

The situation of mobile indigenous peoples in Jordan

Dr Olivia Mason, Assistant Professor, Northumbria University, UK.

Part 1: Introduction

I am submitting this evidence as an academic with nine years of experience researching mobile indigenous Bedouin communities in Jordan. Since August 2022, I have been funded by UK Research and Innovation to undertake research on how Bedouin in Jordan are experiencing environmental change and the challenges to their livelihood and identity. This research process has involved collecting evidence through detailed focus groups and interviews with mobile indigenous Bedouin communities in Jordan. I am currently writing this evidence into a report that will be launched at a knowledge exchange event in Jordan in July 2024 that brings together Ministers in Jordan (including the Ministers of Culture and Environment), environmental NGOs, and Bedouin communities. I was also an invited member of the workshop in September 2022 that resulted in the writing of the Dana+20 Declaration.

The evidence and findings I present in this report are based on my UKRI funded research and my wealth of research experience and knowledge in Jordan.

Part 2: Executive summary

1. Heritage and tourism sites in Jordan, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites, frequently exploit, dispossess, and displace Bedouin communities while simultaneously using their heritage for commercial gain.

⇒ Bedouin communities must be part of decision making in heritage sites in Jordan and when displaced offered compensation. UNESCO must investigate violations against Bedouin communities in its sites.

2. Conservation initiatives in Jordan, including sites controlled by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, frequently displace and dispossess Bedouin communities under the guise of environmental protection. No compensation is given to Bedouin for loss of access to land and conservation initiatives are often about profit making.

⇒ Bedouin communities have knowledge and history about the environment that must be valued by conservation initiatives in Jordan and Bedouin must be offered compensation when their right to access land is taken away.

3. Bedouin cultural heritage in Jordan is not being preserved. Bedouin express concern that Bedouin cultural heritage is at risk of being lost and very few initiatives exist in Jordan to preserve it.

⇒ Preserving Bedouin cultural heritage must be at the forefront of Government policy in Jordan. Especially the conservation of intangible cultural heritage and that not easily profitable.

4. Bedouin communities in Jordan are increasingly susceptible to the impacts of climate change. This includes decreased lack of rainwater to feed farming and to produce grazing land. Temperature extremes also make living conditions increasingly difficult.

⇒ More research needed into the impacts of climate change on mobile people. More support needed for Bedouin communities to adapt to climate change.

5. Bedouin communities, especially those living in border areas in Jordan, are at risk of being involved in drug smuggling due to their loss of livelihoods and little Government economic support.

- ⇒ Supporting Bedouin communities living near Jordan's borders by providing job security and economic support must be a priority.

6. Bedouin are not recognised as an indigenous group in Jordan. Bedouin governance, especially tribal systems, are officially incorporated into law making. However, Bedouin communities in Jordan feel these systems are often tokenistic and do not adequately represent Bedouin needs at the local level in decision making.

- ⇒ More localised forms of political representation are needed in Jordan. Indigenous rights in Jordan need to be better incorporated into decision and law making from the local level.

Part 3: History and present-day situation of Bedouin in Jordan

As my published research has outlined¹, Jordan's mobile indigenous Bedouin population are central to questions of national identity and security in Jordan. The borders of present-day Jordan were drawn by the British during the British mandate period in the Middle East and did not attend to Bedouin tribal identities or movements. At the time of Jordan's formation, its population consisted of diverse groups with distinct loyalties that crucially extended beyond its current borders including Palestinians in the West Bank, villagers in the north associated with Syria, and tribesmen of the South affiliated with the Arabian Peninsula². With these distinct groups and identities now composing the new Jordanian state, the creation of a cohesive national identity was crucial. The period of the 1970s saw the 'discursive reconstruction and institutionalisation of the Bedouins and the Nabatean city of Petra as national signifiers in official discourse' to solidify a historical and cohesive past within the borders of Jordan³. However, while Bedouin identities were key to the formation of the Jordanian identity, its tribal Bedouin population were not automatic supporters of the new Hashemite monarchy⁴. The newly demarcated borders of Transjordan did not consider tribal migratory patterns rendering both policing of the desert and the creation of a solidified territory difficult⁵. A complex process of integration of Bedouin tribes in Jordan took place, that saw them incorporated into the military and political roles to ensure state security, and a process of sedentarisation to fix them to place⁶. Furthermore, indigenous identities were re-articulated by the Jordanian state as linked to oral traditions, skills and spiritual beliefs, rather than through relationships with land and nomadism in order to forge a national identity within state borders⁷. What this demonstrates is that state created narratives surrounding indigenous identity formation in the Middle East, often rely on essentialised representations of Bedouin that serve the interests of the hegemonic power and colonial or state imaginaries⁸.

