

## Tracking Bedouin Soldiers

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A former Israeli soldier I met goes by the name Ishmael.<sup>2</sup> He had served in the Israeli border patrol, in the police force, as a political analyst for the military and as a foreign service trainee at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC. He arrived at the college campus, where I taught, courtesy of its University Students for Israel organization.<sup>3</sup> There he spoke of his military service, his love of Israel, and boasted that his grandmother spoke Yiddish. But Ismael Khaldi was not Jewish. Indeed, he was being promoted and paraded by the state of Israel as a bright example of the type of Arab it wanted to support. His Hebraized name, pride in Yiddish-speaking ancestors, and military service all signal his allegiance to the Jewish state.

“When you say Israel, the first thing that comes to mind is Jews fighting Arabs. It’s unfortunately mostly true. But I’m not Jewish,” began Mr. Khaldi. “I’m of the third generation of Bedouin whose fate is tied to the community who came to establish Israel.” During his presentation, he repeatedly emphasized that Israeli-Jews and Bedouin “share a common destiny.” He described a history of Bedouin loyalty to the state of Israel and assistance to it from its very beginnings (hence his grandmother’s knowledge of Yiddish from interaction with Jewish “pioneers”). He claimed that some 60 percent of Bedouin in the north volunteer to serve in the Israeli military and some of them make “the ultimate sacrifice”: in 2002 alone, nine Bedouin soldiers were killed in service with the Israeli military. When a group of Jewish pilots became *refusniks* [members of the IDF who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories] Ismael Khaldi, together with a few other Bedouin reservists, drafted a petition volunteering to serve two or even three extra weeks of reserve duty. At one point he intoned: “Israel’s fate is our fate, Israel’s fate is our fate, Israel’s fate is our fate.”

Yet his presentation seemed somehow unsatisfactory to the small, mostly sympathetic, though not particularly well-informed audience of Zionist students gathered to hear him. During the question and answer session the students asked Khaldi: “How do you identify yourself, are you Bedouin first or Israeli?”; “Does it bother you that your passport says ‘Arab’?”; “Do you identify with the Palestinian cause or state?” and “What is the legal status of Bedouin? Are they citizens where-

as Palestinians in Israel are not citizens?"<sup>4</sup> Like many other demonstrations of non-Jewish loyalty to the Jewish state, Khaldi's performance that day, as eager as it was, was vexed by its underlying contradictions. Khaldi was prodded into further repetition and clarification of his allegiance to the Jewish state as a Bedouin/Arab/Palestinian.

Khaldi belongs to one of the groups that are accorded special status in Israel as almost-other-than Arab or, as one Israeli journalist put it, "Arab lite."<sup>5</sup> This includes, to varying degrees, not only Bedouin but also Druze, "Christian Arabs," and residents of certain villages. Some members of these groups, Khaldi included, seem to go to great lengths to conform to some of the state's expectations from its special minorities. However, as non-Jews, they are structurally haunted by their Arabness. Indeed, Khaldi's need to repeat his mantras of shared destiny with the state signal precisely its elusiveness.

## Being a Good Arab

From early on, some Bedouin gambled that allegiance to the powerful Zionist forces and the Jewish state would help safeguard their future and improve their lot, while others fought and resisted them. Bedouin in Israel, not unlike other Palestinians, perform a wide range of often contradictory identities and allegiances. Those who express, in particular contexts, loyalty to the state are promised certain limited rewards, or at least, the removal of some of the punishments suffered by other Bedouin. Today a Bedouin serving in the military has the advantage of becoming, as I was repeatedly told, *misudar* [Hebrew for "organized"]. Perhaps the English terms "made" or "set up" better capture its meaning. Those who sign up receive a regular paycheck, tax breaks, increased child allowances, easier loans, educational grants, and, for career soldiers, a generous, early pension. Indeed, in some Bedouin communities with high rates of military service and poverty, the term for military service is *mitwaddif*, which simply means "employed." One man described military service in the following basic terms: "The food is good and the dress is good." Beyond soldiering itself being a key form of employment for an underprivileged population, it also potentially presents further work opportunities after completion of service. As Khalid, a former soldier explained to me:

