

Some Reflections on How Bedouin Women of the Negev Relate to Politics: Between Political Marginalization and Social Mobilization

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The approximately 130,000 Bedouin currently living in the Negev represent 13% of the Arab citizens of Israel who in turn constitute 20% of the total Israeli population. This minority, albeit Sunni Muslim of Arab nationality,¹ consistently proclaims its uniqueness. Even as Israeli Arab citizens unanimously identify themselves as Palestinian, the Bedouin refer to their own history and culture that of the *Bedu*, inhabitants of the desert (*Baadia*), distinct from and different to both city-dwellers and other peasant groups in the region. Social and political changes that have transformed the Negev since the end of the 19th Century, wrought by the administrative reorganization of successive authorities, undid the internal organization of the Bedouin community. The Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate and then the State of Israel have each, in their turn, reshaped Bedouin society, its tribal modus operandi and therefore its political management. This social transformation that we will develop further also affected the gender relationship and the position of women in relation to politics. Since politics, as a method of conflict resolution and as a means of administering public business, has changed its nature, the participation of women and their modes of expression have also evolved. It is not enough to note that Bedouin women are marginalized in a political sphere dominated exclusively by men. It is now important to examine the apparent immutability of such a marginalization, and alternative forms of social and political mobilization.

The socio-political organization of the Bedouin population of the Negev is not static, and a number of studies assert that there has been a reconfiguration of

¹ On top of Israeli citizenship, Israel recognizes three 'nationalities' (*leom*): Jewish, Arab and Druze.

the tribal system² and of the relationship between genders³. Since the 19th century the evolution of the Bedouin community has been marked by the arrival of peasant groups (*fellahin*) coming from sedentary rural areas of Palestine who affiliated themselves to Bedouin goatherds and farmers by renting and working their land. Linked by mutual obligations of solidarity and assistance, Bedouin and peasants constituted what was called a tribe, which also included families of ancient Sudanese slaves (*'abid*). The tribe was therefore composed of these three populations which functioned in a closed relationship but almost never, or rarely, had matrimonial exchanges.⁴ In fact, Bedouin were considered nobles and while they would never marry their daughters to inferior groups, the daughters of *fellahin* could marry Bedouin. This logic, which still stands today, has nonetheless known a good number of exceptions, and is subject to constant modification as the space/time context requires. Nevertheless it is evoked by the Bedouin themselves as a “Bedouin tradition” which indicates the cultural stake and the importance they attach to a collective Bedouin identity that has purportedly never changed and will never change.

The tribe itself as a social and political reference has known modifications under the effect of administrative measures taken by the Ottomans, the British and then the Israelis.⁵ Under the authority of the Sublime Porte, the Bedouin political unit was the *Gabila*, a confederation of tribes led by a small number of Sheikhs. In 1903, the town of Beer Sheva became an administrative center, and in 1906, at a time when Bedouin lived by agro-pastoralism the Turks decided to draw the borders of seven tribal confederations and thus set in motion a process of sedentarization.

The process of territorialization was extended under the British who placed more political weight on the *'ashira* – a smaller tribal unit. The number of Sheikhs was multiplied and they were placed in charge of tax collection for the British. The atomization of the tribal structure continued further when the British-made tribal unit became the standard administrative unit. By the 1930's almost 90% of Bedouin were practicing agriculture, which contributed to the

² L. Jakubowska, “Resisting Ethnicity: The Israeli State and Bedouin Identity”, in C. Norstrom & J. Martin (eds), *The Paths to Domination, Resistance and Terror*, University of California Press, 1992. A. Meir, *As Nomadism Ends*, Boulder, 1997. C. Parizot, *Le Mois de la Bienvenue*, unpublished PhD thesis, Paris, EHESS 2001.

³ G. Lewando Hundt, *Women's Power and Settlement: the Effect of Settlement on the Position of Negev Bedouin Women*. M.A Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1978. S. Dinero, “Female Role Change and Male response in the Post-Nomadic Urban Environment: the case of the Israeli Negev Bedouin”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 28 (3), 1997, pp. 248-261.

⁴ E. Marx, *The Bedouin of the Negev*, Manchester University Press, 1967. Chap. 3: Composition of a Tribe, pp. 61-80 & Chap. 5: Marriage Patterns, pp. 101-145.

⁵ C. Parizot, *op.cit.*, note 2, pp. 25-58.

parcelization of the land and the privatization of resources.⁶ And so the Bedouin tribes, by degrees, began to lose their political relevance.

