



Cultural Corridors of Peace
ممرات الحضارة لأجل السّلام

Regional Gathering of Levantine Bedouin 19-21 October 2019

Statement



Cultural Corridors of Peace is funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund, in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.



Department for
Digital, Culture
Media & Sport



Cultural Corridors of Peace

Statement from a Regional Gathering of Levantine Bedouin, 19-21 October 2019

Introduction

For three days in October 2019, Bedouin from across the Levant gathered in the desert in Wadi Rum, Jordan.

Historically, Bedouin communities lived a nomadic way of life, ranging with their herds of camels, sheep and goats across the Syrian (*Bādiyat al Shām*) and Negev (*al Naqab*) deserts, the Arabian peninsula, Sinai and North Africa. The creation of national borders, restrictions on travel and other developments have limited the movement of Bedouin communities and their interaction with each other.

The Regional Gathering brought together Bedouin from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, different parts of Jordan and the South Hebron Hills in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In total, 45 people took part.

The Gathering was an opportunity for people to meet and to celebrate their shared – if diverse – heritage. It was an opportunity to discuss how Bedouin culture and traditions might be sustained, in order to meet the challenges associated with modernisation, marginalisation and displacement. Participants in the Gathering shared their knowledge and experiences, their values and their visions for the future.

On the final day of the Gathering, representatives of each of the three ‘country groups’ – Lebanon, Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories – presented their group’s views on the value of Bedouin cultural heritage, on the challenges their communities face and on the role their culture can play in meeting those challenges. After each group had spoken, the discussion turned to the commonalities and differences between their situations.

The statement below reflects the views of the Bedouin participants, as expressed by them on the final day of the Gathering.

The Regional Gathering was part of *Cultural Corridors of Peace*¹, a project that is supporting Bedouin communities in the Levant to document and safeguard their cultural heritage as a means of meeting the challenges they face and securing a better future.

The project is run by Inherit (the York Archaeological Trust's *Institute for Heritage & Sustainable Human Development*), the American University of Beirut, the Council for British Research in the Levant and Coventry University. It is supported by the British Council's *Cultural Protection Fund*, in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Support.

The value of Bedouin culture

In the eyes of all three groups of participants:

Bedouin culture – a shared but diverse heritage – is a source of self-sufficiency and resilience.

Participants from Lebanon reminded the Gathering that the livelihood of Bedouin communities was traditionally based on livestock. This provided people with the means to be self sufficient and independent, which was particularly important in times of conflict. During the Second World War, for example, Bedouin were not only able to feed themselves from their own resources but were also able to help feed the wider population.

Participants from Jordan said that, although life for them has become more sedentary and 'urbanised', their heritage is something that they can fall back on in times of crisis such as war and natural disaster. Cultural heritage has also been a source of economic opportunity for some, with the growth of tourism in southern Jordan.

Palestinian participants from the South Hebron Hills told the group of their dreams built on a Bedouin heritage and identity and on the ability to move. They feel that, while there is a need for society to evolve, there is also a need to sustain inherited values as a source of independence and collective sustainability. Bedouin heritage is, in this context, a source of resistance, hope and opportunity.

Challenges

¹ <http://culturalcorridors.net/>

Bedouin communities of the Levant face different social, economic and political challenges. They also share some concerns.

Bedouin communities in Lebanon face challenges relating to belonging, citizenship and discrimination.

Bedouin in Jordan are most concerned about the financial hardship of maintaining a pastoral way of life.

For Bedouin in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Israeli occupation is the main challenge.

The erosion of Bedouin traditions and a Bedouin way of life is a shared concern, not least given the value of Bedouin culture as a source of self-sufficiency and resilience.

The participants from Lebanon explained that, while the region is now divided by national borders, their grandparents would have seen the whole Arab world as their country. The history of the Bedouin is a nomadic one, and they are therefore not bonded to specific places in the same way as other communities. While a mobile way of life may largely be a thing of the past, it continues to define the Bedouin sense of belonging. Bedouin identity is linked to lineage and tribe without geographical borders, more than it is to the modern state where the community resides. As communities who have only recently settled in their current locations, they do not feel that they have roots there. They do not feel “deep belonging” for the places they find themselves in and they have little attachment to the land there, which is not theirs to pass down through the generations.

Before the 1990s, most Bedouin in Lebanon were not Lebanese citizens. Some became citizens in 1994 under a naturalisation decree issued by the government in that year, but others did not. Today, some members of a family might hold citizenship while others do not. A lack of citizenship leaves many Bedouin ‘stateless’, marginalised and on the outside of public services. Participants in the Gathering also noted that they face discrimination from other sections of the population in Lebanon, who treat them as inferior.

Participants from Jordan described the economic reasons for their changing way of life. Traditionally, the tent has been the main shelter for Bedouin families but, now, the use of tents is largely reserved for social events, such as weddings. The tent has fallen out of everyday use because many people no longer practice pastoralism – a change that has been driven by the rising cost of animal feed. People have sold their livestock as a result of the rising costs of maintaining a herd, and in order to raise funds for other daily necessities.

Palestinian participants spoke of the impact of the Israeli occupation on the Bedouin way of life. They described the effects of the occupation on mobility, with people having a restricted range of movement and restricted access to land. People have been forcibly displaced and

communities have been divided and have disintegrated. They noted that the occupation has brought changes to the vegetation, with new crops and trees being planted resulting in changes to the soil and the terrain, which in turn has limited the available pastures. They feel that, because their claims to land are rooted in their heritage, there is an effort to diminish their distinctive way of life and to undermine their identity as Bedouin.

The loss of traditional knowledge, skills and practices is a shared concern. People fear that much will be lost with the passing of the older generation, and that there is therefore an urgency to act to sustain their traditions. In the discussion, it was recognised that things change. It was also understood that there are some traditions that younger generations no longer wish to carry forward because they see them as a negative legacy of the past. However, there was clear recognition of the value of cultural heritage in today's world and a desire to sustain a living, distinct Bedouin culture as a means of creating a better future.

Actions

Participants in the Gathering identified a number of priorities for action. Shared priorities included:

Document the knowledge held by older generations in order to protect the collective memory and knowledge of Bedouin communities for the future.

Actively transfer knowledge, skills and practices to younger generations. Younger members of the community must be supported to learn, carry forward and adapt traditions that have ongoing value in their lives. There was, in particular, a call to establish Bedouin cultural centres as places to promote this learning.

Raise awareness of Bedouin culture and its value for society, as a means of tackling discrimination. Advantage should be taken here of the opportunities provided by digital and social media.

Enable networking and cooperation. Supporting Bedouin communities to forge active links with each other and with ally organisations enables them to build and maintain their confidence and hope, and to take action to address the challenges they face and realise their visions for the future.

Participants from **Lebanon** also underlined the need for them to be granted **citizenship** and they ask municipalities in Lebanon to assign them **land for grazing** use.

Participants from **Jordan** called for a reduction in **animal feed prices**, which they feel will encourage a return to livestock farming amongst Bedouin.