

Unearthing Truths: Israel, Nakba and JNF

By: The Editors of Moving Forward

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The monthly Moving Forward is published with support from Jews Say No! That organization engages in community education, street theatre, and organizing to make their members' voices heard in Jewish communities and as partners in the broader movement for justice in Palestine/Israel. The following article is the editorial to Moving Forward's special issue on the 70th anniversary of the Nakba.

Unearthing Truths: Israel, the Nakba, and the Jewish National Fund

We present this special issue of Moving Forward to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, the Arabic word for 'catastrophe.' The Nakba refers to the expulsion and dispossession of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland during Israel's creation (1947–1949).

In this issue, we lay out the historical record of those years to show that the Nakba was the result of a deliberate policy of mass expulsion, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing—a strategy designed to ensure that the Palestinians who had lived on the land for generations would be barred from ever returning. We also zero in on the fundamental role played by the 117-year-old international organization, the Jewish National Fund (JNF), in facilitating that dispossession.

Our goal is that there be a serious moral reckoning with this history, and it begins with that icon of innocence, the JNF's small blue metal box that many of our readers will remember from their childhood, boxes that beckoned us to drop in coins that would help "make the desert bloom" and build the land of Israel. It was a mission that was legitimized by the governing principle of the Zionist cause: "A land without a people for a people without a land." As seductive as that slogan was, it was willfully false, as amply documented in personal testimonies of Palestinians and Israelis, historical records, and scholarly research. How, after all, could 750,000 Palestinians flee "a land without a people"?

From its founding, the JNF was encouraged by the Zionist movement to acquire land in Palestine for the purpose of settling Jews on that land. After 1948, aided and abetted by Israeli land law, the JNF continued to acquire land and also contributed to Israel's dispossession of Palestinians from their land. This was accomplished by buying swathes of land from absentee landlords and then leasing it exclusively to Jews, by confiscating refugees' land, and by forcibly—often violently—removing Palestinians from their land, a practice which persists today. By continuing to plant forests that conceal the ruins of Palestinian villages, the JNF seeks to



erase history and memory, while hoping to whitewash its political motives and enhance its recent branding as an environmental organization. Ironically, however, it has earned widespread international condemnation for the degradation it has inflicted on the natural ecosystem.

While this year marks the 70th anniversary of the catastrophic events of 1948, we also know that the policies that informed Israel's and the JNF's actions back then continue to the present. With this issue we hope to expose the relationship between the Nakba and the Jewish National Fund; to encourage deeper conversation about the experiences and realities of Palestinians before, during and since Israel's creation; and to facilitate among US Jewish communities—and more broadly—honest reflection, analysis, and action toward truth-telling and justice.

To *Moving Forward* readers: Please note that the articles in this special issue of *Moving Forward* were originally published between 2005 and 2018 and that text written in the present tense refers to events that occurred at the time of publication.

[Original article](#)

Palestine/Israel: JNF Trees Dispossess Bedouin

By: [Zafir Rinat](#) and [Almog Ben Zikri](#), [Haaretz](#)

14 July 2020

Israel pushing large tree planting in Naqab to disclaim lands to Bedouin

Israel is pushing through a plan to plant trees across a significant swath of the Negev in a bid to deny Bedouin residents from accessing the lands.



The plan is described as “agricultural planting” but local activists and human rights organizations say it is being implemented to weaken the Bedouin’s connection to the lands, a significant amount of which are the subject of ownership lawsuits and some of which are used for agriculture. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) states that this move also has destructive repercussions for the desert environment and is being taken while sidestepping planning procedures.

The planting, which the [Jewish National Fund](#) (Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael) is in charge of, is planned across 40,000 dunams (10,000 acres) and focuses on areas around the Bedouin communities of Segev Shalom and Abu Talul.

