University—a professor and a top administrator—had lobbied against my Fulbright award. It was nothing personal. They neither knew me nor my work. They were simply concerned about what I might discover in my research and travels—particularly regarding the Bedouin and particularly as a photographer. This attitude, coming from the heart of a university of all places, piqued my interest in what there was to hide.

Shortly thereafter, I was hit with a second curiosity. My Israeli academic host informed me that he was trying to cut a deal with the Jewish Agency. For a fee of \$15,000 to the university the Jewish Agency would be afforded the right to use my photographs of Ethiopian and Russian Jews for their own promotional purposes. Interestingly, however, they had no interest in the Bedouin photos.

I had only been in Israel a few weeks, but I knew I was not going to let my work be appropriated by anyone. Discretely, I managed to avoid the Jewish Agency deal.

With a few connections from Ben Gurion University and the kibbutz I was residing in, I eventually came into contact with the Bedouin community. From the outset I had heard disturbing stories about these desert people, and the more I investigated such stories, the more they invariably led to other stories. At some point I decided to bring a Hi-8 video camera into Israel and to embark on a clandestine project beyond my Fulbright one.

In one Bedouin settlement, I met Hasan El Bedour, a rare Bedouin who had gone on to higher education in Europe, lived in America, and was visiting his family in Israel. Enthusiastically, he volunteered to

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interview those Bedouin who were willing to talk to me.

The many injustices I discovered facing the Bedouin in Israel disturbed me profoundly. But these turned out to be merely the prelude to an equally disturbing problem. Returning to America with my 120 hours of surreptitiously recorded videotape, I discovered—to my utter shock—that I might as well have never made the effort to tell the Bedouin story. Nobody in America was interested in it: not PBS, not ABC, not an “Arab-Jewish peace” foundation (although its director was recommended to me by an Israeli professor who knew her personally), and, most surprisingly, not many Arab and Muslim Americans whom I contacted.

After spending over \$20,000 and thousands of hours of work on this film, I am still looking for someone, anyone, to see what I have seen.

The Bedouin

For eons the Negev Bedouin demarcated land claims by mutual understandings. The latent threat of warfare backed up boundaries. In the self-contained socio-political ecosystem of the desert, all claims were common knowledge and exchanged by oral contract.

For centuries most Bedouin had resisted Ottoman and later British efforts to ensnare them in foreign land registration and taxation schemes. In 1948, the new Zionist state of Israel imposed its own self-serving legal system on the Bedouin and demanded written, administrative proof of their land claims. Few of course had it.

The audacious claim was made that ALL the Negev desert was really Jewish. Conveniently forgotten was the fact that precedents existed for Jewish recognition of Bedouin land claims. During the pre-1948 British mandate era, for example, the founders of the first kibbutz in the Negev—Revivim—purchased parcels of land from local Bedouin.

Before the 1948 war that established Israel's statehood, a population of over 60,000 Bedouin resided in the Negev desert. After the Arab defeat, many fled into

nearby Jordan, Egypt, Gaza, and the West Bank.

Only about 13,000 members of 19 different tribes remained to face their fate within today's Israeli borders. Some of these were forcibly expelled from the boundaries of the new country. The rest, assured by Israeli officials of fair attention to their land claims, were moved en masse to a reservation area in the northeastern Negev. There they were isolated under military rule until 1966, unable to leave the area without special passes.

Meanwhile, the entire Negev was essentially appropriated by Israel. Jewish-only towns, moshavim (agricultural villages), and kibbutzim were instituted in strategic places throughout the Bedouin homeland. Then, in 1953, the Israeli government created a law that allowed the state to seize any land that was unoccupied by its owner on April 1, 1952.

Thus the Bedouin, confined to their reservations, were—in Catch 22 fashion—legally stripped of their ancestral properties. Upon cessation of military rule, many Bedouin returned illegally to their former

properties and began a hopeless struggle to reclaim their lands.

Next, Israel embarked on a multi-faceted, long-term policy to fragment, subdue, and weaken the Bedouin, destroy their culture, and ultimately evict them from the desert. This included the aggravation and manipulation of traditional inter-tribal Bedouin animosities, the rewarding—even creation—of patronizing leaders (sheikhs) who implemented Israeli

land policies, and the provision for decades-long legal processes through which the Bedouin paid massive amounts of money to Jewish lawyers in vain quests to get their land back.

To date, *no Bedouin has ever won a land claim*. This includes some 3,000 lawsuits by the Bedouin over the past two decades.

In 1976, the Israeli government offered the Bedouin a dictated solution to their claims. For the small minority who could prove their land claims by deed registration acceptable to the government, Israel offered to let them keep 20 percent of the property. The Bedouin would also



Bedouin boys with their ailing grandfather.

be entitled to a payment of 65 percent of the Israeli-assessed value of 30 percent more of their land. The remaining 50 percent would be taken by the government for nothing. This offer, deemed unjust by the Bedouin, was refused. The Israeli government then retracted the offer and has never offered Bedouin land claimants another "compromise."

In an interview with journalist Gideon Eshet in 1979, Israel Land Administration official Amos Muqadi summarized Israel's intent: "The policy aims to sever the tie between the Bedouin and the land, and . . . every legal means available is utilized to this end."¹

Israel's long-term solution to its Bedouin land claim problem is centered on seven governmentally-created "industrial" towns, places segregated by law for Arabs only: Tel Sheva, Rahat, Segev Shalom, Aroer, Ksaifa, Lagiya, and Hura. Here the Bedouin are directed to "buy" a plot of land from the state, which ensnares them in a web of municipal taxes.

Even here, the land—considered part of the "Jewish People's" perpetual inheritance—cannot be owned outright by individuals. The Bedouin are merely afforded the right to lease the plots for extended periods.

Strangely, the Bedouin have had absolutely no input in the creation or development of these towns, which are essentially reservations. They are the inventions of Jewish social engineers intent on suppressing Bedouin culture.

