



# Land Day: its origins and significance

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## **Land Day: its origins and significance**

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### **Background**

Land Day is considered to be a milestone in the history of the Palestinian struggle. It is the day when the Palestinian people declared their commitment to defending the land of their forefathers, and maintain their identity and national rights, despite the ongoing Israeli massacres, terrorism and abuse. It is the day when the Palestinian people stood up to Israeli efforts to seize and Judaize Palestinian land and eliminate its Arab citizens by repressive, brutal and immoral means.

Land Day is a day of national uprising that started on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1976 in the form of a general strike and mass demonstrations in all Palestinian towns and villages occupied since 1948. The slogans were centred on the injustices and racial discrimination of the Zionist policies; from the confiscation of Palestinian land by the Israeli authorities since 1948, to attempts to remove the Palestinians from their land and to isolate them in small enclaves, as well as the various other means of oppression designed to restrict many aspects of their daily lives.

The day came about when the Palestinian masses in Israel and in the occupied territories decided to emphasise the Arab identity of historic Palestine, and protest against plans to empty the land of its Arab population and replace them with immigrant Jews.

In early 1975 the Israeli government announced a project to Judaize the Galilee, a region which has managed to retain its Arab majority despite all the Zionist schemes, under the name of 'Developing the Galilee'. The [objectives](#) of the project as published by the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture are:

1. Converting the Galilee into a region with a Jewish majority.
2. Ensuring proper distribution of the Jewish population in the Galilee.
3. Enhancing the economy of the population present as well as those who join them in the future.
4. The construction of eight industrial estates.



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BREIFING PAPER – March 2010

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 1976 Yisrael Koenig the acting Major General of the Israeli northern region prepared a secret document, aimed at emptying the Galilee of its Arab population, the seizure of Palestinian lands and Judaizing of the region. The document was submitted as a recommendation to the Israeli government under the title: “The draft memorandum for the treatment of Israeli Arabs.” It warned of the increasing population of Palestinians in the northern region, approximately equal to the number of Jews at the time, and that in a few years the Palestinians will become the majority in the region, explaining that this constitutes a serious threat to the Jewish character of Israel.

In this overtly racist [document](#), Koenig called for reducing the proportion of Palestinians in the Galilee and Negev regions, by seizing the remainder of their agricultural land and besieging them economically and socially. The document also recommended instructing new Jewish immigrants to settle in the Galilee and Negev regions, while facilitating the migration of Arab youth and students out of the country and preventing their return.

Following this in 1976 the Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin, issued an order to confiscate about 21,000 dunums of land (1 **dunam equals** 1000 square meters) belonging to the Arab towns of Deir Hanna, Sakhnin and Arabeh in the Galilee region. The Palestinians in Israel then declared a general strike and held demonstrations in several Arab towns and villages. Clashes broke out between the protestors and Israeli police/defences forces. As a result, six Palestinians were killed, 49 injured and 300 arrested. The Palestinians in Israel demanded an investigation by the Israeli authorities into the police killings of the Palestinians who are considered Israeli citizens, but their demands were rejected under the pretext that the army had encountered enemy forces.

Land Day was therefore a turning point in the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians in Israel as this was the first time the Palestinian masses publicly challenged the Israeli authorities. Land Day also served to unify the Palestinians in Israel in resistance against the oppression they faced.

The Land Day uprising was not a coincidence, nor was it simply a result of the decision to confiscate some land in 1976, rather it was a reaction to the deprivation suffered by the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine since the establishment of Israel in 1948.



Seizing Palestinian land is a fundamental part of the Zionist project as indicated in Zionist literature; especially that produced at the First Zionist Congress in Basel (Switzerland) in 1897. Since the creation, Israel has consistently pursued a policy of Judaizing the land and expulsion of its Arab citizens. Not only do the Israeli authorities confiscate the land of the Palestinian Arabs who were forced to flee their lands in 1948 but they also work continuously to seize the rest that is in the possession of those who remained in their land.

### **A land targeted for more than a hundred years**

Since the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, it was clear that the aim of the Zionist enterprise was to seize Palestinian land and expel its Arab population with the ultimate goal of establishing a Jewish state with the lowest possible number of Arabs. Accordingly, the Zionist movement managed to ally itself with major powers, especially Britain, which ruled Palestine as a mandatory from 1922 – 1948, leading to the establishment of the state of Israel on 15 May 1948, on 20,000 square kilometres of Palestinian land – which constitutes 74% of the total area (27,009 square kilometres) of the [historic Palestine](#).