If a man wants to get a good job here, military service is very important. Look at all the help-wanted ads in the Hebrew newspapers. I dare you to find a good job that doesn't require completion of military

service. I got into the business of heavy equipment. Most of my contracts are in restricted areas, areas other Arabs are not even allowed to enter, not to mention to work in. I was able to raise my family from the lowest economic levels to a comfortable situation.

Moreover, being a “made” soldier potentially facilitates “key transactions with the state.”<sup>6</sup> A retired soldier told me:

In eleven years I was able to do many things for the family: licenses, buildings, telephone lines, electricity, water. I started going to government offices and found someone was listening to me. Initially the extended family objected to me joining the army, but when they understood that I was doing it for the purpose of advancing the family, they accepted. My uncles had tried to get a water pipe to our neighborhood for so long, they knew how important this was.

This notion that “made” soldiers received potentially less negligent treatment by state authorities was repeated to me by another former soldier:

I needed to license my house and to get rid of the tax debt I owed. When I wanted to close my tax file, the tax officials advised me to join the army. After I had enlisted I went back to the tax office. I told the man, “Tomorrow I am going to Lebanon [with the army], and I don’t know if I will come back or not.” He signed away the debt on the spot. Out of over 100,000 Shekels I ended up paying 2,000. I showed them my army card and they immediately said: “*Sa*” [Hebrew for “go”]. This state is a Mafia.

This situation is described by Ali, a former soldier, as follows, “We are, like the rest of the Arabs in Israel, *mitkhuzqeen* [Hebrew for “being screwed”]. But they provide this door for us. If you “get employed” [join the military], the door will open. So you have no choice if you want to make that door open. But it doesn’t open all the way.”

A major incentive the military offers is the opportunity to lease residential land (available in certain limited locations) from the state at discounted prices. The size of the price reduction varies from one location to the next; soldiers reported discounts ranging from 90 percent on a \$100,000 plot to 50 percent on a \$15,000 plot.

In essence the state seized indigenous lands and is now inducing members of the dispossessed groups to serve in the military by holding out the promise of

leasing them some land—sometimes the same land they originally owned—back to them. Indeed, the “economic opportunities” presented by military service should be understood as resulting from particular state policies. The confiscation of Arab lands and interior ministry planning that seeks to Judaize it,<sup>7</sup> discriminatory employment policies,<sup>8</sup> a segregated and hierarchical education system,<sup>9</sup> and differential treatment by welfare agencies,<sup>10</sup> together with the linking of citizenship rights to military service<sup>11</sup>—all contribute to positioning soldiering as an economic opportunity for Bedouin youths.

## Still Not Jewish

“Lite” Arabs like Ismael Khaldi, despite their efforts to conform to the state’s requirements, continue to be defined in terms of their non-Jewishness. The state’s “divide and rule” policy of awarding certain privileges and fostering special ties with particular segments of the non-Jewish population, such as Bedouin, is not without contradictions. In principle, it is disrupted by the continued importance of the Jewish/non-Jewish dichotomy at the core of the ideals of a Jewish state. Thus, despite the policy’s years in practice, state officials who insist on differentiation among Muslim, Christian, Bedouin, and Druze, are themselves haunted by “a persistent ambivalence”<sup>12</sup> and regularly collapse these various minority categories into a single Arab one. That Bedouin remain “non-Jews” in a state that continues to prioritize its Jewish character puts a significant damper on the elevation of their status to that of one of the “special minorities.”