Even the mayors of all the Bedouin towns, with the current exception of Rahat, are Jewish appointees of the Israeli government because, says the government, the Bedouin are incapable of governing themselves in a modern way.

Even by Israeli accounts, the first Bedouin town, Tel Sheva, built in 1966, was a colossal failure. Accustomed to the spaciousness of open tents and desert views, the Bedouin felt suffocated in buildings with windows in only 6 percent of their outer walls. Deposited in cement homes set in semi-urban sprawls, the Bedouin also are deprived of the privacy—and dignity—they enjoyed in the desert. Their new environment had little room for the flocks and herds that had engaged their animal husbandry skills, and they were overtaken by boredom, listlessness, and claustrophobic nightmares in man-made caves.

Bedouin women, who bear a disproportionate burden

of responsibility for family honor, were reluctant to be seen in their small yards by male neighbors from different tribes. Even by 1988, in a survey of 160 families in Rahat (widely considered by Israeli administrators to be the most successful of the seven Bedouin towns) all but five families stated that they would leave if they had the option.

Despite these Israeli pressures over decades to move the Arab desert dwellers to the government-sanctioned reservations, only about half of today's 90,000 Bedouin of the Negev have moved. Those who have managed to resist, fear these places as magnets for despair and drug

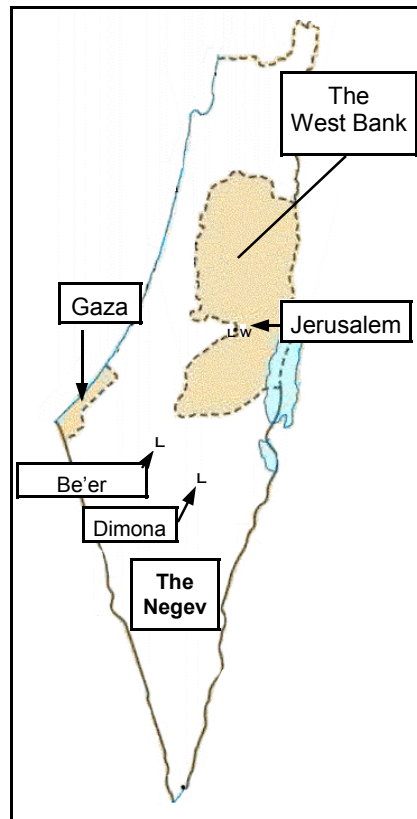
use, crime, and other social ills. Rahat alone has 30 known drug addicts, reflecting a problem virtually unknown a decade or so ago. Lagiya has its own share of drug addiction and dealing in hard drugs.

Unemployment in the Bedouin towns is chronic. Despite initial promises to provide complete community resources, the Israeli government has done little more than throw up a few essential institutions, predominantly schools and small clinics. Not one of the official Bedouin communities has a municipal sewage system. Rahat is the only Bedouin town with a bank or post office. None has industrial areas, commercial centers, public libraries, or recreational centers. According to mayor Juma'a Al-Kasasi, Rahat—which serves two and a half times as many people as the Jewish town of Ofakim—gets less than half the Jewish settlement's budget.

It has become ominously clear to many of the Bedouin that the towns were

designed as giant bedrooms, places where they can spend their nights after performing their menial daytime jobs in Jewish communities. In 1987, a Jewish government official suggested to *The Jerusalem Post* that if factories were constructed in Bedouin towns, the cheap Arab labor there would inevitably undercut Jewish businesses.

"If it's up to the government," the official said, "there won't be industrial areas [in Bedouin towns] for another 50 years—the government has a very clear policy."² In essence, this policy is in the final stages of eradicating the Bedouins' traditional economic independence and self-reliance, which was based on their flocks and herds. They are forced into lives of wage-earner dependency in an economic system intended to guarantee their



peonage.

Most of the 40,000 who still resist the towns are clustered today, as they have been for decades, in hundreds of so-called "spontaneous settlements" (neither planned nor administered by the government.) Some of these makeshift "squatter" villages throughout the northern Negev are situated on part of their respective tribe's ancestral lands. Others are not. In the eyes of the Israeli government, they are all illegal. As such, they are regularly denied services, including paved roads, public transportation, garbage collection, telephones, and electricity.

Most do not have water lines and must periodically buy water at centralized, carefully-controlled faucets. While Jewish desert kibbutzim routinely enjoy elaborate sprinkler systems, green lawns, flower and vegetable gardens, commercial orchards, and swimming pools—one even has a duck pond—the "spontaneous" Bedouin communities are rarely given even drinking water. For any agricultural pursuits, the Bedouin in these "illegal" sites must rely upon rainfall, an infrequent desert visitor.

These Bedouin settlements are targets of draconian Israeli tactics intended to drive their inhabitants into one of the seven sanctioned towns. Structures defined as "permanent"—usually shacks made of cinder block, concrete, stone, wood, or metal—are expressly forbidden. Unstable homes made of temporary materials such as wool, goat hair, cardboard, canvas, plastic, or burlap are more often tolerated.

Once warned of a housing infraction, a Bedouin is usually given up to six months to dismantle the structure. Then come court appearances, fines, and possibly jail. At this point, many Bedouin choose to destroy their own dwellings. Otherwise, sooner or later, at any hour of the day or night, the Israeli army, police, and paramilitary organizations descend upon the settlements to level the offending homes. A man who tried to start a market in an empty bus hulk in the

middle of his community watched helplessly as Israelis destroyed his "business."

Between 1988 and 1990, the Israeli Ministry of Interior reported that "unlicensed" Bedouin homes were demolished at the rate of nearly one every other day.

Bedouin know of course that their very presence on contested land is unacceptable to the government. Faced with growing families, they are forced to build home additions as surreptitiously as possible. Otherwise, young couples "double up" with relatives or face a dreaded move to the official towns.