The process was at once reinforced and reshaped by the Israelis. Following the 1948 war, most of the Bedouin were expelled,⁷ and those who remained were concentrated into a more compact perimeter north east of Beer Sheva (*sayigh*), a zone that represented only 10% of the area they was previously occupied. The Bedouin were granted Israeli citizenship during the 1950's – the Law of Citizenship (1952) – and the very notion of belonging to a tribe was assailed when the Israeli authorities demanded that each Bedouin register with one of 19 officially recognized tribes.⁸ 19 tribal chiefs (Sheikhs) were then chosen and appointed by Israel, sometimes despite the logic of power which had prevailed up until that point.⁹ The Sheikhs now acquired considerable power, becoming the intermediary between the population and the Israeli authorities; authority relationships were overturned and recreated in haste. While the territorialization as well as the social organization of the Bedouin froze, they were subjected to martial law which lasted until 1966. As in the Arab zone of the Galilee and in the Triangle, the Bedouin were placed under the authority of a military government that controlled their movements, their political expression and the way they organized.¹⁰

At the end of the 1960's, Israel altered its political stance vis a vis the Bedouin and decided to urbanize them by locating them in planned cities and villages. In most cases these settlements were built without prior consultation with the people involved, their objective being to gather the Bedouin into urban concentrations in order to prevent them spreading out in the Negev.¹¹ Beginning in 1966, seven settlements were created, that contain today more than half the population of the Bedouin in the Negev¹². The other half live in the so-called non-recognized villages on lands which had traditionally been theirs and which

⁶ G. Falah, "The Spacial Pattern of Bedouin Sedentarization in Israel", *Geojournal*, 11 (4) 1985, p. 362.

⁷ There were about 95,500 Bedouin in the Negev in 1947. Only 11,000 were left by the end of the year 1948. Falah, *op.cit.*, note 6, p. 363.

⁸ Among the 19 officially recognized tribes that had been fixed by the Israeli authorities, 11 came originally from areas that were outside the *sayigh*.

⁹ E. Marx, *ibid.*, note 2, Chap. 2: Administrative Environment, pp. 31-58. A. Meir, *op.cit.*, note 2, Chap. 4: Territorialization, pp. 73-105. C. Parizot, *op.cit.*, note 2, pp. 42-48.

¹⁰ Up to 1966, the Arab population of Israel as a whole was placed under military administration. The rules were strict: surveillance of the modes of political organization and control of movements with traffic permits necessary in order to get out of military zones. See I. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State*, Austin, Texas University Press, 1980.

¹¹ A. Meir, *op.cit.*, note 2, Chap. 4: Territorialization, pp. 73-105.

¹² Tel as-Saba, Rahat, A'ra'ra, Kseife, Sgib as-Salam, Hura then Laqiyya.

the State had nationalized in the 1950's.¹³ A considerable differential opened up between the urban, semi-urban and rural, this last enjoying the benefit neither of infrastructure nor services. The administration of the planned settlements was entrusted to a local authority appointed by the Ministry of Interior. It would not be until the 1990's that the organization of the first free elections for Bedouin local councils would take place. The urbanization and the socio-economic changes that appeared in the 1960's had caused the Israeli-made tribes to disintegrate; they lost all political relevance as well as their administrative legitimacy. Today, reference to belonging to a tribe has not completely disappeared, but it is used occasionally more to recall the familial and territorial origin of a lineage.

The Bedouin socio-political organization has therefore known deep upheavals since the end of the 19th C. By becoming Israeli citizens, Bedouin entered a new era of reconfiguration which led to the disintegration of their tribal system. However in this study there is one point which does not seem to have changed: the marginalization of women in political power and public affairs. But the immutability is only apparent, because in reality the mechanisms of discrimination have changed. While Bedouin society has undergone social and political transformation, the relationship of women to the political sphere has also changed. Whether we are discussing the pre-Israeli era, the military government or the urbanization process, although it would appear that women have been completely excluded from the political game, in fact the mechanisms of discrimination themselves, and the stake, have undergone successive changes.

I. Power and Politics

In the first place we need to be precise about the terminology used in this study and to distinguish between "power" and "politics." The study of political modes of expression and mobilization is one thing, the analysis of power is quite another. In this regard, Lila Abu Lughod (1988, 1990) Cynthia Nelson (1973) and Gillian Lewando Hundt (1978) have stressed the modality of the power exercised by Bedouin women in the Middle East.¹⁴ Lila Abu Lughod who studied the social and political significance of poems recited by the members of

¹³ The expropriation of the Bedouin was done under the effect of several laws, including the Absentee Property Law – 1950 and the Land Acquisition Law – 1953.