This context is crucial because it demonstrates the ways in which Bedouin are often incorporated into nationalist and security narratives in Jordan. However, what I seek to demonstrate throughout this report is that this narrative and ideological relationships with Bedouin occur while Bedouin are simultaneously denied

¹ Mason, O. (2021). A political geography of walking in Jordan: Movement and politics. *Political geography*, 88; Mason, O. (2020). Walking the line: lines, embodiment and movement on the Jordan Trail. *cultural geographies*, 27(3), 395-414

² LaBianca, Ø. (1997) Indigenous hardiness structures and state formation in Jordan: Towards a history of Jordan's resident Arab population. *Ethnic encounter and culture change*, 3: 143-157

³ Al-Mahadin, S. (2007). An economy of legitimating discourses: The invention of the Bedouin and Petra as national signifiers in Jordan. *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural Studies*, 21 (1): 86-105.

⁴ Alon, Y. (2009) *The making of Jordan: Tribes, colonialism and the modern state*. I. B. Tauris, London (2009)

⁵ Nasasra, M. (2017) *The Naqab Bedouins: A century of politics of resistance*. Colombia University Press.

⁶ Massad, J. A. (2001). *Colonial Effects: The making of nation identity in Jordan*. Colombia University Press, New York.

⁷ Bille, M. (2012). Assembling heritage: Investigating the UNESCO proclamation of Bedouin intangible heritage in Jordan *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 18 (2): 107-123.

⁸ Tatour, L. (2009). The culturalisation of indigeneity: The Palestinian-Bedouin of the Naqab and indigenous rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23 (10): 1569-1593.

material rights. For instance, the late 1960s was a period of strenuous land reform with government policies that did not understand or value Bedouin land systems. These occurred alongside policies in Jordan to encourage Bedouin to settle. Sedentarisation in Jordan forced the previously mobile Bedouin population to live in fixed locations through enforcement of laws requiring children to attend school and to only provide essential items such as healthcare, water, sanitation, and electricity to those living in fixed locations⁹. These practices of state legibility are common in states in which there are mobile populations as mobile people have always been enemies of the state.

In present day Jordan, these tensions between the state and Bedouin populations continue. Moreover, the impacts of sedentarisation programmes continue to impact on Bedouin livelihoods, cultural heritage, and identity. The aim of this report is therefore to detail the situation of Bedouin in Jordan and will specifically examine the impacts of tourism, conservation, and climate change on the collective rights of Bedouin and also their relationship with borders and political representation.

Part 4: Main findings

4.1 Tourism and world heritage sites - Example of Petra

This section offers more context to the point 1 in the executive summary that heritage and tourism sites in Jordan, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites, frequently exploit, dispossess, and displace Bedouin communities while simultaneously using their heritage for commercial gain. I use the specific case of Petra as an example.

Petra is Jordan's most visited tourism site and became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1985. Petra is also a site that encompasses a large area and has been home to Bedouin for at least 500 years. This UNESCO designation resulted in the decision to resettle Bedouin living in that site into a newly built village. The impact of that decision meant that Bedouin were removed from a site in which many were farming, rearing livestock, and had been living for hundreds of years. While Bedouin were initially cooperative in moving from the site with the promise of housing, it soon became clear that the housing provided was inadequate and there was not sufficient compensation for loss of livelihoods. The housing provided was very small plots of land with no space to keep animals. Bedouin were given the opportunity to travel into the site each day to sell products in shops. However, the growth of the population meant that there is increasingly competition between shop owners and families can make very little money from these shops. This is in stark contrast to the huge amounts of income generated from the entrance fee to Petra.

In December 2023, the Jordanian Government made the decision to remove almost all Bedouin shopkeepers from Petra with violent force. The argument being that many of these shops were unlicensed. However, the Government did nothing to support or regulate informal stalls leading many to believe this was forced neglect. The site is now heavily policed and frequent clashes between Bedouin and the Government exist.

In interviews I conducted with Bdoul, they highlighted the impacts of these recent decisions to me and made several key points:

- Bedouin feel they are not heard in political settings due to a lack of representation. Many feel that those in political power do not want to hear the point of view of Bedouin. Politicians such as the Governor of Petra refuse to meet with Bedouin communities.

⁹ Massad, J. A. (2001). *Colonial Effects: The making of nation identity in Jordan*. Columbia University Press, New York.

- Dominant narratives often suggest that Bedouin are simply connected to these sites because of financial gain whereas many indicated the deep emotional connections they feel towards their traditional lands.
- The land given to the Bedouin in a new built village is not sufficient for the needs of the expanding population. There is no space for children to play, since 2014 the Government has not allowed expansion of houses, there is not sufficient housing for all families.
- No one is listening to ideas Bedouin have for job creation or preservation of traditional livelihoods and heritage.
- Due to the removal of almost all Bedouin traders from the site in December 2023, many Bedouin communities are suffering and starving.