The government's Markovitch Report of 1986 cited 5,994 illegal Bedouin dwellings in the Negev desert, all subject to demolition. By 1992, the Ministry of Interior cited the existence of 12,489 illegal structures, including over 10,000 homes and nearly 2,400 livestock sheds.

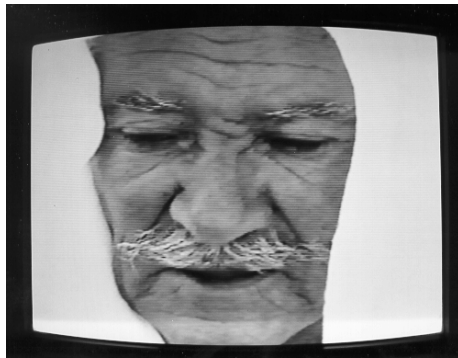
The enforcement of demolition laws has become fairly arbitrary. With literally thousands of targets, the government can levy legal punishment or look the other way for the time being.

Ultimately, the creation of any kind of Bedouin presence on "Jewish" land is grounds for a violent Israeli response. A number of Bedouin have watched olive orchards and other trees

they had planted uprooted by Israeli law enforcers. This is particularly ironic in light of the comment by one Israeli Defense Force spokes-man who told me that all trees ("You mean literally *all*?" "Yes. All. Every.") in today's Israel were planted by Jews.

Most Bedouin are not naive about the future. They recognize that drastic social change—with or without the incessant pushing by the state—is inevitable. But, like any people, they desperately yearn for control of their lives and the freedom to make their own decisions.

Given the choice, the overwhelming majority of Bedouin would choose a lifestyle in agricultural villages modeled after the Jewish moshavim. This would mean a larger land allocation for the Bedouin than they are presently afforded in the governmental townships, as



Freedom

Musa Abu Frej:
"Freedom. The Bedouin like freedom. They never seek luxury. Just freedom."

M. Sana: *"The Bedouin's freedom is his dignity and honor. Once the Bedouin is amongst his family and tribe, outside in space, this is dignity, this is honor. And at the end—freedom."*

well as additional water which would reduce quantities going to the privileged Jewish desert towns, kibbutzim, and moshavim.

Ironically, the inevitable effect of stripping the Bedouin community of everything "Bedouin" is to create a new community that, for shortsighted Israeli planners, can only backfire in the long run. While Bedouin children are required to learn about Theodore Herzl and the roots of Zionism in the official state schools, they are taught very little about their own distinctive history, causing more and more of these transplanted Bedouin to seek their identity and purpose in Islamic institutions.

Likewise, increasing numbers now perceive themselves more Palestinian than Bedouin, with all that this implies politically. Palestinian nationalist posters now adorn many walls in Bedouin homes. One popular poster shows a weeping Arab child, her hands in chains. The subtext is unmistakable: she is begging someone, anyone, to release her from her terrible suffering.

Eviction

I gaze out over a barbed wire fence. For a moment I block out the steady beat of soft-rock Hebrew music from a nearby loudspeaker. A Maccabee beer is in my hand and I'm sucking on a strawberry. Spread out on rows of tables are wine, cheese, various meats, baskets of bread, and a cornucopia of pastries. Pockets of people laugh and chatter behind me. Colored balloons bob in the nearby swimming pool. A few people are dancing. Others sit on bar stools, hugging their glasses of alcohol.

A string of multi-colored lights pops on, the music stops and an announcement in Hebrew comes over the sound system. Kibbutz Retamim is about to begin the last phase of its tenth anniversary celebration.

Retamim, a relatively new kibbutz, had started with 35 Jews and had grown to about twice that population. It was a young kibbutz in all respects; its oldest member was reputed to be 35 years old.

A man next to me offered to translate the Hebrew being spoken from the stage. The theme of the skit was that many critics had predicted this kibbutz to fail, but here they were, ten years later, still making the desert bloom. (The kibbutz eventually did fail.) The celebrations concluded with an impressive display of fireworks.

I wondered how the sounds of this self-congratulation were being received from the huge abyss of darkness out beyond the fence where, in a rough arc about half a mile away, Bedouin sat in contemplation of their fate. Three days earlier, they had been served their final notice of eviction and were removed by truckloads of police and border patrol agents.

The next day, in defiance of Israeli law, they had come back, minus their confiscated tents. Now they were sitting in the desert, on land they claimed as their own, watching the Jewish fireworks. Indeed, for the past three days of Retamim's self-inflation, Bedouin women and children huddled in the

harsh sun within walking distance of the kibbutz, waiting for their husbands to figure out a way to stay where they were.

One such campsite was particularly disturbing to me. Driving up to the living quarters with a Bedouin interpreter, I noticed a young boy hiding behind a water tank. When he realized I had seen him, he broke off running into the empty desert. I videotaped the scene, one that I will never forget. The interpreter called him back, but to no avail.



"We grew up in a circle of fear. And now the children face it, too. Go to any child here—even five years old. When he sees a jeep approaching, he panics and starts shouting: 'The Green Patrol is coming.' . . . The Green Patrol keeps scaring them all the time. Whenever they see a kid here, they stop their jeeps and beat them.

The

children also know the livestock they are herding are likely to be confiscated. Our homes are also demolished.

Now he's going to hide in the desert

The boy's father explained that his son was frightened of us. Terrorized, he thought we were associated with the Israeli wrecking crew that destroyed his home just days earlier. We returned later, hoping to talk to the boy. When we reached the site, we were told that he had seen us coming in the distance and had fled in fear again.

I wondered about the men who had come to steal the boy's home. Had they watched the boy cower, horrified, as they rummaged through his family's private space, scaring the life out of him? What did they see? What did they think? What did they feel? What will go through their minds when, inevitably, they return to finish the job?

Some of the answers I got from Fathiya Abu Gardud, an unlikely spokesperson for a displaced people. Traditionally, Bedouin women evaporate into their side of the tent with the approach of men from outside the family. They play no role in the tribe's business or political affairs. By Bedouin terms, Fathiya was a maverick. Widowed, she lived in an isolated tent with her grown son and his family a few miles south of kibbutz Sde Boker.