¹⁴ L. Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments, Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Berkeley, University of California, 1988; "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, # 1, February 1990, pp. 41-55. C. Nelson, *The Desert and the Sown. Nomads in the Greater Society*, Berkeley University of California, 1973. G. Lewando Hundt, *Women's Power of Settlement: the Effect of Settlement on the Position of Negev Bedouin Women*, M.A. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1978.

the Egyptian tribe Awlad 'Ali tried to demonstrate the forms of resistance used by women to masculine domination. She discusses poems – sometimes subversive – and the attitude of young girls who, by the way they dress and by their refusal to submit to forced weddings, demonstrate that they hold power of a kind. Cynthia Nelson has a theory concerning the place of women in the semi-nomadic way of life of the desert. She demonstrates that women exercise power by controlling the *Harem*, particularly in freely criticizing men and by being in charge of matrimonial bargaining. It is the women, mainly the oldest, who arrange the unions and exercise power over their juniors. Gillian Lewando Hundt has studied the position of women in planned Bedouin townships in the Negev. She shows how the urbanization has changed social norms by enclosing women in the family cell, but at the same time how this seclusion has allowed them to dominate their space and has given them a kind of autonomy from men.

Each of these studies thus addresses the question of “power” but not that of “politics.” This power that women exercise, however influential, is confined to the feminine and private space. Women have little or no influence on public affairs. This was true in the semi-nomadic setting where the *shigg* (space for men) was still the place for debates and political arrangements, and this is still true today where the political parties as well as elected bodies are exclusively masculine. Then it was easier for women to circulate and move between spheres, thereby informing themselves about the issues of the day. Today a couple still discusses politics and there are secretaries working in the town halls. Does this mean that women, because of their knowledge of political matters, exercise a form of political power? No. It is quite evident that Bedouin women have always been aware of what goes on around them, but to claim that they hold political power solely because they hold information, would be a gross overstatement. In order to exercise political power, even at an informal level, it is not sufficient just to be in the know, you must also be in a position to act. Even when Bedouin women exert influence in the social sphere – weddings are an example – they are not autonomous in the exercise of this expertise. Again, one has to differentiate between political expertise and political involvement,¹⁵ the latter being demonstrably circumscribed if not non-existent. Furthermore, it is not at all certain that the political expertise Bedouin women have could be adapted to the existing political game, given the extent to which it is codified and controlled by men today.

Although women have little access to public politics as it relates to conflict resolution and the administration of the affairs of the group, they are politically

¹⁵ S. Duchesne & F. Haegel, “La politisation des discussions au croisement des logiques de spécialisation et de conflictualisation”, *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 54, # 6, December 2004.

socialized in the private space and conduct “private politics” by acting within the tribal organization and today the familial organization. On the other hand, concerning another aspect of politics which corresponds to the collectivization of a social question carried into the public arena, here the mobilization of women is a more recent phenomenon. Women's associations, notably national and international feminist networks have allowed certain Bedouin women to endow social themes with a public dimension, and enabled them to start to play the game of the political negotiation, not only with national bodies (the Knesset) but also international ones (UN and donors). This is where the novelty of this last ten years resides: the access of Bedouin women to the Israeli and transnational public arena, employing political tools outside the conventional arena which is locked down by the dominant groups.¹⁶

II. Gender and Semi-Nomadic Way of Life: In Search of Politics

When asking Bedouin women of the Negev about the situation of women before the creation of Israel in 1948, one obtains two types of answer: the old-timers describe the difficulty of the semi-nomadic way of life, their participation in agro-pastoral tasks, and their exclusion from political matters; the youngsters praise the golden age of Bedouin life, the value of solidarity and complementarity as between men and women. Two visions of history and the relationship between sexes. The old-timers readily stress the harsh economic and social conditions, herding, farming, collecting water from wells, cooking, sewing, and all the other domestic tasks with which women were encumbered. They describe the *shigg* as a public and masculine sphere where men received their guests and discussed group business. When asked if they thought they had any political influence, the answer is no. First of all because it was an exclusively male domain, primarily a masculine skill so much so that they were hardly consulted in the decision-making process. Nevertheless there is one practice that mitigates this picture: the women close to the Sheikh – daughters, spouses, sisters – were sometimes sent out to inquire, if not to spy, on local lineage groups and their social situation. In other words, women were charged to go and spend a few days in a tribe to see if there were girls suitable for marriage and to examine the economic situation of the group – size of the herd, ownership, proximity to well etc. In fact when it came to forging a bond between lineages, the matrimonial exchanges were a good way to seal alliances and mutual obligations. These delegations were therefore privileged sources of

