

Palestine's "Land Day" and "Israel Apartheid Week"

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Palestinian Land Day and Israel Apartheid Week activities around the world gave Israel and its Western backers something to think about in recent weeks...

Israeli land confiscations accelerated in the 1970s and led Palestinians to organise the first coordinated demonstrations in the Occupied Territories on 30 March 1976, during which 6 Palestinians were killed. This date has been marked ever since as "Land Day".

The secret Interior Ministry Koenig Memorandum, written shortly after the 1976 Land Day rallies, called for "diluting existing Arab population concentrations" to "ensure the long-term Jewish national interests". This officially marked the implementation of Ben Gurion's plans of ethnic cleansing to make Israel a de facto Jewish state. Treatment of native Arab Muslims and Christians ever since merely confirms this policy, with forced Jewish loyalty oaths and second class services and laws for non-Jews.

This year's 36th annual Land Day rallies saw Israeli security forces shooting dead a 20-year-old man, and wounding 37 stone-throwers in the Gaza Strip and around Jerusalem, using live ammunition, rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades. Israeli forces were put on high alert on the frontiers with Lebanon and Syria, but there were no reports of anyone nearing the frontier fences. In fact, the Israeli Defence Forces were relieved at the relatively small numbers of protesters.

But there is little for them to cheer about. Israeli Brigadier General Yoav Mordechai said, "The Nakba and Naksa days are ahead of us, and that is where the challenge will be." Nakba (disaster) Day, the day after Israeli independence day, is 15 May, and Naksa (retreat) Day, when Israel took control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, previously controlled by Jordan and Egypt, is 5 June.

During Nakba Day commemorations last year, thousands of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syria marched towards the ceasefire borders with Israel. Fifteen Palestinians were killed and hundreds wounded, and more than a hundred protestors from Syria managed to breach the fence and enter the Golan Heights. One even made it all the way to Tel Aviv.

Land Day is now formally commemorated in a Global March to Jerusalem, protesting the Judaisation of East Jerusalem as Israel prepares to make Jerusalem its Jews-only capital. According to organisers, more than 600 institutions from 64 states were involved in planning the march. Protests also took place outside Israeli embassies in European and Arab countries. Backers of the march include former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohammed and former Anglican Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu. Organisers planned to send convoys of vehicles to Israel's borders simultaneously from Jordan, Egypt,

Syria and Lebanon.

Jordan's demonstration attracted 15,000, included four rabbis from Neturei Karta. "We want the world to know that the Jewish religion does not accept the occupation and the oppression of the Palestinian people. It is against the views of Jews around the world who are true to the Torah," said Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss. "We are here to mark Land Day, and tell the world not to blame Jewish people for the crimes of Zionism," Rabbi Ahron Cohen said. "Judaism and Zionism are two different concepts."

Numbers were smaller in Lebanon, as Lebanese security forces attempted to prevent a repeat of last year's fatal border protests. About 200 foreign activists, including two more rabbis, arrived at Beaufort Castle to join the southern Lebanon rally. In Syria, despite the civil war, protesters rallied in Damascus in solidarity with both the Palestinians and Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Egypt had planned demonstrations, but they were called off due to heightened security and the tense political situation there.

To mark Land Day, Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti, who is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for his role during the Second Intifada, called on Palestinians to launch a popular resistance campaign against Israel and for the Palestinian Authority to stop peace negotiations and all coordination with Israel in the economic and security realms.

Land Day, of course, is all about land. Appropriately, 30 March 2012 is the first anniversary of the Stop the Jewish National Fund (JNF) campaign aimed at ending the role of the JNF in expanding illegal settlements by displacing Palestinians, stealing their property, and then covering this up with tax-exempt donations from diaspora Jews. This campaign is a key element in Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) activism. The JNF uses greenwash to advertise itself as an environmental movement, planting fast-growing non-native firs on razed Palestinian villages to hide Israeli crimes. Israeli parks include a Leisure corner at Neshar Park, Canada Park, American Independence Park, JF Kennedy Memorial, and Coretta Scott King Forest.

The Stop the JNF campaign (www.stopthejnf.org) fights this, even doing "flash" actions in the Israeli parks, nailing notices to trees to identify the destroyed Palestinian villages, as well as lobbying foreign governments to end the JNF's tax-exempt status. British Prime Minister David Cameron was successfully pressured to end his status as "Honorary Patron" of the JNF last year. Stop the JNF also has a "Plant a Tree" programme in Palestine to replant indigenous trees.

In the build-up to Land Day, throughout February and early March, student solidarity groups marked the 8th Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) at 120 universities in 40 cities around the world, from Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and Albuquerque to Yaffa and Zurich. At Boston-area universities Israeli activist and filmmaker Shai Carmeli-Pollak screened his 2006 documentary "Bilin Habibti" about Israel Defense Forces violence. Members of Brandeis University SJP marked their first annual Israeli Apartheid Week with a hunger strike to draw attention to Palestinian Khader Adnan's 66-day hunger strike in protest of his detainment without charge. Good news: the international media spotlight on the case pushed Israeli officials to agree to free Adnan in April.

At the University of Amsterdam, Shir Hever, an Israeli economist at Jerusalem's Alternative Information Centre, gave a series of lectures "Could the economic policies of Israel be

considered a form of Apartheid?" At Glasgow University, Israeli anthropologist Jeff Halper, co-founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, spoke on "Israeli Apartheid: The Case For BDS". At the University of Liverpool, the Corporate Watch research group unveiled a new source book Targeting Israeli Apartheid. In London, a Beats Against Apartheid event included performances from hip-hop artists Lowkey, Mic Righteous and Awate.

British and Canadian politicians were furious. In Canada, the Ontario legislature unanimously condemned Israeli Apartheid Week. "If you're going to label Israel as Apartheid, then you are also attacking Canadian values," Conservative legislator Peter Shurman told Shalom Life. "The use of the phrase 'Israeli Apartheid Week' is about as close to hate speech as one can get without being arrested, and I'm not certain it doesn't actually cross over that line."

In the UK, thought police were called on to investigate comments made at Middlesex University's Free Palestine Society IAW forum by Liberal Democrat Peer Jenny Tonge and former US marine Ken O'Keefe. O'Keefe is alleged to have incited racial hatred by comparing Jewish supporters of Israeli crimes to Nazis in their treatment of Jews. "The decent Germans of World War Two, what did they do when the Nazis came to power and instituted their policies? Did they do enough to stop the Nazis? No, they didn't. What are the Jewish people doing right now? Are you doing enough to stop your racist, apartheid, genocidal state?" Baroness Tonge agreed with O'Keefe telling the audience at that Israel would "not last forever" and would "lose support, and then they will reap what they have sown".

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