



From

The Desert and the Cities Sing: Discovering Today's Israel

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SOLUTIONS



FROM THE LAND

BY LIN ARISON

findings, in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Central Europe, and the Middle East—and farmers and scientists from abroad are brought into Israel to study and share their knowledge as well. Not surprisingly, the focus is on Israel's areas of expertise: growing food in semi-arid and arid zones, combating “desertification,” irrigation and water management, dairy farming, and strategies for the small farmer. The goals, as always, are vast and vital: to ensure food security and economic self-sufficiency.

Project Wadi Attir: A New Bedouin Community

At this point, I'd like to take you on a little detour—not out of the desert, but to a different kind of research community, which has all the same challenges: Wadi Attir, located in the northern Negev near the Bedouin town of Hura.

The Bedouins here have lived nomadically for centuries. In the contemporary world, their way of life has become virtually impossible, and many Bedouin tribes are making the transition with difficulty toward a newly settled existence—often living in squalid villages without benefit of basic municipal services. It is a struggle to maintain their traditions and any sense of their own cultural identity. It is a struggle, in fact, just to survive.

Bedouins of the Negev

The Bedouins of Israel are traditionally pastoral, nomadic, desert-dwelling Muslim Arabs, and make up only about 2 percent of the Israeli population. While there are small Bedouin communities in the Galilee and the center of the country, the vast majority of Bedouins live in the Negev Desert. Their nomadic lifestyle is rapidly giving way to settled living, an inevitable process of modernization that is complicated by intractable issues of land rights, which successive Israeli governments have yet to resolve. While the Negev Bedouins are Israel's most socio-economically disadvantaged community, the number of Bedouin academics, businessmen, and activities is growing remarkably, with Bedouin women featured at the forefront of this important societal development.



Project Wadi Attir was founded by Michael Ben-Eli, who heads a global initiative called the **Sustainability Laboratory**. The project's aim is to find a way to combine Bedouin culture and experience with progressive notions of sustainability and “green” technologies – looking at renewable-energy production, recycling, land stewardship, and much more. The concept for the project was born in 2007 when Ben-Eli and his colleague Josh Arnow paid a visit to Ben-Gurion University and the Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research – centers outfitted with astonishing technologies and facilities, where much of Israel's world-class research into desert living is being conducted. But during that visit, Ben-Eli and Arnow also saw the harsh living conditions of the growing Bedouin

community, trying to make its way in a land of increasing Westernization and urban sprawl. “It did not seem right,” Ben-Eli has observed, “that full citizens in a country like Israel would live in desperate circumstances, when there were such incredible technologies being developed nearby.”

Ben-Eli met with Muhammad al-Nabari, the forward-thinking mayor of Hura, and they teamed up to bring Project Wadi Attir to light (it is a joint effort between Ben-Eli’s Sustainability Laboratory and the Hura Municipal



Council). The project's approach might be described as "holistic": dealing with social, economic, environmental as well as tech considerations. Collaborators include Bedouin community members, university scientists and researchers, local nonprofit organizations, a nearby kibbutz, government agencies, and private-sector companies. The hope is that this new vision of environmentally sound development—beneficial to all parties—may impact the entire Middle East region as well as other parts of the world.

When I visited Project Wadi Attir in 2012, ground had not yet been broken, but the vision was in place. I was treated to an Arab coffee by Ben-Eli and by Project Wadi Attir's then-director, Shahdeh Abu Sbeit. And they told me about plans for the future—plans that are now in effect. At the Project Wadi Attir farm, Bedouins tend goats and sheep organically for the production of dairy products. They grow medicinal plants and herbs (based on traditional Bedouin healing methods), and have developed a line of health products for sale on the mainstream market. Indigenous vegetables—once an important part of the Bedouin diet, many now nearly eradicated—have been reintroduced and are cultivated organically, and a seed bank has been established for these precious plants. I was particularly intrigued to understand that women are working and taking part in the project's planning—that is a huge breakthrough among the Bedouins! (You can

read about the Bedouin women's cooperative Lakiya in *Arts & Design*.) Today Project Wadi Attir—the first-ever Bedouin agricultural cooperative in Israel—serves as a hub for eco-tourism, and as a model for Jewish-Bedouin collaboration. As Mayor al-Nabari puts it: “It is good for the people. It makes them feel good as citizens. It makes them proud to be part of Israel.”

In the time since that visit, Project Wadi Attir has moved forward as things sometimes do in Israel, with the miraculous first reaping of crops: zucchini, eggplants, and peppers. And the cultivation of thousands of trees—including 360 olive trees, planted by local Bedouin high-school students, into soil that had been enhanced and irrigated with the help of scientists from the Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research.

The harvest was good. And the trees, as of this writing, have taken root and are thriving.



There is more good news in the nearby town of Hura, and much of it can be traced back to the efforts of this same Mayor Muhammad al-Nabari. He grew up in this predominantly Bedouin town, but in his teens came to the conclusion that there was no future for him in the Negev. He moved north to attend high school,