¹⁶ Gender dominant groups, but also ethnic or confessional dominant groups — the Jewish citizens. We are only talking here of one aspect of the relationship of domination. One should not forget the variables of generation, economics, geography, etc., which also prevail among Bedouin women.

information which then enabled the sheikh to decide whether a certain alliance served his interests. Bedouin women, at least those of them close to the tribal chief, were then used as political auxiliaries, and although they could willfully orientate their declarations and advise the sheikh in his choices, they still did not take the decisions. Once again women had a secondary, background role, influential maybe, however dependant on masculine goodwill. If semi-nomadic life was characterized by a polarization between the sexes, at once strict in public but pliant within the immediate family, the political expression of women in the private space does not compensate for their silence in public.

However the youngsters do not judge their elders with the same severity. They praise the courage of the old Bedouin women who lived in particularly harsh conditions and they also underline the complementarity between men and women since women were helping in physical tasks and working like real economic partners. Women in their thirties also talk about the dialogue that existed between men and women and about the fact that women were consulted about each question related to the life of the group. It seems to be a slightly romantic vision of the semi-nomadic life in desert regions; men and women acting together, as if fraternity and mutual help define Bedouin life in its entirety. In reality, according to the stories told by the old-timers, it is true that there was a dialogue between members of the same family, but it was not a partnership and there was no political sharing. The pre-Israeli era is therefore still characterized in terms of a political marginalization of women and a distinction between private and public affairs. What today can be analyzed in terms of space or sphere already represented at that time a social and political polarization between men and women. Indeed the structure has changed but the patriarchal nature of the gender differentiation remains.

Furthermore conflict resolution in Bedouin communities follows customary practices which involve patrilineal lineage solidarity. Obviously it would be too simplistic to characterize Bedouin by their customs. This would mean denying the transformation in their practices and the socio-legal environment in which they live. Nevertheless the question of blood revenge is a good example of the exclusion of women from the codes of conflict resolution. In fact, in case of conflict, notably in case of murder between individuals from different lineages, the *khams* acts as a political organ of conflict resolution. The *khams* gathers all the men of patrilineal descent who claim a common ancestor within five generations. All these men must in principle help one another and bare a collective responsibility for the actions of each one of them. If a member of lineage A is killed by a member of lineage B, then the *khams* of lineage B is responsible for paying the debt, *haqq al daam* (price of blood) in order to resolve the conflict. Without entering into the details of a practice that is a lot more complex than it seems, blood revenges are proof of traditional management of

some conflicts and an exclusively masculine responsibility¹⁷. In this system which results in the payment of the debt, the death or the exile of the guilty party, men alone are competent and empowered to negotiate.

III. Tribal Reconfiguration, Urbanization and Professionalization of Politics

Let us state clearly that these logics or Bedouin norms have undergone many changes and their transformation has been under the effects of policies imposed by those who exercised authority in the region. One of the most brutal of the contemporary modifications, certainly a product of the creation of the State of Israel, was the forced departure of the major part of the Negev Bedouin and the transformation of the way of life of those who remained. These new Israeli citizens were subjected to Military Government within a much reduced territory. Modes of political administration were swept away by the imposition of martial law, the appointment of salaried Sheikhs – not always representative – and the development of a broad system of patronage between local leaders and the Israeli authorities.¹⁸ If the clientelist logic is not new, then patronage such as the one that developed at that time was of a new order. In fact, since the 1950's, Bedouin became Israeli citizens and they voted in the parliamentary elections of 1955. In the same manner as in the North, Zionist parties, primarily *Mapai* – ex-Labor party – courted the Arab vote, in this case Bedouin vote.¹⁹ Bargaining for the Arab vote was done in exchange of material and symbolic gain. The Arab satellite lists affiliated to *Mapai* were specially created on the eve of the election in order to win the Israeli Arab vote. It was in this manner that Arab MPs, such as the Bedouin Hamed Abu Rabia, entered the Knesset, elected on a list affiliated to Labor at the end of the 1970's.