The day I met her, she pulled her black veil tightly across her mouth with weathered, tattooed hands. As a measure of how drastic her situation was, she was ready to talk with anybody about the injustices the Israelis had inflicted upon her. At this stage, cultural taboos against women speaking so boldly in public fell by the way. Bedouin culture itself, after all, was being exterminated.

The day we went to visit her I had to park my rented car on the other side of a dry river bed near her home; the Bedouin "road" was too steep for the little Fiat. With no husband, and her son away tending the sheep, Fathiya took over the men's chores. She pulled the green coffee beans from an old rusty tin, roasted them in a black pan over the fire, and poured them into a decorated wooden mortar. There she pounded them with a heavy pestle. Eventually she pulled from the warm ash a little potato for each of her unexpected guests.

Abu Gardud's story was typical. She had lost her last Israeli court appeal to live in the desert. Since Turkish times, she insisted, her family had lived in this general area. She had papers to prove it. Any day she expected the troops to come with guns to move her again.

Barefoot on the hot earth, she gave us a tour of her homestead. What we saw was survival. There was a tent. A large water container. A few yards from the tent she proudly showed us her watermelon plants peeking up from furrows in the ground. Watermelons? Here in the desert where there was little rain and where Jewish settlements hoarded all the available water? Watermelons? But there they were, little green strings,

folded and contorted in the rocky soil, pushing up against all odds.

Then she pointed to a little hill where she had built a small earthen dike to channel rainfall into her garden. She had gone to jail for it—Israeli authorities said she was harming state land, ruining the environment. They carted her off, she observed, without allowing her to get her shoes. Fathiya gestured to the land around her. She wasn't allowed to graze sheep any longer. Her family had to pay and take the sheep miles away.

A few weeks after I met Fathiya Abu Gardud she was forcibly evicted from her land. Yet, she refused to live in a government-assigned town. Joining a small band of protesting Bedouin, she camped out in downtown Jerusalem across from the Knesset building, hoping to draw attention to her plight. By the time I left Israel, she was still there, waiting for a miracle to be granted for the



“The [Jewish] policewoman asked the policeman, ‘Who died?’ He answered her in Hebrew: ‘Nothing happened. An Arab died.’ And all the Bedouin who were there understood Hebrew. Some of those who heard it had even served in the Israeli army.”

simplest of requests: the freedom to be left alone.

The Green Patrol

The Green Patrol is an essentially independent paramilitary police unit created in 1976. Ostensibly founded to enforce laws protecting the natural environment, its major function over the years has been to harass and persecute the indigenous Bedouin.

The Green Patrol's brutality, cruelty, ruthlessness—essentially "terrorist" activities—are legendary and well documented. This includes the wounding and (rare) killing of Bedouin, the ravaging of their homes, destruction of their crops, the slaying of their animals, and the beating of men, women, and children.

A former Minister for Arab Affairs, Shmuel Toledano,

has admitted to hearing "tens of horror stories recorded on tape" from Bedouin who had been beaten and humiliated: One young mother was shot dead by a soldier during a Green Patrol evacuation attempt described by local people as a "routine harassment." (The soldier who killed her was imprisoned for 38 days and demoted from sergeant to corporal.) A baby died after a two-hour jeep ride and a night of exposure following another eviction. A man of eighty was slapped in the face, transported 30 miles and left by the roadside. Children have been held at gunpoint under interrogation.³

For seeking legal redress in the Israeli courts for their suffering at the hands of the Green Patrol, the Bedouin are rewarded with scorn and the fear of recrimination. *The New York Times* journalist David Shipler noted that "some Bedouin complained that the [Green Patrol] was using intimidation and violence, to which [the Green Patrol's] lawyer, Herzl Kadash, replied that such charges could never be confirmed 'because the polygraph doesn't work with Bedouins' . . . The Bedouin tribesmen are so convinced of their fantasies, Kadash asserted, that they do not display physiological signs of mendacity . . . to which a lie detector responds. So, he said happily, there is no way to verify their stories."⁴

To this day, some members of the Green Patrol revel in their harsh reputation, believing it adds leverage to their crusade against Arab "squatters" on Jewish land. Through a consistent Wild West policy of intimidation and violence, the Green Patrol enforces dozens of government policies designed to expunge the Bedouin lifestyle, sever their socio-cultural and economic attachment to the land, and sweep the desert clean for Jewish settlements.

My first experience with the Green Patrol was at its regional office in the old part of Be'er Sheva. I had phoned to ask permission to ride on one of its regular routes overseeing the Bedouin. No one promised me anything. When I walked in, I was given a phone number to call in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem office would get back to me in a few days, presumably after it checked my background.

A week later I was directed to meet my Green Patrol ride at 6 a.m. at the gate of a kibbutz near Ashkelon, north of the Negev. I parked my car just inside the gate a few minutes early. A little later, a jeep drove up and Green Patrol member Yagael Benari apologized for the fact that he had to quit work at noon that day. He could only spare me the morning.

I threw my gear into the back of the jeep with his two dogs and we took off. Benari was a man in his late twenties; he had been working for the Green Patrol for about a year and a half. He told me that when he started he had been especially harsh on the Bedouin; he didn't want them to think they could take advantage of him.

Over time he thought he had become a bit easier, although they knew he would do whatever it took to enforce Israel's Negev policies. He liked his job, he said, because he liked nature.

Our first stop was at a Bedouin tent in the northern Negev on the stubby croplands of a kibbutz. As the jeep pulled up, a Bedouin emerged, smiling nervously. The man's wife prepared a mat for us and we all sat down in the tent.