The most intensive phase of Zionist settlement in Palestine was during the British Mandate. During this period, successive British governments played a major role in enabling the Jews to control large areas of Palestinian land by transferring ownership of publicly owned lands to them. As such the Jewish immigrants were able to own over 2,070,000 dunams.

It is important to note that the Zionist institutions were keen on ensuring that these lands were spaced out, so as to ensure that the Jewish State would cover a greater area. Under the British Mandate, the Zionist movement managed to seize 30% of the total agricultural land in Palestine, which the authorities helped to facilitate by easing the transfer of ownership of Palestinian land to Zionist organizations. It also granted the Jewish Agency vast areas ([195,000 dunams](#)) of Palestinian land.

The Zionist organisations ‘Haganah’, ‘Stern’ and ‘Irgun’ were able in 1948 to expel over 850,000 Palestinians from their lands, forcing them to become refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as well as the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The number of Palestinian refugees at the time made up 57% of the total sum of the Palestinian people in 1948, which totalled about 1.5 million. In contrast, those who managed to remain within the so-called Green Line were about 151,000 Palestinians, mostly concentrated in the Galilee and the Negev. These so-called ‘Arab Israelis’ are now 1.2 million in number and since 1948 have become a minority in their own land.



Recently they have been the subject of attention by decision-makers in Israel because their population growth is seen as a threat to the Zionist project.

Accordingly, successive Israeli governments have sought, since 1948, to make life for the Arab community within their homeland unbearable through the imposition of facts on the ground to prevent Palestinian construction and geographical expansion, along with the confiscation of large parts of Arab land for the establishment of more Jewish settlements. This is despite attracting more Jews from around the world, raising the total from 650,000 in 1948 to more than 5.5 million in the beginning of 2008.

To further strengthen its authority over the Palestinian territories, Israel passed a law called the 'Law of Return' in 1950 which enables any Jew in the world to settle in Israel, while seizing the territories of the Palestinian refugees through another law entitled the 'Law of Absentee Property'.

In this respect, the confiscated lands owned by Palestinian refugees who were expelled in 1948 is approximately [17,178,000](#) dunums constituting 63.6% of the total area of historic Palestine and, and 84.5% of Israel.

### **The apartheid wall and the Judaizing of Palestinian land**

The latest tool for land Judaization adopted by Israel is the apartheid wall Israel is building which cuts deep into the Palestinian territories. Derived from the "Iron Wall" idea of "Jabotinsky" – a Zionist ideologue - for a wall of intimidation and terror, the wall is a practical embodiment of the intellectual arguments present in his writings.

In July of 2003 the project to build the wall was announced. The plans indicated that it would devour more than half of the West Bank and withhold the Palestinian water sources for the benefit of the Jewish settlers. The full length of the wall, as planned, was 622 km, and is thus twice the length of the so-called Green Line. As of late 2009, construction of about 60% had been completed. According to Palestinian sources, 85% of the planned wall cuts deep into the West Bank.

The apartheid wall, as it is known, represents a large scale land-grabbing project, and divides the West Bank into several pieces, isolating hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into enclaves. The wall has affected an estimated 300,000 Palestinians so far through confiscation of land, the uprooting of trees, prevention of access to farms and water sources in a number of villages in the northern West Bank, Jerusalem and Bethlehem areas.



Furthermore, there are 93,200 Palestinians living in areas between the wall and the Green Line, and 32.7% of the West Bank villages will face difficulties in accessing medical services and other basic services upon completion of the wall's construction.

A large number of human rights organisations, as well as the decision of the International Court of Justice in the Hague (2004), have made clear that "Israel's construction of the Apartheid Wall in the West Bank constitutes a [flagrant violation of human rights](#) and international law, as a unilateral demarcation of the border with the West Bank" as well as in terms of other violations of international law associated with it such as the annexation of lands, collective punishment, seizure of private property, destruction of homes and properties, in addition to violating fundamental human rights, such as the right to work and the freedom of movement.

### **The confiscation of land – an elimination of the two-state solution**

On 26 June 2009, Israel published twelve adverts in the Arab newspaper 'Al-Quds' and in Hebrew newspapers announcing the confiscation of 140,000 dunums of Palestinian land and the transfer of ownership to the Israeli Civil Administration. The confiscated region spans the area from Seir village (northeast of Hebron) in the south, to South Jericho (central West Bank), and from Bethlehem in the west to the Dead Sea in the east, which effectively means Israeli control of the entire West Bank desert. Experts and politicians warn of the impossibility of a Palestinian state after such large-scale confiscation of land, calling for greater international pressure on Israel to compel it to abandon its plan.