Although Bedouin have been considered more trustworthy than other Arabs, the history of their recruitment in the military shows that this has been a gradual and incomplete undertaking. A gap of distrust and a tendency to view even these so-called special minorities as a potential Arab “Trojan Horse”<sup>13</sup> in the Israeli military have been evident throughout their history of service. Some Bedouin were already recruited into the pre-state Zionist forces. However, for years to come, they were placed in segregated units under Jewish command, were denied participation in Israeli-Arab war combat, and limited in rank. Their recruitment was not aimed at increasing the strength of the military, but rather, as a sign on the door of the Bedouin recruitment center in Bir el-Sabi indicates, intended “to strengthen the identification between the Bedouin sector and the state/IDF.” Although “minority” soldiers were allowed positions outside the segregated brigade (except in the air force or in intelligence) starting in the 1970s, and all units were declared open in 1991, the largely segregated units continue to exist and “minority” soldiers continue

to be directed primarily to them. For example, roughly 80 percent of Bedouin in the Naqab [Negev] region who join serve in one of the two Bedouin units, the so-called Trackers or the Desert Patrol.<sup>14</sup> According to Colonel Ganon, a commander of the tracker unit: "They are more successful there ... it is easier for them."<sup>15</sup> The continued predominance of minority units highlights that such soldiers are not just Israeli soldiers, but "minority" Israeli soldiers, since "Israeli" on its own is used to mean Jewish.

Almost without exception, Arabs who serve in the Israeli military seem to be handled according to the state's ethnic categorizations. An official history of Bedouin in the military, for example, describes an early attempt by a Bedouin soldier to join the paratroopers. On his first jump he became frightened and failed to jump. As a result of his individual performance it was decided that no Bedouin would be allowed to join the paratroopers.<sup>16</sup> When Lieutenant Colonel Omar al-Hayb was accused of spying for Hezbollah in 2002, his identity as a Bedouin was a central component of the case. At the time the head of the military general command pointed out that this was "an isolated case, and must not be used to reach conclusions against all Bedouin in the country. The contribution of Bedouin to protect the security of Israel is considerable and ongoing and proven since the establishment of the state until today."<sup>17</sup> Moshe Arens (former Foreign Minister and three times former Defense Minister) described the trial as "being accompanied by a feeling of anxiety and injury by many in the Bedouin community," adding that Israelis should express their support for the Bedouin community in this hour of crisis.<sup>18</sup> Al-Hayb's defense attorney highlighted the years of military service and ranks of the defendant's clan members and the number of them killed during military service.<sup>19</sup> The accused's brother, Hasan al-Hayb, stated in an interview that the shock of the accusations was difficult not only for the family and for the people of his village Zarazir, but also for "all Arab Bedouin villages."<sup>20</sup> By 2006, residents of Zarazir regarded the accusation as "a state conspiracy and an attempt to muddy the name of all Bedouin."<sup>21</sup> "It's not him who's standing trial," said a relative in uniform, "the entire Bedouin sector is standing trial."<sup>22</sup> According to Sultan al-Heib: "I swear to you that they did him an injustice and they did an injustice to the entire village. I have a brother who's an officer, and this is very troublesome for the officers, because now they're being watched closely—and what's more, it's over a spy case. If it were about drugs, so what."<sup>23</sup> It is clear for all the involved parties that ethnic affiliation is paramount: Omar al-Hayb is not an Israeli soldier—he is a Bedouin-Israeli soldier.

The official history of Bedouin in the military published by the Ministry of Defense agrees that the minority units are perceived to be less prestigious.<sup>24</sup> Many

soldiers I interviewed echoed the sentiment that such units offer very limited opportunities for advancement. According to Ammar: "I was supposed to go into the special minority unit, but I kept on pushing to be in *Giv'ati* [Hebrew for "brigade"] with the Jews. It was very difficult, but I did not give up. I found that being with them I learned more and saw more things and better things. It is well known that the Bedouin unit stays in the same location all the time, and for me it was better to move around to get more experience." One former soldier commented on the use of Bedouin in the military: "They have us shining shoes. You know how close we get to the air force. They have us sitting on the F16 shoeing the pigeons." Categorization as Bedouin, but also as Druze, Muslim, or Christian, remains paramount within the so-called melting pot of the Israeli military with ethnically organized units, commands, benefits, and memorials.

