

Israeli citizens?: Palestinian displacement inside the Green Line

On February 24 Israeli police forced the Abu Shimla family from their home in Haifa, smashing windows and walls as the extended family, including 10 children, were driven out.¹ The week before, six Bedouin homes in the Negev were bulldozed. In this paper I draw attention to the struggle of three groups of Palestinian refugees living in Israel. Not only has the international community failed to address the injustice and increasingly difficult conditions facing 1948 refugees, it has failed to prevent continuing displacement of Palestinians inside Israel as well as those in 1967 occupied territories. Activists describe this process as the ‘ongoing Nakba’:

We do not use this description lightly, or to enlist tears of sympathy or nostalgia for what once was; it is an important way of understanding the present, entrenching the demand for redress for the crimes committed by Israel over the past 60 years, and to stress the urgency of the struggle to bring about change for the future.²

Sami Abu Shehadah and Fadi Shbayteh, Jaffa community activists

Mixed cities: Jaffa

While over 90% of the million Palestinians in Israel live in villages away from the economic and industrial heartland of the country, a small number remain in ‘mixed’ cities such as Jaffa, Haifa and Ramle. In 1948 most Palestinians were transferred from the cities, but small numbers remaining were forced into one neighbourhood which effectively served as a ghetto.³ In Jaffa for example the Ajami neighbourhood is now the lowest income neighbourhood of all Tel Aviv/Jaffa’s 60 municipal neighbourhoods. In Ajami there are currently around 500 Palestinian families facing eviction.⁴

How does Israel stay within the boundaries of its own laws which claim to give citizenship to Arabs, yet still concentrate so many demolition orders in one Palestinian neighbourhood? “Between the 1960s and the late 1980s municipal authorities placed a total freeze on all permits for new building or renovations with the intention of demolishing the whole area for redevelopment,” explains Abu Shehadah. “Unfortunately for the Arab residents crowded into the Ajami neighbourhood, 80% of these houses were built pre-1948, and without any renovations the ceilings would quite literally fall in on their heads. With a freeze on allocation of permits for renovations they had no choice for the safety of the families but to go ahead without permission from Israeli authorities.”⁵ Thus authorities can claim families have contravened the law and issue a demolition order, ironically even billing the family for demolition costs. Eviction orders are issued by Amidar, the housing company owned and operated by the government. Amidar claims to offer subsidized and rent-controlled housing in Israel, but its major stockholders are the Jewish Agency (JA) and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) – supporting Jewish only interests. Vacated land is then used to ‘gentrify’ the area, to build new property way beyond the price range of the Palestinians of the Ajami. The seafront location is the site of new flats which sell at the top end of Israeli housing prices.

Jaffa is only one example. In October 2008 violent attacks were made against Palestinians and their property by Jewish residents in Acre. The town currently has 160 Palestinian homes under demolition order. Acre community activist Eyad

Barghouti identifies four pillars of policy applied to drive Arab Palestinian citizens out of Israeli cities:⁶

- 1) Economic, cultural and social marginalization and discrimination in provision of services with aim of reducing quality of life so people ‘voluntarily leave’
- 2) Erasure of Arab-Palestinian identity of city in official histories; systematic neglect and demolition of buildings – (e.g. 240 Palestinian houses in Acre stand empty and boarded up)
- 3) Seizure of Palestinian homes and real estate by government agencies and corporations through legislation and policies that hinder implementation of Palestinian inheritance rights and facilitate transfer of property title to Israeli capital and institutions
- 4) Transformation of old Palestinian neighbourhoods into tourist and cultural attractions (notably artists colonies) emptied of Palestinian residents; transfer of ownership of large buildings and landmarks to Jewish tourism entrepreneurs

Judaization of the Galilee and the Negev: “Unrecognised” Bedouin villages

At the fringes of Israeli society, the Bedouin Arab community are a key target of Israel’s ongoing programme to “Judaize” the Negev and Galilee, areas which still have significant Palestinian populations remaining. As in all cases of Israeli displacement the process is planned and carried out at every stage with tight coordination between the state and quasi governmental Zionist institutions such as the Jewish National Fund.⁷ (Read *Blueprint Negev* on the JNF site.)⁸

