

Canada Park, a popular picnicking spot for Israelis, created upon the rubble of Palestinian homes

By [Mersiha Gadzo](#), *Mondoweiss*
19 June 2017



Heider Abu Ghosh stands in over the ruins of his childhood home in Imwas, now Canada Park, built atop a series of Palestinian villages outside of Jerusalem, destroyed by Israeli forces in 1967. (Photo: Mersiha Gadzo)

Twelve-year-old Ahmad Ali Zaid awoke at 5 a.m. on June 6, 1967, to the sound of loudspeakers blaring outside his home, demanding that the sleeping residents of Beit Nuba village immediately leave their homes.

“Leave your homes, leave the village. Go to Jordan; this is a military zone,” the voice commanded as Israeli tanks rolled through. “Anyone who doesn’t leave will have their house demolished on top of them.”

In their pajamas, with no time to even put on shoes, residents frantically rushed outside.

“We left because we were afraid of getting killed,” Zaid told *Mondoweiss*. “We were scared because we remembered [the massacres that] happened in 1948.”

Others in the neighboring villages of Imwas and Yalu northwest of Jerusalem woke up to Israeli soldiers pounding on their doors and ordering them to gather in the village yard.

“Once everyone was gathered in the yard, the officer said, ‘Leave! March until you reach Jeddah [Saudi Arabia]. This is our land, from here until Jeddah,’” said Ahmad Abu Ghosh, head of the Imwas Association based in Ramallah.

Ten thousand inhabitants of Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba trekked for days through the mountains to Ramallah, leaving their belongings behind. Four seniors and a one-year-old baby died along the way.

The elderly and disabled residents who were unable to leave their homes had their houses demolished on top of them. Eighteen were killed, buried underneath the rubble.

The Israeli army, after razing these occupied villages to the ground, refused to let the refugees return home for “security reasons.” Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel is required to allow their return but the villagers remain displaced to this day, mostly across the occupied West Bank and in Jordan.

The Latroun villages of Yalu, Imwas and Beit Nuba were specifically selected and cleared for their strategic location on “the line of the road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem,” former prime minister and chief-of-staff for the Israeli Defense Forces, Yitzhak Rabin, [told journalist Trish Woods in a 1991 interview for the CBC, Canada’s public broadcaster.](#)

Israeli forces had already depopulated and destroyed the nearby village of Deir Ayyoub in 1948, but failed to take control of the other three. An Israeli general, Uzi Narkiss, described the operation to Woods as appearing to be retribution.

“I think that it was an operation based on the difficult souvenirs of ’48. It can look as if it were a sort of revenge,” he said.

What took place amounts to a war crime, as under the Fourth Geneva Convention, the destruction of homes is permitted only when there is a direct relation between the property and the overcoming of enemy forces.

These villages, however, were destroyed after the war had already ended. The Jordanian army withdrew from the area the night before the villagers’ expulsion, and the Israeli army occupied the area without any resistance. The villagers held up white flags to send a message of non-violence.



Heider Abu Ghosh (Photo: Mersiha Gadzo)

Only a few traces remain of their beautiful stone houses, which stood among orchards of grapevines, olives and almonds. Spring water ran through the villages.

“We lived a happy life in our village,” Zaid said. “We had fruits, agricultural plains, plants, every kind of tree, mountainous areas; we drank sweet water.”



Canada Park, Once a series of Palestinian Villages outside of Jerusalem, destroyed by Israeli forces in 1967. (Photo: Mersiha Gadzo)

Today, their villages are barely recognizable amid more than five million trees planted over the years as part of Ayalon Canada Park, a popular picnicking spot for Israelis that was subsidized by Canadian taxpayers, including the construction of a [wildflower trail](#) as recently as 2015. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) was founded in 1901 to create a Jewish state in Palestine. It bought and developed land in Ottoman-era Palestine exclusively for Jews, and after achieving its goal in 1948, JNF expanded

branches worldwide. It now has charitable status in 50 countries, including Canada. It presents itself as “Israel’s largest green organization.”

In 1972, the Canadian branch, JNF Canada, raised \$15m (\$90m in today’s dollars) to create Canada Park, built on top of the demolished villages in occupied Palestine. Since then, the land has been treated as though it is in Israel proper rather than the occupied West Bank. The Separation Barrier prevents Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank from accessing Canada Park, including families that used to live on the land.

A 1986 UN Special Committee [reported](#) to the UN Secretary-General that it “considers it a matter of deep concern” that the villagers are denied the right to return due to the construction of Canada Park by JNF Canada. Israel’s occupation of the West Bank is illegal under international law. The Canadian government also doesn’t recognize permanent Israeli control over the territories occupied in 1967, which includes Canada Park.