The opportunity supposedly provided by military service for a fuller sense of membership and belonging to the Israeli collective also seems circumscribed. An activist on behalf of unrecognized villages described to me how he felt his service in the border guard allowed him to speak with "a full mouth" [for which he used the Hebrew term *peh maleh*] and helped him win the ear of state officials in fighting for his village's recognition. The sought-after symbolic rewards in this case—the potential for gaining legitimacy and a voice among the "community of warriors"<sup>25</sup>—could produce material ones. This man hopes that his ability to declare: "I am a veteran and my brother gave his life in Lebanon," will result in the "listening ear" of state officials. This could potentially mean running water, electricity, health care, schools, etc. He believes his success has been limited: "So far I think my military service helped me to a certain degree. I can clearly see the change in the behavior of officials as soon as I say 'I just came back from reserve duty [in Hebrew: *milu'im*].' One official heard this and immediately gave me an invitation to a very important meeting. But I can't say for sure, since they haven't recognized our village yet!"

Another soldier's family land lay on the outskirts of one of the state's planned Bedouin townships.

We are fifty meters from the village plan and we are trying to get electricity with much difficulty, running illegal lines borrowing electricity from others. The cow stables near us have electricity. Consider us cows! When someone from another village comes to visit me and they see how the electricity is taken from our neighbors and the road is unpaved, they start to laugh: "You did military service and you don't have conditions [in Hebrew: *tna'im*] and we didn't do anything and we have everything." A person is affected by that. My father

served eighteen years in the military and he lives in a shack and can't build a home. They demolished his home while he was at work. When they came to demolish the home, people came out to plead with them and told them that he was away serving with the army. They [the authorities] said: "How is that related [in Hebrew: *ma ze kashur*]?" You know in our area there is one woman whose brother died in the military, and another one whose brother also died in the military, and a third one whose brother's son died in the military. The three of them are living in an area that is still unrecognized. And the government doesn't care.

Bedouin are described as the Jews' brothers-in-arms. Generations of them have served as trackers in the military and hundreds have been killed during service, as the monument to the "Fallen Bedouin" commemorates. Yet Bedouin villages on territory the state wants to Judaize go unrecognized, crops on Bedouin land the state claims as its own are burned with toxic chemicals, Bedouin fertility rates loom exceptionally large in Israeli fears of the Arab demographic time bomb, their economic status is the lowest, and their unemployment rates highest in the country. Khaldi's repetition of the state sponsored mantra "Bedouin and Israeli Jews share the same destiny" aside, state officials voice their fears of a "Bedouin *intifada*," view Bedouin as lawless "foreigners" invading state land and see their military recruitment as diverting their otherwise sure path to Islamic radicalism.

In addition, job opportunities for released "minority" soldiers remain meager. A March 2001 government report identified job placement as a major problem facing released Bedouin soldiers.<sup>26</sup> The disappointments Bedouin soldiers are facing were described by one of the men Jansson interviewed in the Naqab: "We wanted to become equal [with Jews]. He is doing the army so I will do the army. He will get chocolate, I will get chocolate. You understand? Now he goes to the army, I go to the army, he gets chocolate, I get a slap."<sup>27</sup> Soldiering is criticized by many Bedouin on political, moral, religious but also economic and material grounds. The rewards for soldiering were cynically summed up by one soldier from an unrecognized village in the south: "We say to each other, today you are a combatant, tomorrow you are an Arab [said in Hebrew: *hayom ata kravi, mahar ata 'aravi*]." That some Bedouin still decide to serve in the Israeli military despite these conditions illustrates their difficult circumstances and the limited alternatives available to them.