The interministerial coordination committee responsible for approving the plan debated it on Monday. Israel Skop of the [Israel Land Authority](#) heads the committee, which was established

five years ago, in wake of SPNI's petition to the High Court of Justice against the ILA's planting policy on the grounds that it violated planning procedures.

The state agreed in response to establish the coordination committee to approve so-called agricultural plantings.

Planting has occurred periodically since then. Work was done recently adjacent to the unrecognized Bedouin village of Hirbat Al-Watan, east of Tel Sheva, where 4,500 people live. The village is in the process of planning and gaining official recognition. So far, the committee decided to start planting only in parts of the lands.

In this case, residents turned to Economy and Industry Minister [Amir Peretz](#), responsible for the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin. He acted to stop the works. However, the ILA is permitted to continue such works even without coordination with the Bedouin development authority. In response, far-right lawmaker Bezalel Smotrich complained to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that "a Zionist deed of unmatched importance" was being stopped.

"One day tractors and other equipment showed up and started digging ditches right next to residents' homes," Majd al-Shenarna, chairman of the village council. "It was frightening because there were rumors that they wanted to move us elsewhere. All this happened on plots that village residents have owned for generations. There was no signage or explanation what they were doing. We asked a human rights group to help us, and we set up a protest tent."

The works were halted, but resumed last week before being stopped again a few days ago.

"This time, they told us they were planning to work on the plots which have no ownership claims," al-Shenara said. "However, we explained to them that this area is also important to the village's future because we will need it for public buildings."

Al-Shenara says he hopes the state will hold a dialogue with the village council to prevent confrontations and to allow the continued establishment of the village's legal planning status.

Issam Al-Atiya, a resident of [Abu Talu](#) who also heads the council of unrecognized villages, said he could not see how the state would want to plant trees without coordinating with local villagers who have land claims.

"We will object and won't allow them to take the lands just like that," he said. "It seems the state feels it can do what it wants with Bedouin. They don't see us as people. We will inform all the local families and recruit them to stop this."

Damaging Desert Ecology

Ahead of Monday's meeting today, [SPNI](#) asked Skop to halt the process. SPNI says the move violates what was agreed to in court. "The coordination committee was meant to arrange plantings of a limited scope, in specific and urgent cases in which there was a proven threat of

a specific invasive danger to land,” the NGO wrote. “Data on the areas being sought out for planting show there aren’t any construction violations in the overwhelming majority of lands.”

SPNI asserts that such an extent of planting requires coordination with the district building and planning committee. The main reason for this is the far-reaching impact that forestation has on the desert ecological system. Most of the land in question is made up of loess soil, housing many unique plant and animal species. Much of the land has already been damaged because of development activities and working the land. The NGO claims that implementing the planting plan will require introducing heavy equipment to the land, excavating and planting trees that will significantly change the desert scenery. It predicts that species characteristic of loess areas will be replaced by other animals suited to trees planted by humans.

“The ILA’s planting of trees in widespread areas across the Negev is another way of the state abusing the lives of Bedouin residents,” said Cesar Yeudkin, planner of Arab localities for planning rights [NGO Bimkom](#). “Instead of talking with the local leadership to advance together solutions for organizing settlement and developing employment resources for the community, the state exploits its power to reduce its living space and deny it basic agricultural income that harms no one. Let’s hope that those responsible will wake up and realize that it’s preferable to act in other ways.”

The ILA commented: “The Israel Land Authority works to conserve state lands, partly through planting. It is a successful step that has proven its efficacy in recent years and is done according to the law and pursuant to the rules. The authority works to conserve open spaces and nature from illegal control and invests tens of millions of shekels in these lands through the Fund for the Protection of Open Spaces. Let it be stressed that the High Court rejected the position of the Society for Protection of Nature. The committee operates precisely according to the court decision and discusses all comments and opinions of the partner ministries.”

[Original article](#)

Photo: A protest tent set up at the entrance to the Bedouin town of Shaqib al-Salam, Naqab, 27 July 2011. Source: Eliyahu Hershkovitz.

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