However, JNF Canada has always advertised the park to be in Israel. [In a fundraising letter](#) from September 1984, JNF Canada wrote: “Income tax receipts will be issued for all your contributions and your donation will help complete the Grove in Canada Park, in Israel...” according to a report by the Canadian human rights group Independent Jewish Voices (IJV).



Imwas before it was destroyed by Israeli forces in 1967. (Photo: Imwas Association)



THE EXPULSION OF IMWAS' RESIDENTS IN 1967. (PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE IMWAS ASSOCIATION)

IJV says the creation of Canada Park contravenes international law and Canadian public policy. Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 465 and 446, Israel may not change the physical and geographical nature of the occupied Palestinian territory nor affect its demographic composition.

“JNF Canada claims to operate on behalf of all Jews, and as Jewish Canadians, we don’t want to be implicated,” said Tyler Levitan, IJV’s national coordinator.

“It’s very clear that the goals of the organization are to favor Jewish settlement over the well-being and rights of Palestinians who were already living there,” Levitan told *Mondoweiss*. “For them to do this under the guise of charity is an insult, of course, to other charity organizations who do important work and as a means to conceal the true nature of the organization, often times using environmentally friendly imagery.

“What they’re actually interested in is to appropriate lands and resources from Palestinians for Jewish control and for settlements in historic Palestine,” Levitan said, noting that JNF Canada also funded Jewish-only villages in the Galilee where Palestinians used to live before their expulsion.

Formal complaints have been made to the Canadian government for over forty years.

JNF Canada has funded at least three other parks that extend past the Green Line into the occupied West Bank: Begin Park, Yatir Forest, and Gilo Forest and Park.

JNF Canada was contacted for comment but did not respond.

Although in Wood’s 1991 feature for the CBC, former JNF Director of Information Benny Mushkin said that the village of Yalu wasn’t situated within the park’s boundaries and that Canadian taxpayers’ money wasn’t spent on occupied Palestinian territory. “All we did was take the area that was here, reconstructed it, enhanced it and improved it... The area is much, much nicer now than it was before,” Mushkin said.

[According to Israeli writer and peace activist Uri Davis](#), all Canadians are implicated in a “war crime” since JNF Canada’s charitable, tax-exempt status means that tax deductions for donations are “drawn out of the commonwealth, namely out of the pocket of each tax-paying person in Canada.” Canadian taxpayers fund up to 25 percent of JNF Canada’s budget. The Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) confirmed in an email that a charity’s purposes and activities cannot violate Canadian public policy, but couldn’t comment specifically on JNF Canada due to confidentiality.

However, a CRA internal document from 2010 noted that there is no clear public policy prohibiting charitable activities in the occupied territory: “...in the absence of legislation or some other clear and compelling public pronouncement, the CRA cannot treat the fact that otherwise charitable activities taking place in the Occupied Territories are a barrier to charitable status.”

Pine trees now cover 7,900 acres of Canada Park, impeding the refugees' right to return, a demand they continue to make today. According to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, only a tenth of local indigenous tree species have survived the JNF's reforestation. The pine tree grows quickly, ensuring that expelled Palestinians cannot return to the rubble of their homes, which is concealed by the foliage.

According to the Israeli NGO Zochrot, more than two-thirds of JNF's forests and sites are situated on the ruins of Palestinian villages. Eighty-six Palestinian villages are buried underneath their parks and another 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed and replaced with Jewish communities.

Heider Abu Ghosh, a former resident of Imwas who has been living in Ramallah since the expulsion, gazes at a small clearing among the trees where his house used to stand. Only a few stones remain; the only reason he is sure of the spot is that his childhood home stood directly opposite the Emmaus-Nicopolis archaeological site, which remains standing today.

Rabin's vision of a road connecting Tel Aviv to Jerusalem- realized in what is now Israel's busiest highway – lies just yards away.

"For anyone, your birthplace is your roots, your memories. When you are uprooted from this place, you lose certain beloved memories, certain photographs. It's very sad when I go back," Heider said.

At the Imwas Association office in Ramallah, a miniature model of Imwas lies on the table protected by a glass case. Refugees from Imwas spent four years reconstructing their village from memory, carefully placing each house, school, road and tree that previously stood in what is now Canada Park. The memories of their villages are all that they have left.

Ahmad Abu Ghosh said that an Israeli military leader met the committee of the three villages after their expulsion and offered to build them homes in other locations.

“We will not accept a dunum in heaven instead of our dunum in Imwas,”
Abu Ghosh said the group responded, “We want to return.”

[Original article](#)