Although Israel claims to recognise their status as citizens, approximately 70,000 Bedouin are living in several hundred villages in the Negev which Israel refuses to recognize, thus denying building permits and public services such as roads, utilities and piped water. Some families have lived on the same piece of land since before 1948, while others have been repeatedly dispossessed over 60 years. Israel’s hope is that increasing pressure will force people to relocate out of desperation to one of the overcrowded and underdeveloped townships which it has allocated to them. Built as part of an effort to contain the Palestinian Bedouin community, these townships provide neither a traditional agricultural lifestyle nor an adequate alternative source of income.

Grassroots organizations try to challenge these policies but face an uphill battle. In November 2008 Adalah, the largest Palestinian legal centre representing Palestinians inside Israel, appealed to the Israeli courts to prevent the expulsion of 1000 Bedouin from their homes at Atir-Umm el-Hieran. The state is requesting the destruction of the entire unrecognised village. The village was established in 1956 at the order of the military regime after the army had expelled the villagers from the region of Wadi Zaballa – Kibbutz Shuval now stands where they lived. (This expulsion was not the first; between 1948 and 1956 the community had been repeatedly displaced.) Despite existence of official documents to prove that the 1956 establishment of Atir-Umm el-Hieran was given government approval, the village was never officially recognized.

The 2002 approved government master plan has allocated the village to become a Jewish settlement known as Hiran.⁹

Aside from direct physical destruction which usually utilizes the full force of the authorities with helicopters, bulldozers and hundreds of armed police to destroy zinc shacks and evict unarmed occupants, as in the case of mixed cities, Israel applies methods designed to result in quiet or ‘voluntary’ transfer. At the end of 2007, Adalah appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court against a decision by the Water Commissioner and the Israel Land Administration (ILA) not to provide drinking water to a group of unrecognized villages.¹⁰ The appeal was made on behalf of 128 families living in six villages. Adalah argued that the government’s denial of a request for drinking water is a direct attempt to use water resources to force Bedouin to leave the villages. Over a year later the organization is still awaiting a court decision. “These families have not left their land and have not relocated to live in other areas. The main basis for denying the requests...is to exert pressure on them to relocate to these government planned towns, which violates their basic right to dignity, solely in order to advance Israel’s policy... a severe and totally illegal punishment.”¹¹

1948 internal refugees

In 1948 while the majority of Palestinians were exiled outside the new state of Israel, an estimated 160,000 Palestinians managed to remain, later becoming Israeli citizens. However around a fifth of these were internally displaced – despite their citizenship, denied return to property and lands. Today some homes still exist crumbling or boarded up, or lived in by Israelis in what have become Jewish residential areas. However the vast majority have been bulldozed and built on or left as empty fields.

From 1948 to 1966 Palestinian citizens lived under military government, subject to curfew, and requiring permits for even small journeys. Throughout my research people spoke of how this was a time of struggle for basic survival. Coordinating effective struggle to return was out of the question, particularly with the threat of banishment hanging over their heads. By the time Palestinians had rebuilt their lives and began to re-establish political structures devastated in 1948, the destruction of more than 500 Palestinian villages was seen by Israel and the world as a *fait accompli*. Palestinian political activity was focused on ending the new 1967 occupation, and new threats of land confiscation inside Israel. The police killing of six demonstrators in 1976 as Palestinian citizens gathered in the Galilee to protest land confiscation, today commemorated as Land Day, was a bloody reminder that the end of military rule did not signal the integration of Arabs as full citizens of Israel.