4.2 Conservation Initiatives – nature reserves

This section expands on and gives more context to the ways in which conservation initiatives in Jordan, including sites controlled by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, frequently displace and dispossess Bedouin communities under the guise of environmental protection.

Since the 1960s, the Jordanian state mandated the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature to manage protected areas and it played a major role in setting out basic dynamics of conservation in Jordan. Most disappointingly, these conservation efforts followed international models of conservation, especially those outlined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature that saw indigenous communities removed from land designated within the reserves. The result of this now in Jordan are increasingly strained relationships between mobile communities and conservation practices. One of the major reasons for these strained relationships is that while the nature reserves in Jordan removed mobile people while turning nature reserves in Jordan into tourism sites.

A further example of the strained relationships between Bedouin and nature reserves is a decision made by the Jordanian Government in 2019 to explore copper mining in an area that lies within the borders of one of Jordan's nature reserves, the Dana Biosphere Reserve. This has exacerbated tensions between the community and the reserve as it demonstrates the conflicting environmental agendas of the reserve. In interviews with communities living in and near the reserve they have also demonstrated they would support the copper mining as it would provide job opportunities that the reserve has taken away from them. As was outlined to me: 'people here are desperate. They do not have that many opportunities. They suffer from poverty and unemployment. So, they would rather anyone take over the land as long as they provide job opportunities'.

In my interview, Bedouin communities noted the following challenges to mobile peoples of conservation initiatives:

- No compensation is given to Bedouin for loss of access to land.
- Conservation initiatives take huge amounts of grazing land away.
- The compensation for loss of grazing land offered by nature reserves is jobs in eco-tourism. However, competition for tourism jobs in these sites creates huge tensions between Bedouin communities. Many Bedouin do not want to work in tourism and are given no other options.
- A sense that Bedouin communities are portrayed as the ones who are dangerous to the environment whereas they have lived and protected nature in these sites for at least 500 years.

- Bedouin communities undertake environmentally destruction practices out of vengeance and a lack of other income options.
- There is a psychological impact on Bedouin communities due to the loss of their traditional lands.
- Policies put in place to limit the movement of mobile peoples are often simply to control their movement.
- Conservation policies are used in Jordan that are developed from elsewhere and do not apply to Jordan.
- Bedouin communities are best placed to protect their ancestral homeland. As one Bedouin said to me: Bedouins used to protect the land themselves and back then no one can trespass or do anything but right now, because the environmental reserve is under the government ownership, Bedouins can't do anything to stop illegal activities inside the reserve. If someone from outside the area does anything inside the reserve, Bedouins can't stop them because they don't own the land anymore.'

4.3 Identity – preserving Bedouin culture

Bedouin cultural heritage in Jordan is not being preserved. I will detail here the ways in which Bedouin detail how their cultural heritage is being lost and the challenges to this.

No, there is no effort to preserve the Bedouin culture, and the evidence is they opened the door to all types of camps with behaviors that do not adhere to the Bedouin culture. If you look at websites of Ministry of Tourism or visit Jordan, there is nothing on the website that refers to anything that has to do with the Bedouin culture. Everything is marketing for tourism and foreign concepts.

We feel like life of Bedouins will disappear in 20 years. Most Bedouins currently car sell phones and have access to different society's ways of life. I believe that with the first decent job opportunity available, Bedouins will leave the desert and directly move in the city. In addition, with the dams and lack of vegetation, livestock will not be worth it anymore...A major contribution to this is that Turkey stopped importing Jordanian sheep's wool due to the Syrian war blocking the trading borders. Now it goes to waste because people no longer make Ja'ed as they used to, and they no longer make beit al'shar.

Being a Bedouin holds a deep meaning for us. I had a conversation with a young man who holds a master's degree in Arabic language and works as a teacher. He owns 10 dunums of land and expressed his longing for the Bedouin life. Despite the water shortage and difficulties of farming, he wants to farm because it holds a significant psychological and mental aspect for him. It's not just about financial benefits; it's about the connection to our heritage and the desire to live the same way our ancestors did.

Our Bedouin traditions and customs are not recognized by the government, which led to the decrease of people's interest in those traditions. It will continue to decrease gradually, and it will become like big cities without Bedouin traditions and customs.

I have included these three quotes because they detail from Bedouin communities in Jordan how important cultural heritage is to them, the susceptibility of it to climate change and conflict, and the lack of government initiatives to preserve it. Many have also indicated that having livestock is no longer profitable for Bedouin. Wool used to be a main source of profit for Bedouins and now it is no longer profitable and is thrown to

waste. Many Bedouin call for support for traditional wool weaving projects and products. Many Bedouin discussed with me that younger Bedouin communities have lost their connections to traditional Bedouin heritage.