One young soldier from an unrecognized village often calls himself Bedouin rather than Arab because he argued "when Jews hear the word Arab they are startled, the word Bedouin relaxes them more." Other soldiers in different contexts

emphasize their Arabness and Palestinianness: "I know eight ancestors back," a soldier from Kammaneh told me: "even more than the *fallah* [farmer] knows about his ancestors. How can I deny that I am Palestinian and Arab?" While the state's segmentation policy and its partial attempts to de-Arabize Bedouin have succeeded in producing certain performances of acquiescence to the state, they certainly are not the exclusive form of identity presented. Indeed, Bedouin service in the military is widely questioned, contested, and criticized within Bedouin communities and even among soldiers themselves. Not all soldiers are as eager in their demonstration of subservience or as conformist as Khaldi appears to be. Moreover, the state's insistence on the prioritization of Jews has directly backfired in some cases. The Council of Unrecognized Villages has started calling its constituents in the south "Naqab Arabs" rather than "Bedouin," reflecting in part, according to the council chairman, "feelings of frustration and despair over the state's treatment of the Bedouin," and in rejection of state attempts to distance them from the rest of the Arab population. According to parliament member Talab es-Sani (from the Naqab), the new terminology also reflects disappointment with Bedouin efforts to integrate into Israeli society.

They believed that if they were more Bedouin and less Arab, this would help them enter Israeli society; it would give them more rights. But this failed. The policy is the same policy, the demolition of houses continues, the lack of recognition continues, and Shimon Peres [current Vice Premier, Minister for the Development of the Negev, Galilee and Regional Economy, and former Prime Minister] continues to talk about Judaizing the Negev.<sup>28</sup>

That one person sometimes calls himself Bedouin while another prefers in certain contexts Naqab Arab is not to delegitimize their identities as exceptionally fragmented or not "real," nor is it to present Bedouin as being in a special state of identity crisis, loss, or decline. These contradictions should be understood as neither exceptional, nor, on the contrary, ubiquitous and thus neutral or apolitical. They reflect the constructed nature of identities in general and are best positioned in relation to the state and its power of setting and changing structural parameters.

Given the relatively limited range of strategies available to them as well as the limited structural incentives offered for serving, it is not surprising that some Bedouin volunteer to serve in the Israeli military. Rather than seeing these soldiers as naïve dupes, or eager victims of the state, their choices should be understood within the powerful structural constraints imposed upon them. While one may at-

tribute to individual soldiers certain personal backgrounds, motivations, intentions, and resistances in joining the military, overriding structural limitations remain paramount. As one career soldier told me: “We don’t trick ourselves—we all know the game. But sometimes we have no choice but to play it.”

This condition of having to play a game with unfair rules holds true more generally for all Palestinians in Israel. For example, the legal system in Israel has allowed and even mandated much of the injustice against Palestinians, from land expropriation to torture of political prisoners. Yet time and again, Palestinians turn to that very same legal system to seek redress. Regional planning committees have the explicit goal of expanding Jewish land control and settlements in the Galilee and the Naqab. Yet Palestinians submit appeals and write letters to such committees in the hope of keeping their land. Those men who serve in the Israeli military are an extreme and less frequent example of this same condition—suffering extensive discrimination for being Arab and thus not drafted into the military, they decide of all things, to serve in the military. Palestinians in Israel have found themselves continuing to largely play by the state’s rules, in the state’s games, despite—or perhaps also because of—decades of losing at that game.