In clarifying the impact of the decision, Abd al-Hadi Hantash, a member of 'The General Committee for Defending the Land' said that the occupation is carrying out a series of plans, of which the Allon Plan, first announced in 1970, dictates the capture of a strip from north to south parallel to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea 10 to 13 km wide.

Another plan is detailed in a document by [Israel Galili](#) demanding the confiscation of more land, as well as the setting up of settlements to prevent a return to the borders of 1967.

An international group active in the field of human rights has warned that the two-state solution to the 62 year old Arab-Israeli conflict has become practically impossible because Israel's policies continue to confiscate Palestinian property together with the continued denial of the right for refugees to return to their homes and lands.



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BREIFING PAPER – March 2010

The report is entitled 'Ruling Palestine: A History of the Legally Sanctioned Jewish-Israeli Seizure of Land and Housing in Palestine', by the independent Geneva-based Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) and BADIL Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. The report covers details of how the Zionist leaders, and successive Israeli governments, manipulated Ottoman and British laws in addition to the introduction of a legal system aimed at dispossessing the Palestinians of their property and land. The report warns that if Israel continues to confiscate land at the current rate, upon completion of the 'security' wall, the Palestinian territories comprising of Gaza and the remainder of the West Bank – on which a Palestinian state is expected – will cover less than 8% of the area of historic Palestine.

When the State of Israel was created in 1948, Jews owned less than 10% of the area of the land. Today, these figures have been reversed; as Israel effectively controls, militarily, the whole area of historical Palestine and is in direct possession (or has cleared for its use) approximately 90% of the territory of historic Palestine.

Scott Leckie, the Executive Director of (COHRE) says "Our research reveals that Israeli law, far from providing impartial protection and equal treatment to all those that it affects, has been fundamental to the expropriation of Palestinian land and property since the State of Israel was unilaterally declared in 1948."

Leckie adds: "In the period 1948-49, the formation of Israel was followed by more than 30 separate military operations by Jewish-Israeli forces, which led to the flight or expulsion of over 800,000 Palestinians and the destruction of 531 Palestinian towns and villages. The calculated theft of Palestinian lands through both legal means and military aggression, as well as widespread housing demolitions and the imposition of apartheid-like laws by Israel, are difficult to see as anything other than a cruel form of ethnic cleansing."

There are today more than five million Palestinian refugees still deprived from returning to their lands, homes and properties, at a time when, over the past few years, millions of refugees around the world have returned to their homes. Examples include the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, South Africa, Mozambique and Kosovo, whereas Israel still opposes the legitimate rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.

He adds "Although the United States routinely supports the rights of refugees throughout the world to recover their former lands, homes and properties, it refuses to recognize that Palestinian refugees should also enjoy their legitimate property rights. The hypocrisy of the US stance which explicitly denies the property rights of Palestinian refugees is blatant and unjustifiable if terms such as human rights and the rule of law are to have universal application."



The study shows how Israel used the 1954 Prevention of Infiltration Law to expel 'internal refugees' - Palestinian Arabs who were declared absent from their villages at the time of Israel's creation despite remaining in Palestine. These 'absentees' were effectively defined as infiltrators, and when caught were barred from their villages despite living in Israel as Israeli citizens.

The report also reveals land and property laws enacted by the Israeli government in the occupied West Bank which enabled it to take further control of Palestinian land.

The report concludes that, even if a final settlement could be negotiated, a viable Palestinian state would not be feasible, given the shortage of available land and infrastructure and the lack of territorial contiguity. These problems are further aggravated by the presence of hundreds of strategically located Jewish settlements, especially in the West Bank, and around East Jerusalem which split the West Bank into unconnected northern and southern parts.

[Leckie](#) warns "This new study concludes that what little remains of the Palestinian homeland is disappearing in front of our eyes; it's as if Israel is deliberately erasing it from the map."

### **In Conclusion**

After 34 years since the start of Land Day, confiscation and Judaisation rates are now at their peak. Having seized the bulk of Arab lands in Israel, the focus is now on the West Bank and the Judaisation of Jerusalem, with no serious attempts by the international community to deter Israel. Rather the victims are expected to suffer in silence, and to give up their rights in exchange for a deceptive economic mirage in the West Bank financed mostly by European countries at no cost to Israel as an occupying power. It comes as no surprise therefore that Israel refuses even a temporary cease in settlement construction since it is treated as an entity above international law.