4.4. Land and environmental changes – access and rights to land.

This section deals with the impacts of climate change on Bedouin communities. I outline here all the ways in which Bedouin communities have described the impacts of climate change:

- In the past Bedouin would only move once in winter and once in summer. Now they are either not able to move at all or forced to move frequently. They are forced to move several times a year to find grazing land which is getting less and less. Or else they are not able to move due to sedentarisation programmes aimed at certain groups, the impacts of borders, or the lack of food for livestock at all, resulting in them buying fodder.
- Now all Bedouin were given land rights and access. Certain Bedouin tribes are favoured. Many tribes, especially those from Palestine are not given land rights. There must be fairer and more consistent policies around land rights for Bedouin.
- Number of Bedouin who have livestock dropping because of lack of vegetation, lack of rain, and establishment of dams.
- Bedouin used to be able to move across borders depending on environmental conditions.
- Raising livestock has become increasingly difficult due to price of fodder and lack of access to grazing. This means that people also lose connections to their Bedouin heritage.
- Living conditions have forced Bedouins to adapt to different environments, climates, and modernization.
- Bedouins face extremely harsh living conditions, they have no alternatives, no job opportunities, and they received financial aids from different people which is against their Bedouin nature.

I include here a quote from a Bedouin I interviewed about the environmental changes they see because of tourism:

It hurts us when we see the place gradually being ruined, but at the end of the day, it's out of our hands. You can't do anything about it, but it's still something precious to us. If they gave me the choice between living in Amman or here in this region, I'll always choose here. It's my region, even if I lived hungry or full. I like my region, I like my home. But the circumstances and what the region is going through, from overgrazing and overhunting to the decreasing of livestock and animal wealth, all affect us as the local population.

Many Bedouin are concerned especially about the impact of tourism in Jordan on damaging culture and destroying the environment. Excessive tourism in Wadi Rum has damaged culture and destroyed the environment. As highlighted above, this includes the psychological damage of this. More research needed into the impacts of climate change on mobile people and support for Bedouin communities to adapt to climate change.

Alongside the impacts of climate change on Bedouin communities, many also described to me in interviews the impacts of borders on their mobilities. Families on Jordan's northern border with Syria reported regularly going to the Syrian cities for grazing, shopping, and buying necessities. Border restrictions, including those caused by conflict, resulting in siblings having different nationalities and lack of access to essential resources. In the South of Jordan, Bedouin communities report having an 'identity crisis' as many lived across the

Jordanian and Saudi Arabian borders. Jordanian government has made it very difficult for these cross-border relations to be maintained through strict border controls.

4.5 Mobile communities on borderland susceptible to drug smuggling.

Bedouin communities, especially those living in border areas in Jordan, are at risk of being involved in drug smuggling due to their loss of livelihoods and little Government economic support. In frequent discussions with Bedouin elders, they feared that younger members of Bedouin communities were increasingly at risk of working in job smuggling due to lack of other opportunities. I include several quotes from research interviews:

'With the water levels plummeting, Azraq is a border area with no water, and no jobs. Many illegal issues can arise, such as drugs and border smuggling.'

'Unemployment can lead the youth to take many illegal paths they should provide us with development projects to encourage the youth to work.'

'All the smugglers in Jordan are Bedouin. They are taking advantage of their history of movement and knowing how to navigate the borders. Most of the drugs are coming from Turkey/Syria through Jordan to Saudi.'

Supporting Bedouin communities living near Jordan's borders by providing job security and economic support must be a priority.

4.6. Recognition of Bedouin as a group in Jordan and indigenous rights.

In this final section, I briefly outline some of the ways in which Bedouin are recognised within Jordanian law. As I outlined earlier, the Bedouin were crucial to the security and formation of the Jordanian state under the British Mandate Period. Senior members of Bedouin were therefore incorporated into Jordanian political systems. However, only certain Bedouin communities became part of these systems and many of these Bedouin political leaders are completely removed from communities. Not all Bedouin in Jordan have equal legal status either. For instance, Bedouin in Jordan who were forcibly displaced from Israel in 1948 do not have the same rights as Bedouin who have been living within Jordan since before 1948. Many Bedouin expressed concern to me that there are no localised forms of political representation and political leaders who are meant to represent them remain in the capital and refuse to meet with Bedouin community members. More localised forms of political representation are needed in Jordan. Indigenous rights in Jordan need to be better incorporated into decision and law making from the local level. Furthermore Bedouin are not recognised as indigenous in Jordan and this prevents them from accessing legal rights provided globally to indigenous peoples.