Knowing Bedouin custom, I politely took off my shoes. Knowing Bedouin custom, Benari didn't. For that matter, the shorts he wore, exposing so much skin, also offended Bedouin etiquette. We were served, per traditional Bedouin hospitality, small cups of bitter black coffee and later sweet tea. I had heard stories earlier from Bedouin about how much they loathed providing hospitality to the Green Patrol, but it was unthinkable in their culture to insult even their enemies.

As we chatted in the early morning, the Bedouin patriarch occasionally got up to adjust a sleeping bag he had balanced on the low roof of the tent to shade us from the rising sun. Benari translated my questions into Hebrew, which our Bedouin host knew well. His wife shot wary glances at us from afar as she tended a fire, occasionally staring blankly out over the fields of the nearby kibbutz.

"Things are fine," the Bedouin told me through Benari. "Yes, things are better for us since the coming of the state of Israel. We rent this grazing land from the kibbutz during certain times of the year. We used to walk our sheep 30-40 miles to get here. Now we bring them in trucks. No complaint. We are happy."

Our Bedouin host, a veteran of the Israeli army, went on to compliment the Israeli right wing party, the Likud, and suggested that the proposed peace plan with Yassar Arafat couldn't be trusted.

At some point, Benari looked up and gestured to the flocks of sheep in the distance. He told the Bedouin something, and suddenly our host appeared troubled, shaking his head in denial.

"He says he doesn't have too many sheep," said Benari. "But I know he has too many out there. It's against the law for him to have so many. There is a limit. He probably tries to get around it by having some of them registered under his wife's name."

The second Bedouin we visited that day was an elderly man. He too lived with his large family in the shadow of another kibbutz. A few yards away a Jewish-owned herd of cows munched lush grasses. The old man nervously greeted Benari. A woman brought a blanket and the man spread it out in the shade of an olive tree. The three of us sat down and a young Bedouin hurried over with a full

coffeepot. Benari and the old man conversed in Hebrew. The Bedouin smiled a lot.

For 22 years, the Bedouin had been a guard and watchman for the nearby Jewish kibbutz. As part of his 24-hour per day employment, he was permitted to live with his family in the midst of the pleasant Jewish farmland that surrounded us.

Unfortunately, although he would qualify for a retirement pension in less than three years, the Israel Lands Administration had suddenly decided to threaten him with eviction for living illegally on Jewish land. Even though the kibbutz had invited him here, the old man knew his days there were numbered. The government was known to be intractable in such matters. The kibbutz could cause problems for itself by further supporting his residency there and had already decided to abandon him to his fate. His only hope seemed to be to court favor with Benari so he could squeeze out another three years to get his pension.

The more Benari translated the old man's story, the more it outraged me. At one point, the old Bedouin pointed to the boundary fence, less than a mile away, between Israel proper and the Gaza strip, where 800,000 Arabs live in stark poverty—a situation directly attributable to Israel's long occupation of the area.

The old man then said something in Arabic to one of his small sons and the boy returned quickly with a long, heavy, almost black piece of metal. The old man passed it to Benari. He inspected it briefly, then handed it to me. It was a crude machete, hand-made, welded at the handle. It was only moderately sharp, but it was terribly menacing. As a weapon, its blow could certainly be lethal.

One night, the Bedouin explained, he confronted three infiltrators from Gaza at the edge of the kibbutz. Whether they had come to kill cows or Israelis, he wasn't certain. But he suspected the worst. It was so dark that

the intruders couldn't see the only weapon he had: a little dagger. The old man shouted a few times to the darkness, scaring the intruders away. One of them dropped the machete in his haste to flee.

The old man, who had risked his life 24 hours a day for the past 22 years protecting Jews, now faced eviction and the loss of a pension. The Israeli government, Benari's Green Patrol, and the kibbutz itself all stood ready to cut him loose. He was, after all, just an Arab.

Al-Huwashle

Along one part of the Dimona-Be'er Sheva road one comes upon a snaking, dark green vegetation. It is an odd sight in the desert. At a cursory glance, the green looks—well—healthy. In fact, it is open sewage from the Jewish desert development town of Dimona. It is piped underground a few hundred yards from the town itself to where it surfaces into six settling ponds located in the midst of the Bedouin settlement of Al-Huwashle. The people of Al-Huwashle have never been told about the many ill effects the liquid could hold for them.

From the settling ponds —where solid waste ends up at the

bottom—the untreated waste water spews out pipes into the open, gushing through the Bedouin community, passing next to their elementary school before meandering into the desert. Miles westward, another Bedouin community is not so fortunate. For the past 25 years its members have suffered the gross indignity of having to drive their vehicles from the main highway through diluted feces and other waste in order to get home.

The Green Rivers, as they are called by the Bedouin, are part of the strategy of degradation that the Israelis impose on the Bedouin, hoping to make their lives so miserable that they will eventually surrender their lands and move into the seven segregated reservations.

Hannah Pesakh, a city planner for the city of Dimona, repeated in an interview the Zionist myth that the desert



Bedouin children, brother and sister.

was empty when the Jews came to settle it. The local Al-Huwashle clan would beg to differ. The city of Dimona sits in the middle of their ancestral homeland. Over the years, some of the Al-Huwashles have congregated alongside the sewage system. Others have pushed to the eastern outskirts of town. The Dimona dump now lies between the two groups. For these Bedouin, simply going home from the central road system necessitates a scenic cruise between narrow corridors of raw sewage, while all day long the stinking, burning garbage takes spirit-form over Bedouin tents.

The Bedouin tradition—however fatalistic—is one of obsessive, almost fanatic, pride and honor. Imagine my amazement when I watched a local Al-Huwashle clan member with his wife and daughters as they drove their flocks of sheep to graze atop the unstable mounds of fresh Dimona garbage. As trash truck after trash truck drove into the area to vomit their holdings, the sheep hurried from mound to mound, knee deep in rubbish, scurrying for a tasty morsel amidst the used Pampers and clumps of indistinguishable rotting foodstuffs.