1948 however was never forgotten within the community. In the early 1990s as Palestinians inside Israel finally realised that the international community labelled their concerns as ‘an Israeli domestic issue,’ local activists decided to take a more proactive stance in demanding a just solution for their 1948 dispossession. Destroyed village committees emerged campaigning for the right to protect remaining graveyards and holy sites. An umbrella committee known as the Association for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced (ADRID) was formed in order to campaign for the right of return for refugees inside Israel – as part of the development of the wider international grassroots campaign for the Palestinian right of return. In 1998 ADRID established a ‘Nakba March’ at the site of a different Palestinian village each year. The event is held on the day Israelis celebrate independence as traditionally

this was the only day Israel permitted access to the land. In 2008, 60 years on, around 15,000 people gathered at the site of Saffuriyya close to Nazareth. This crowd included not only refugees but other members of the community; “We are all refugees in our homeland.”

Despite official permission for this event, the police allowed a counter demonstration of Israelis to go ahead at the end of the march. As verbal exchanges began between a few Palestinian demonstrators and the Israelis waving flags and shouting Zionist slogans, a special unit of the police, some on horseback, attacked the Palestinian crowd.¹² Dozens were injured and arrested, with police using clubs, tear gas and stun grenades on the non-violent crowd. Footage posted on the internet and circulated amongst the community shows police kicking and stamping on demonstrators, chasing and smashing cameras and recording equipment.

“Viable” states?

This is not an exhaustive list of all Palestinian displaced living inside Israel. Discrimination against Palestinians inside Israel is not something that will automatically dissolve in the (unlikely) event of the establishment of a small West Bank/Gaza state of Palestine. Many European commentators have rightly noted in horror the rise to power of Avigdor Lieberman, who now plays a crucial role in the Israeli government. Lieberman’s *Yisrael Beiteinu* party openly advocates transfer of Arab citizens of Israel into a future Palestinian ‘statelet.’ However displacement and denial of refugee rights has been integral to Israeli policy towards Palestinians inside Israel since the establishment of the state. International campaigns should call not only for the end of occupation in the 1967 territories, and the right of return for Palestinians in the Diaspora, but for whatever state exists in the areas occupied in 1948 to be one which is a democracy for all its citizens. Raising awareness of the existence of Palestinian refugees and ongoing displacement inside Israel can be a key campaigning tool that Israel’s withdrawal to the 1967 line (however important a step it would be) is not the only action necessary to bring lasting justice and peace to the people of the region.

Isabelle Humphries, March 2009

¹ Reported: http://english.pnn.ps/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4866&Itemid=1

² Sami Abu Shehadeh and Fadi Shbaytah, “Jaffa from Eminence to Ethnic Cleansing,” *al-Majdal*, Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, Autumn 2008/Winter 2009, p.14.

³ Isabelle Humphries, ““Co-existence” and “Mixed Cities”: A Microcosm of Israeli Apartheid,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs (WRMEA)* Jan-Feb 2009, pp 15,37, www.washington-report.org/archives/Jan_Feb_2009/0901015.html

⁴ Isabelle Humphries, “The Nakba Continues: The Ethnic Cleansing of Jaffa’s Ajami Neighbourhood,” *WRMEA*, July 2008, pp.14-15, www.wrmea.com/archives/July_2008/0807014.html

⁵ Conversation with the author – April 2008.

⁶ Eyad Barghouti, “Akka: A Palestinian Priority” *al-Majdal*

⁷ Isabelle Humphries, “From Gaza to the Galilee: Same Policy, Same Agenda,” *WRMEA*, Sept/Oct 2005, pp.12-13, www.wrmea.com/archives/Sept_Oct_2005/0509012.html

⁸ See JNF Website: <http://www.jnf.org/work-we-do/blueprint-negev/>

⁹ Adalah, 13 November 2008, http://www.adalah.org/eng/pressreleases/pr.php?file=08_11_13

¹⁰ Isabelle Humphries, “Bringing Life to the Desert”: Israel’s Master Plan for Dispossession in the Negev,” *WRMEA*, March 2008, pp.20-21, www.wrmea.com/archives/March_2008/0803020.html

¹¹ Adalah, 12 December 2007, www.adalah.org/eng/pressreleases/pr.php?file=07_12_12

¹² Jonathan Cook, “The Nakba March”, *Electronic Intifada*, 16 May 2008 <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9547.shtml>