The end of the Military Government (1966) saw the creation of planned settlements headed by local councils appointed by the Ministry of Interior. The mode of political administration of the Bedouin community underwent change; the Sheikhs lost their prerogatives and were replaced by administrative and

¹⁷ For more details about these notions, see E. Marx, *op.cit.*, note 4, Chap. 7: Sections and Co-liable Groups, pp. 177-213; E. Marx & A. Shmueli, *The Changing Bedouin*, Transaction Books, 1984; as well as G. Kressel, *Descent through Males. An Anthropological Investigation into Patterns Underlying Social Hierarchy, kinship and Marriage among Former Bedouin in Ramla-Lod Area (Israel)*, Mediterranean Language and Culture Monograph Serie 8, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1992.

¹⁸ A. Meir, *op.cit.*, note 2, Chap. 8: The Political Dimension: The Bedouin and the State, pp. 193-220.

¹⁹ I. Lustick, *op.cit.*, note 10, Chap. 6: Cooptation as a Component of Control: The Capture of Arab Elite. Benyamin Neuberger, "The Arab Minority in Israeli Politics 1948-1992: From Marginality to Influence", *Asian and African Studies*, # 27, 1993, pp. 149-170.

political councils. Organization by lineage, largely undermined since 1949, disappeared and gave way to a form of government officially more rational. A conventional political scene therefore evolved even though Bedouin were still limited in what they could say and how they could organize politically. They voted in national elections mainly for Zionist parties and the satellite lists, but they still did not have the vote at the local level which was dominated by a Jewish administration. It would not be until 1989 in Rahat, 1993 in Tel as-Saba and 2000 in the five other Bedouin settlements that they could hold their first free local elections. This whole period was characterized by the domination of Zionist groups and patronage relationships among Bedouin, and again women take no part in these activities. They were not local leaders and therefore they did not participate in the electoral deal-making. Of course they went along with the political views of their husbands and family but they had no direct influence. The fact that Bedouin themselves were largely denied any say in their own administrative affairs served to marginalize women still further. A minority within an already discriminated against minority, Bedouin women kept their distance and were kept distant from the political game. Marginalization which is also experienced by other social groups like ancient slaves' families and other groups marginalized from power sphere.

The change took place in the 1980's with the creation of autonomous Arab political parties.²⁰ Up till then, only the *Rakah* communist party, then the *Jabha* (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality)²¹ had represented the Arabs' interests in Israel. Well established in the North, they had not succeeded in penetrating the Negev and to be a counterweight to Zionist groups. It was not until the formation of Arab political parties in the 1980's that the Bedouin vote became autonomous and they started to claim a collective Palestinian identity. National elections and then local elections gained in importance and further mobilized the Bedouin electorate. Thus Bedouin participation in the elections of 1988 was 61.3 % compared to 50 % in 1981. At these elections the Arab Democratic Party (ADP), that had just been created, gained 43.7 % of the suffrage, while the *Jabha* only received 5.8 % of the Bedouin vote. At the elections of 1999, the Arab parties were made up of the United Arab List – a joint list of the ADP and

²⁰ Creation in 1984 of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, that came out of the coalition of the Progressive Movement (led by Mohammed Miari) and the Jewish movement *Alternativa* (led by Uri Avneri). Just before the 1988 elections, creation of the Arab Democratic Party, led by Abd el-Wahab Darawshe, ex Labor Deputy.

²¹ The *Jabha*, founded for the 1977 elections, came out of a coalition of several groups, around the central cell formed by the communist party.

the Islamic movement – the *Tajammu'* – National Democratic Assembly²² – and the *Jabha*. These three lists gained more than 70 % of the Bedouin vote.

Since then, the new successful actor has been the Islamist movement which has enjoyed since the 1980's, but mainly in the 1990's, a large social and political base in the Negev. While the ADP has a famous MK, the Bedouin Talab as-Sana, the Islamic movement is still the most active and the best established organization among the Bedouin. Each settlement has active members of the movement that seem to be closer to the moderate branch of Ibrahim Sarsur than to the radical branch of Ra'ed Salah.²³

The professionalization of politics in the Bedouin milieu implied the creation of political parties and politicians. A young educated cadre became the new specialists in politics, mastering the wheels of the electoral game and of the clientelist horse-trading. Once again women were excluded from this transformation because they were neither involved nor invited to participate in the political parties, they do not have interests to negotiate and they are not familiar with the new tools of the Israeli political system. A Bedouin woman has never been elected to a local council or as an MK.²⁴ It is important to specify that many other social and economic groups remain at the periphery of the political game in a Bedouin society who has a strong internal hierarchy.