Pulling up a plastic bag of stale bread, the Bedouin patriarch tucked it into his pocket. As I approached him, he looked up with fear and uncertainty. The bread was for his dogs, he said.

He gestured to his home at the edge of the fields of rubbish. "I must graze my sheep here because I have no choice," he said softly, staring at a curl of broken egg carton at his feet. "The Green Patrol lets me graze my animals only a short distance from my home. I cannot go anywhere. It's not enough for my sheep, for me, to survive. So I bring them here. In the garbage, at least, the Green Patrol leaves us alone."

Ramat Hovav

A few miles downwind from Be'er Sheva, a heavy noxious smell hangs perpetually above the desert highway. The odor, I learned, emanates from Ramat Hovav, a fenced-off cluster of industrial factories a mile or so from a military base. The buildings are part of an important chemical production center that churns out massive quantities of fungicides, pesticides, and other ominous poisons that make this toxic waste site one of the most dangerous in the Middle East. [Editor's Note: See current news item in box on this page.]

Through a series of interviews with local Israeli

authorities, I learned that the cheapest way they could get rid of these poisons was to pipe the liquid toxins to a series of "evaporation ponds" in the area, and then funnel them up a structure towering a couple stories into the air. There the poisons are sprayed into the desert winds to be scattered, usually in an easterly-southerly radius.

As a spokesman for Ramat Hovav admitted to me, no one knows the toxic potential of the myriad of poisons combined in this lethal "throwaway," and the dangerous materials probably do not just "disappear" into the ecosystem. Where does it go and what is it doing? The spokesman shrugged, acknowledging it is an open question.

In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*⁵ concerning the eviction of the Bedouin from their traditional lands, Miron Chumash, director of the housing supervision department of the Israel Lands Administration, had this to say about the Bedouin living near the hellhole of Ramat Hovav:

"These Bedouin have moved there freely and we don't object. [They can remain there] until they can afford to build homes" [in one of the seven Bedouin towns.]

To say the Bedouin moved to the Ramat Hovav area "freely" is an incredible leap of doublethink. Those unfortunate Bedouin who find their tents literally dumped near the toxic site have been forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands by Israeli police, who follow the long standing governmental policy of forcing the Bedouin into the official pens set up for them.

Mr. Chumash cites the government's allowing the Bedouin to reside in the Ramat Hovav areas as an act of charity. An act of genocide would be closer to the truth.

An Israeli medical professor at Soroka Hospital in Be'er Sheva told me, off the record, that a few years ago a number of Bedouin workers at Ramat Hovav began showing up at the hospital with rare forms of cancer. The statistics concerning this disturbing issue, he said, have been mysteriously lost and no one has taken further interest in the story.

A second medical academic, John Goldsmith, an American-born epidemiologist at Soroka Hospital, who was unaware of my interest in the Bedouin, recalled a troubling incident. It occurred during Dr. Goldsmith's only visit to Ramat Hovav a number of years ago. As he inspected the toxic areas, he was flabbergasted to see a

Ramat Hovav Burns

RAMAT HOVAV (*The Jerusalem Post*, August 3, 1998) — Firefighters had given up trying to extinguish the largest-ever blaze at the Ramat Hovav national hazardous waste disposal site late last night. After battling the conflagration for some five hours, they decided to let the main flashpoint burn itself out.

The fire broke out for still unexplained reasons among used lithium batteries stored under oil in drums. Flames burned high into the nighttime sky and could be seen from Beersheba, some 12 kilometers away, but no injuries were reported.

Beersheba firefighters arrived to find the site abandoned by its workers, who fled from the fierce heat and multiple chemical explosions. Environment Ministry inspectors checked for possible poisonous fumes, after the blazing chemicals formed a huge, oily black cloud. Though they determined there was no danger from the fumes, police closed the Beersheba-Yeroham road for several hours, until the cloud had dispersed.

Bedouin woman pulling up a bucket from an old water source. For years the Israeli scientific community has known that the water table in the local area was dangerously polluted.

"What's that?" said the doctor, gesturing to the woman with amazement. The Ramat Hovav official shrugged. "Don't worry," he answered. "She's just a Bedouin."

Horror stories about the Bedouin living near Ramat Hovav abound. It is difficult to sleep at night because of the smells from the pesticide factories. They often hold their hands over their mouths as they sleep.

One Bedouin administrator at a nearby Bedouin elementary school—he feared losing his job if his anonymity were breached—told of a poison cloud that leaked from Ramat Hovav a year earlier. He became aware of the problem when he noticed the nearby Israeli military base being evacuated by police and helicopters. Incredibly, the Bedouin elementary school was never notified about the threat of the toxic leak, nor was any Bedouin living in the entire area.

I also learned that all Bedouin elementary schools in the rural areas were covered with asbestos roofs, which are subject to the constant strong desert winds.

As one Bedouin told it, years ago, when the health hazards of asbestos were publicized and its use discontinued by Israeli authorities, the Haifa manufacturer sold his remaining stock to a Gazan entrepreneur. Through this source, the rural Bedouin schools were all fitted with this cheap and durable carcinogenic material. Asbestos as a major material in makeshift homes is now endemic to the Bedouin community.

The long-term impact on the Bedouin from these Israeli-produced health hazards will never be known. Such studies are unlikely candidates for governmental funding. Stoically, the Bedouin absorb what is thrown at them—literally. Some simply resign their fate, like their nomadic ancestors, to God's will. Others fear reprisals by Israeli overseers for airing the injustices that smother them. And all of them are leery of visitors asking questions about their situation: they may turn out to be the enemy.

As a kibbutznik once told me, "The Bedouin are in our pocket."

Noble Savages

Few Jewish Israelis really know much about the Bedouin, other than the commonly held stereotypes. The idea that they are "noble savages" is a favorite one, although they are widely regarded by Israel's Jewish society as rather stupid, dirty, and primitive in their

lifestyle and behavior.