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- <sup>2</sup> The Arabic version of this Hebrew name is Ismael.
- <sup>3</sup> Lecture by Ismael Khaldi "An Arab Muslim in an Israeli World," March 16, 2004, American University, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>4</sup> Israeli identification cards list "nationality" as, for example, Arab, Muslim, or Bedouin. Passports do not include a slot for nationality as the student mistakenly assumed, and Palestinians inside the 1948 borders of Israel are in fact citizens.
- <sup>5</sup> Avriama Golan, "Where the 'alliance of blood' has led," in *Haaretz*, February 17, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Lesley Gill, "Creating Citizens, Making Men: The Military and Masculinity in Bolivia," in *Cultural Anthropology*, 12 (4) 1997, pp. 527–550, here p. 537.
- <sup>7</sup> Ghazi Falah, "Israeli 'Judaization' Policy in Galilee and Its Impact on Local Arab Urbanization," in *Political Geography Quarterly*, 8 (3) 1989, pp. 229–53; Oren Yiftachel, "The Dark Side of Modernism: Planning as Control of an Ethnic Minority," in Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (eds.), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell 1995, pp. 216–42.
- <sup>8</sup> Noah Lewin-Epstein and Moshe Semyonov, *The Arab Minority in Israel's Economy: Patterns of Ethnic Inequality*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Second Class: Discrimination against Palestinian Arab Children in Israel's Schools*, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/israel2/>, accessed December 16, 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> Zeev Rosenhek, "The Exclusionary Logic of the Welfare State: Palestinian Citizens in the Israeli Welfare State," in *International Sociology*, 14 (2) 1999, pp. 195–215.
- <sup>11</sup> Sara Helman, "Citizenship, Regime, Identity and Peace Protest in Israel," in Daniel Maman, Eyal Ben-Ari and Zeev Rosenhek (eds.), *Military, State, and Society in Israel: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 2001, pp. 295–318, here p. 303.
- <sup>12</sup> Rebecca Luna Stein, *Forthcoming National Itineraries: Tourism, Coloniality and Cultural Politics in Contemporary Israel*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, chapter 4, p. 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Alon Peled, *A Question of Loyalty: Military Manpower Policy in Multiethnic States*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1998, p. 131.
- <sup>14</sup> Maria Jansson, "Bedouin Soldiers—Loyal 'Israelis'? A Study on Loyalty and Identification Among a Minority Group in a Nation Building Process," MA thesis in Political Science at Gothenburg University, Sweden, 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Ya 'acov Havakook, *Footprints in the Sand: The Bedouin Trackers in the IDF*, Israeli Ministry of Defense 1998 (Hebrew), p. 113.
- <sup>17</sup> "Extension of Arrest of Lieutenant Colonel Omar al-Hayb Accused of Spying for Hezbollah," in *Al-Ittihad*, December 25, 2002 (Arabic).
- <sup>18</sup> Moshe Arens, "Our Brothers, the Bedouin," in *Haaretz*, October 29, 2002.
- <sup>19</sup> Amos Harel, Jalal Bana and Baruch Kra, "Bedouin officer says he's innocent of spying for Hezbollah, drug dealing," in *Haaretz* October 25, 2002.

- <sup>20</sup> "Israel gave the case more weight than it deserves and Hezbollah will announce its position at the appropriate time," in *Al-Sinnara*, October 23, 2002 (Arabic).
- <sup>21</sup> Daniel Ben Simon, "A community on trial," in *Haaretz*, May 5, 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ya'acov Havakook, *Footprints in the Sand* (note 16), p. 205.
- <sup>25</sup> Sara Helman, "Militarism and the Construction of the Life-World of Israeli-Males: The Case of the Reserves System," in Edna Lomsky-Feder and Eyal Ben Ari (eds.), *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1999, p. 194.
- <sup>26</sup> Amos Harel: "Stemming the tide: Bedouin no longer flock to join the army," in *Haaretz*, June 14, 2001.
- <sup>27</sup> Maria Jansson, "Bedouin Soldiers—Loyal 'Israelis'?" (note 14), p. 45.
- <sup>28</sup> Nir Hasson, "Bedouin: Call us 'Negev Arabs'," in *Haaretz*, January 25, 2006.

# Ahlam Shibli Trackers

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