The mechanisms of representation and mainly of political expression have professionalized themselves, throwing up political technicians who know how to play all the solidarities, no matter if they are familial or more materialistic.²⁵ Today local and national elections are built on a network of personal connections and interests that is not only founded on lineage, but is integrated into other forms of clientelism from which women are even more marginalized. They go along with the choices of their father or their husband but they do not mobilize themselves autonomously. The proof can be found in the way the elections are run, and in the fraudulent practices used. During the local elections in Laqiyya in September 2004, we observed a fraud which was repeated in all

²² *Al-Tajammu' al-Watani al-Dimuqrati* (National Democratic Assembly) founded in 1996 from the fusion of the Progressive Movement and part of the radical organization *Abna al-Balad*. It is today led by its charismatic leader, Azmi Bishara.

²³ In fact the Islamic movement which split into two branches in 1996 has a radical northern wing that refuses to participate in parliamentary elections, and a moderate southern wing which plays the game of the political system and has MKs in the Knesset.

²⁴ Since the creation of the Israeli State, 15 women Arab citizens have been elected as city counselor and one woman, Violet Khouri, was head of Kufr Yassif local council between 1972 and 1973. Two Arab women, have been elected deputies: Husnia Jabara from the left Zionist party *Meretz* (1999-2003) and Nadia Hilou from the Labor Party elected during the last 2006 elections.

²⁵ C. Parizot, *op.cit.*, note 2, Chap. 6 : Le Mois de la Bienvenue : Médiations “traditionnalisées” et culture politique partisane, pp. 322-386.

the Bedouin settlements.²⁶ Men took the ID cards of certain women, or bought their vote, then gave the cards to a trusted woman in charge of voting for all the others. This was a way of ensuring the vote of women and to prevent the risk of potentially deviant individual expression. As they liked to tell it themselves, the cards could be exchanged in an emergency for several hundred, sometimes thousands of shekels. Women spent their day changing their cloths to deceive the police at the polls and they played this game several times during the day. It also happened for certain national elections, women were sent to other settlements in order to vote instead of local women. The system was widespread and well-polished. The circulation of the cards was done inside the voting office next to the rooms where the police officers and the electoral inspectors of the Ministry of Interior stood. In this game the Israeli authorities were not duped, they knew exactly how the election was being run. But they consciously refused to intervene in order to avoid friction with the local population. This fraud was practiced as much at national as local elections. The men were organizing the fraud and the women are executing it; but once again Bedouin women proved that while they participate in their way in the political game they remain voluntary auxiliaries still dependant on men.

The elections in Laqiyya in 2004, however, were marked by a novelty: the presence of a Bedouin woman as an observer at the polling station. In charge of preventing irregularities in the voting, she was not afraid to challenge the identity of some of the voters, even individuals from her family. Her presence was widely criticized by some conservatives but mainly by the organizers of the fraud who went as far as threatening her husband if he did not get her to withdraw. This scandal offers further confirmation of the political lock-out of women and the monopoly that some men would like to keep in order to master the system.

Furthermore, during the electoral campaign no women participated in political meetings which were exclusively masculine, and organized in headquarters placed on the land of the head of the list. The lists did not follow the logic of the familial entirely. If anything, the opposite was observed in the elections in Laqiyya in 2004 where members of the same lineage were candidates for opposing parties. But, the occasional conflicts within the family confirmed the attachment to familial solidarity that was being undermined by other types of interests. Women worked for certain lists by approaching their female neighbors on behalf of a candidate. In this way, the campaign also has a feminine arena, but more discrete, non-professional and circumscribed within the private space. It was a matter of informal meetings organized by women,

²⁶ C. Parizot, *op.cit.*, note 2, pp. 262-268.

mandated by the heads of the list. They were not political militants but they were volunteers who were occasionally mobilized and were always on hand.

On the other hand a lot more women are active in the network of associations of the Islamic movement, and it is here that the border between social and political becomes unclear. Many Bedouin women participate in the activities of the Islamic movement organized for women. In each Bedouin settlement there are those responsible for feminine sections. These women do not participate in the elections but they organize debates, religious classes in mosques and the collection of donations for the poor notably Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. In fact women are active and mobilized as much on cultural questions as on social and political. They are not affiliated members, but supporters and volunteers. This phenomenon is quite recent and corresponds to the process of Islamization of the Bedouin community of the Negev observed since the 1970's.²⁷ Muslim religious rules are collectively followed and the Islamic movement has imposed itself as an indispensable political and social actor. Furthermore this highly respectable movement shows interesting practices concerning the legitimization of access of women into the public space. Social, cultural and political activities of the Islamic movement have become spaces that are respectable and appropriate for women.