Curiously, some grant the Bedouin the informal status of "non-Arab." For decades the Bedouin have been governmentally, as well as culturally, isolated from other Palestinian Arabs and encouraged to maintain an "other" socio-political sense of themselves. This is especially ironic since the Bedouin have always considered themselves to be the quintessential Arabs. Israeli policy, however, is geared to accentuating the differences



Sliman Abu Jleedan, who lost his arm in a bomb explosion.

between the Bedouin and other Arabs as much as possible.

Many Israeli Jews insist that the impoverished Bedouin, as a group, are doing well economically. This blends with the general Jewish assertion that the drastic social changes wrought upon the desert Arabs are really a blessing for them.

Israelis also insist that the Bedouin are loyal to Israel. Some Bedouin—particularly members of the impoverished Azazmeh tribe—do serve in the Israeli army, predominantly as "trackers" along Israel's border with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Realistically, of course, for a Bedouin to be "loyal" to the Israeli state, in the sense that a Jew might be, is surreal. The reality has more to do with poverty and survival: high unemployment, limited work options, attractive social service benefits for veterans, and (in theory) the advantages Israeli military service offers in getting a civilian job. A cited lack of military service is an easy smoke screen for naked discrimination against job-seeking Arabs.

The image of Bedouin as exotic primitives is also a

boon to the Israeli tourist industry. A rash of photography books about Negev Bedouin (and those in the formerly Israeli-occupied Sinai peninsula) have typically highlighted romantic Man versus Nature themes.

On two occasions I witnessed the unannounced, uninvited presence of Israeli tour buses disgorging excited Israeli and European tourists in the impoverished Azazmeh tent community across from—of all places—Ramat Hovav. Cameras in hand, the tourists descended on the tents of burlap bags, scavenged wood pallets, and ripped plastic.

Israeli tour guides shepherded their charges between



A Bedouin grave site, employed by Israeli Jews as a trash dump.

tents, around goatherds, tiptoeing—slightly indignant—around all the animal crap. The Bedouin men gazed blankly at the intruders. Women dropped the flaps of their tents for privacy. A few children gathered around the visitors, their hands outstretched, asking in Hebrew for money.

These invasions are all the more insidious when one considers that traditional Bedouin culture prescribes the etiquette for merely approaching a family's tent, let alone entering the community. The approach must be made from the north (the men's side of the tent). A shout or a car horn announces the visitor's presence. A male of the household comes out to greet the visitor. If accepted, the visitor will be escorted to the male side of the tent for coffee, tea, and conversation. Traditionally, the women will never be seen by male visitors. The cacophony of excited tourists, of course, followed none of this protocol.

The Bedouin of southern Israel have proven to be a valuable tourist attraction for Israel, both inside and beyond the reservation communities. The most successful Bedouin tourist site is, not surprisingly, owned by a Jewish kibbutz, Lahav, in the northern

Negev. The Joe Alon Center is essentially a museum of Bedouin artifacts. Its name has nothing to do with the Bedouin—not in a positive way, at least. Joe Alon, best known as a founder of the Israeli air force, did his part to destroy the culture his name today embellishes.

The museum contains a range of obsolete Bedouin artifacts rarely seen anymore, including wool rugs, embroidered objects, and elaborate women's veils. Whatever else it is, the museum is a cynical monument to Israel's destruction of the Bedouin. First, the Jewish state systematically kills the Bedouin lifestyle. Then, Jewish kibbutzniks salvage the cultural bones for public display. A few Bedouin are even employed to serve traditional bread and tea.

For their own part, two Bedouin-owned tourist centers have managed to open in recent years, seeking to gain from their own nostalgic image. At one site at Be'er Asluj, visitors pay for traditional Bedouin hospitality and camel rides. Ironically, in a project sponsored by the Jewish Agency, new Russian immigrants to Israel, who go on a two-day bus tour of Jewish pioneer museums and rides along the Egyptian border, regularly choose the Bedouin camel rides to be the best adventure of all.

Erasing the Past

One night in the late 1970s an old Bedouin awoke in his tent from a disturbing dream.

A revered Muslim holy man buried nearby

for generations had appeared to ask that his grave be moved because Jewish development of the town of Yeroham was encroaching on the dignity of the cemetery in which he lay. The next morning the dreamer and other Bedouin elders decided to exhume the holy man's remains and rebury them elsewhere in the Negev.

I had met the old man who told me this story, Abdul Karim, in the course of researching rumors about Bedouin grave desecration by Israeli authorities. He consented to take us to the holy man's new burial site, as well as to show me local evidence of grave desecration. I was unprepared for what I would see.

The first cemetery we visited nearly adjoined the newest westward expansion of Yeroham, built to accommodate the influx of Russian Jews to Israel. We drove off the asphalt road onto a short dirt road that wound around a trash dump with its truckloads of construction refuse, broken cinder blocks, and common garbage.

Abdul Karim gestured to stop and we got out of the car. Where was the cemetery? The old Bedouin shrugged and raised his arms forlornly, sweeping the entire area.

For a moment I didn't understand. I saw only rubbish. Then, I made out the mounds of dirt and rock aggregations of the simple desert graves, with their plain rock headstones precariously straddling the edges of the trash, twisted metal and Styrofoam debris. I noticed one, then another. Walking along the edge of the garbage, the gravestones were everywhere.

Only then the total degradation of it all hit me. The whole area beneath the trash heap was part of the Bedouin graveyard.

At first I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Any time a Jewish gravestone—anywhere in the world—is tipped over, defaced, or defiled in any way, it is instant news, cited by Jews everywhere as proof of undying anti-semitism. Yet here were Jews perpetrating similar racial indignities upon another people.

Abdul Karim, though, wasn't through with his tour. He guided us a couple of hundred yards across a dry riverbed to the site of yet another Bedouin graveyard. He explained that Jews had been digging into a bluff, searching out the best soil to spread in the gardens of Yeroham. In the process they had wantonly dug into this second cemetery with heavy earth-moving equipment, exposing human remains.