IV. Social and Feminist Mobilization

At the end of the 1970's, Israeli society as a whole witnessed the development of a large number of associations, able to represent various interests and notably those of minority ethnic and religious groups. Several Arab associations were thus created in the Negev, such as the Association for Bedouin Rights in 1974. The themes of the mobilization are mainly protests against the expropriation of Bedouin land, which has become the highest stake in the national struggle of Arab citizens. Land Day in September 1976 which started with a one-day general strike in the Galilee to protest expropriation of land is a good example. It ended up with the death of six Arab citizens. Now, each year on September 30 this tragic event is commemorated, accompanied by demonstrations and conferences on the land question. In 2005, for the first time, this day was organized in a non-recognized village of the Negev showing how topical and sensitive this matter is in the Bedouin community.

Some Bedouin women regularly stand shoulder to shoulder with men to protest Israeli policy towards the Bedouin of the Negev. In 1996 the inhabitants of the non-recognized village of Abdeh were victims of forced expropriations. A sit-in of several tens of days was organized at the door of the Knesset in Jerusalem. Fadiya Abu Gardud, an old widow was standing next to the Bedouin

²⁷ L. Jakubowska, *op.cit.*, note 10, pp. 100-101.

MK Talab as-Sana. Today she is known throughout the Negev for her active participation in this protest. She explains that her action was self-evident, a survival instinct to which men are not subject alone, but also women who must protect their land for the good of their children and for the preservation of their identity.²⁸ She therefore refuses to see any political significance in her initiative because politics remains a male world, the prerogative of professionals and not for those who 'simply' struggle for their survival.

While strikes and demonstrations have been much on the rise in the 1980's, their use has been less prevalent in the Negev. Bedouin do not mobilize themselves massively in order to defend their rights or those of the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories; notwithstanding the fact that this theme is unanimously supported today in an Arab population which publicly claims that it is a part of the Palestinian people.²⁹ Bedouin also insist on the reference to identity, notably among young nationalists, and in the public sphere where there is a call to be distinguished from the Jewish Israeli population. Demonstrations were therefore organized against the massacre in Lebanon in 1982 in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatilla or in support of the first and the second *Intifada*. Some women have participated in these demonstrations, which confirms a recent phenomenon fairly typical of educated young Bedouin women who claim their Palestinian identity and their solidarity with the struggle in the Occupied Territories. The fact that Bedouin university students, male and female, insist that their identity is Palestinian does not mean that they have forgotten their Bedouin origin, on the contrary, but they articulate it with an identity more politicized and national. Calling yourself a Bedouin is about remembering your territorial anchorage and your attachment to the land, whereas calling yourself a Palestinian has a more encompassing political connotation which leads the Bedouin into an historic, nationalist and far-reaching protest.

Still, the number of Bedouin women mobilized is still very small and limited to certain families of privileged class. In fact the feminine mobilization occurs in educated and rich families, mostly urban and with the support of the men of the

²⁸ Interview, September 2004.

²⁹ This subject has been examined in numerous studies dealing with "Palestinization," or even the radicalization of Arab citizens of Israel. See J. Landau, *Arab Minority in Israel 1967-1971: Political Aspects*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993; Y. Peres, "Modernization and Nationalism in the Identity of the Israeli Arabs," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 24, # 4, Autumn 1970; S. Smootha, "The Arab Minority in Israel: Radicalization or Politicization?," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 5, 1989; A. Bishara, "L'Arabe en Israël," *Revue d'études palestiniennes*, # 7, Spring 1996; E. Rekhess "Israeli Arabs and the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza: Political Affinity and National Solidarity," *Asian and African Studies*, # 27, 1989 and L. Louër, *Les Citoyens arabes d'Israël*, Paris, Balland, 2003.

lineage. Women's associations have therefore been exclusively created in the planned settlements by women coming out of dominant lineages. This is true of Laqiyya as well as for all the other towns, systematically these women come from dominant families. One had to wait until recent years in order to see the development of activities in the non-recognized villages. But most of the time they are led by the leaders of the associations of the planned settlements. These associations, registered under the Law of Associations (1980), are non-profit and offer all kinds of activities and services angled towards women and children: Day care centers, Hebrew and Arabic lessons, lectures on various subjects such as health, education, domestic violence or the opening of bank accounts and financial management of the household. The two main associations of the Negev can be found in Laqiyya. The first one "*Nisa Laqiyya*" (Women of Laqiyya) produces Bedouin embroideries, and the second one, "*Jam'iyyat Sidreh*" (Sidreh Association), manufactures and sells carpets. The craftwork is entirely done by women of the village; the goal is to help them to become financially independent. The objective of these NGOs is to promote Bedouin craftwork in order to defend a cultural heritage and to support local economic development.

Nevertheless some militants of these associations participate in a feminist organization called *Ma'an* (Forum) which was created in 2000 in Beer Sheva and whose goal is to defend the rights of Bedouin women. The outlook is one of intense engagement and feminism. The organization produces a newspaper and participated in 2005 in the writing of a report on the condition of Palestinian women in Israel intended for the UN CEDAW committee.³⁰ Parallel with the official report written by the Israeli authorities on the condition of women in Israel, an Arab organization, the Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women in Israel has been producing counter-reports since 2001. For the first time this year some Bedouin women with the help of *Ma'an* have been able to participate in this report and to give international visibility to the place of women in the Negev. Furthermore *Ma'an* also expects to write its own independent report on Bedouin women and to address the feminine questions that are most often marginalized in the Negev: health, employment, education, personal status, polygyny and the political role of women.

To accomplish this, the association is financed with external help from the EU and other overseas NGOs. Recourse to the international scene for the last ten years is not only a feature of Bedouin associations but of all organizations both Israeli and Palestinian. The involvement of international donors has seen a new rise with the success of programs of "Gender and Development," set in motion by the UN and numerous international conferences on development. This

³⁰ Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

phenomenon has in fact changed the configuration of the associations of Arab women which seek to comply with the requirements of their foreign donors; to conform to their feminist aims. In fact the financing criteria developed are essentially inspired by western feminist theories, augmented by new economic and political criteria of "good governance."³¹ In the new quest for democracy in the Middle East, women are considered to be the guarantors of social change. The associations, once they have polished up their feminist and largely depoliticized agendas, they then become a prime target for international financing. One of the consequences of the recourse to the international is the decontextualization of the priorities and the needs³². In trying to change the women without changing the context of their discriminations these measures extract all trace of potentially nationalist and subversive politics. This explains why the associations are often reproached for the fact that they struggle for women without taking account of the needs of the community as a whole. Another reproach targets the social and political negotiations employed by these associations. Some Bedouin men see the recourse by these associations to national financial support places them in dangerous proximity to the state apparatus. Equally suspect, they see the influence of Israeli feminists in the emphasis the associations place on the patriarchal foundation of Bedouin society and the suffering of women. This is why some acts of sabotage and degradation have been carried out against these associations in protest against both the activities, the independence of women and their insertion into the Israeli political game. In fact, it would be a simplification to think that the reticence of men towards the associations of women can only be found in the patriarchal system. There also exists some political and social reasons notably of frustration, jealousy and mistrust for feminine initiatives that de facto exclude men and are supported by Israeli authorities.

Therefore, not only are Bedouin women not always represented in politics they are also practically inactive in the parties. Nevertheless few of them are mobilized in the field of associations which have gained in importance and which no longer content themselves with offering local services. Today they also

³¹ On a regular basis, international texts relating to the promotion of women are reproached for not using feminist terminology. Meaning they are engaged and critical but are using a neutral vocabulary. This criticism actually aims directly at the texts from the UN. Nevertheless, in the case of associations that are not occidental, one can not deny the influence of western values and criteria about equality between men and women. It is in this sense that we are talking here of western feminism.

³² The same analysis has been used on Palestinian women's associations. See R. Giacaman, "International Aid, Women's Interests and the Depoliticization of Women., *Gender and Society*, working paper # 3, Women's Studies Program, Birzeit University, September 1995.

take on a national dimension and have international support. Even if these associations have no clear political aim, nevertheless they represent new places for women to work, to socialize and participate in social protest. The conventional political arena does not seem to Bedouin women to be a useful and respectable sphere of involvement. Opinion which is now shared by lots of Arab citizens who do not trust neither have hope in their political representatives. People disappointed and marginalized by the system refuse largely to be involved. Bedouin women mobilized in civil organizations are young, educated and urban (feminist or not), very critics of the political system in the Negev and who decide to be involved in other social and economic fields, in aid of women, independently of political partisan logics.

(This version has been mainly translated into English
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