Looking up the bluff, my mouth dropped as I stared at a completely exposed skeleton. The skeleton was on its side, in Muslim fashion, eternally staring over us towards Yeroham, and, beyond Yeroham, to Mecca. Abdul Karim grumbled, recited more prayers, then climbed up the bluff and tucked the bones back into a niche in the open grave.

And there were other stories. A Bedouin in the remotest part of the desert told me the Israeli army had dumped truckloads of trash on the graves of his family. Another showed me the fence that Israelis had installed across his tribal graveyard, effectively rendering some graves off-limits to his family. In another case, near Gaza, a Bedouin showed me the site of a renowned holy man's shrine and the mess of open trenches a Jewish archeological team had left in the adjoining cemetery.

In still another case, we inspected an overgrown hillside in the center of lands confiscated for a Jewish agricultural settlement. Scattered about us were Bedouin graves mixed with mounds of garbage.

In July 1992, an incident occurred at Golda Meir Park, a new recreation area built over the obliterated Bedouin trading center of Be'er Asluj, with its demolished mosque and graveyard. Numerous human bones were uncovered when a deep trench was cut across the graveyard for a water pipeline. The local Bedouin managed to stop the desecration and have a fence erected around the site to underscore the presence of the graveyard. Within a week, however, the fence was removed, presumably by

Israeli authorities.

After visiting the desecration of Bedouin graves in the Yeroham area, Abdul Karim took us to the new grave site of the holy man who had appeared in the dream. We drove up a hill on one of the main roads. Abdul Karim sat quietly beside me, staring blankly into the passing emptiness. I can't imagine what he was thinking. About five miles out of town he directed me to leave the main road and follow a bumpy, dusty dirt path.

Again, I was stunned by the scene as we approached the cemetery. About 50 Bedouin graves were clustered around the grave of the holy man. The saint's grave was large—a conglomeration of cement and stones a few feet high, stretching like an oversized coffin along the earth. It was painted white; a number of white flags, propped like masts atop a frozen ship, flapped in the desert breeze. Black streaks dripped like tears across the grave's white face from a ledge at the front of the shrine, the remnants of melted candles from the pious who came throughout the year to pay homage and make wishes.

Abdul Karim prayed at the shrine's base, facing Mecca. He told us how Jewish authorities had cut down the cemetery fence that the Bedouin had erected to protect their dead from further humiliation by beasts or vermin. Or man. Their bitter protests had found a receptive chord somewhere in the Israeli bureaucracy, for someone with a little power permitted the barbed wire fence to be put back up.

Now there it stood, bleak and stark, in the desert tundra. I will never forget that frail little cemetery in such a forlorn place, the final repository for the desert holy man who wandered into dreams, imploring to be rescued from Jewish debris.

As it turned out, his reprieve was short-lived. A few years after the transfer of his skeletal remains, a neighbor appeared: a large Israeli army base had encamped alongside the holy man.

Endnotes

¹ Maddrell, Penny, *Bedouin of the Negev* (1990), p 13.

² Maddrell, p. 15.

³ Maddrell, p. 10.

⁴ Shipler, David, *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land* (1986), p. 228.

⁵ *The Jerusalem Post*, July 21, 1993, p. 7

The original *Link* issue used this page to list books being offered for sale at discount prices by Americans for Middle East Understanding. Please consult AMEU's book catalog elsewhere on this website.

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Video-Cassettes (VHS)

Middle East Council of Churches, **Disabled for Palestine** (1993, 21 minutes). A Palestinian doctor shows cases of Palestinian civilians who have been maimed for life by Israeli bullets, beatings and tear gas. List: \$25.00; **AMEU: \$10.00.**

Middle East Council of Churches, **Christian Families of Palestine** (1993, 34 minutes). Documents expropriation by Israeli settlers of the land of two Christian Palestinian families. Good for church groups and tourists preparing to visit the Holy Land. List: \$25.00; **AMEU: \$20.00.**

IRA, **Children of the Cradle** (1996, 30-minute report on embargo of Iraq). **AMEU: \$3.00.**

Masri, M., **Hanan Ashrawi: A Woman of Her Time** (1995, 51 minutes). One of Palestine's most articulate representatives shows that Israel's occupation is far from over – and far from benign. List: \$65.00; **AMEU: \$35.00.**

Munayyer, F. & H., **Palestinian Costumes and Embroidery: A Precious Legacy** (1990, 38 minutes). A rare collection of Palestinian dresses with accessories modeled against the background of Palestinian music, with commentary tracing the designs back to Canaanite times. List \$50.00; **AMEU: \$12.50.**

AIC, **Seeds of War in Jerusalem** (1997, 20 minutes). The struggle to save Abu Ghneim and Arab East Jerusalem. **AMEU: \$17.50.**

PHRM, **Jerusalem: An Occupation Set in Stone?** (1995, 55 minutes). Graphic account of Israel's plan to uproot Palestinian presence from Jerusalem. **AMEU:\$20.00.**

DMZ, **People & the Land** (1997, 57 minutes). This is the controversial documentary by Tom Hayes that appeared on over 40 PBS stations. **AMEU: \$25.00.**

Studio 52 Production, **Checkpoint: The Palestinians After Oslo** (1997, 58 minutes). Documents the post-Oslo situation with off-beat humor and historical insights provided by Palestinian and Israeli activists like Naseer Arad and Hanan Ashrawi. **AMEU: \$27.00.**

Kelley, R., **The Bedouin of Israel** (1998, 2 hours). Never-before-seen film of how Israel has treated its Bedouin citizens, including interview with the notorious Green Patrol. **AMEU: \$30.00.**

Driver, R., **TV Political Ad** (1998, 30 seconds). This is the powerful 30-second spot that Congressional Candidate Rod Driver has been airing on Channel 12 in Rhode Island. Also included are his six "Untold Stories" newspaper advertisements. **AMEU: \$8.00.**

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