



ILA Agricultural Plantings “To Protect The Land From Invaders” Carried Out By The JNF: An Explainer

29 January 2023

The Jewish National Fund (JNF), upon the decision of the Israel Land Authority (ILA), has [resumed](#) afforestation work surrounding numerous unrecognized Bedouin villages, primarily along the unrecognized village of Bir Al-Hamam, starting on Sunday, 29 January 2023.

This action follows continued afforestation efforts, including that carried out by the JNF in January 2022 on the lands of the Al-Atrash Bedouin tribe near the village of Sa'wa. The plantings, carried out under a heavily militarized police operation, sparked widespread protests. Israeli police violently dispersed the protests against the afforestation work, using rubber bullets, rubber-coated steel bullets and drones that dropped tear gas grenades, and subjected protestors to mass arrest and detention. Read more [here](#).

The state sees these plantings as an effective tool "to protect the land from invaders" referring to the Bedouins who live near the land, use it, and often have claims of ownership over it. As such, the plantings are a tool of the state's repression of Bedouins living in unrecognized villages, part of its ongoing project to forcefully displace them from their lands into impoverished government-planned towns and "recognized" Bedouin villages. The decision on the location of the afforestation is made by the ILA's "Committee for the Preservation of the Agricultural Land". This committee was established following a petition by the Society for the Protection of Nature which argued that the afforestation work carried out by the JNF and the ILA does not do not comply with the legal requirements under Israeli law and on areas not designated for afforestation and results in irreversible ecological damage. Afforestation requires the preparation of plans for afforestation, the state is exploiting a "legal loophole" by claiming that the plantings in the Naqab are "agricultural". This claim is a fiction designed to circumvent legal obligations, and according to Adalah, as detailed [here](#), is an illegal policy.

These recent plantings follow a long history of the political use of afforestation by the State of Israel and the JNF to dispossess Palestinian society of their lands. As recently described by Ovadia-Luski, the Chairwoman of JNF-KKL (the Israeli chapter of the JNF) [stated](#), in the context of the JNF's planned afforestation work starting this week, "holding onto and protecting the land, along with settlements and planting trees were core values of JNF-KKL from the early days of the Zionist movement, and we're proud to be leading these fields today as well."

The Status of the JNF-KKL

The JNF is a private organization that was established in 1901 as a trustee in the name of the Jewish people to expand their acquisition of land in historic Palestine. In 1961, a treaty was signed between the JNF and the State of Israel, which, among other things, transferred the land belonging to Palestinian refugees to the JNF-KKL. Since its founding, the JNF-KKL has served as a non-governmental body that is used to circumvent legal obligations and, above all, the right to equality under the law.¹

The JNF today has fundraising efforts and other Zionist projects across the world through its various branches outside of Israel. As a whole, this collective is committed to expanding the Judaization of historic Palestine, particularly the regions of the Galilee and Naqab, with large Palestinian populations, primarily by building and developing new towns and villages exclusively for housing Jewish Israelis and undertaking large afforestation projects. Under Israeli law, the JNF enjoys a special status and carries out governmental functions; about 78% of the land currently under the JNF's control – 13% of all land in Israel – was transferred to it by the state of Israel, and six out of the 14 members of the Israel Land Council (ILC), a governmental body that determines land policies in Israel, are required by law to be JNF representatives. This means that the JNF retains enormous influence over all decision-making pertaining to the allocation and use of land, and although this land was largely confiscated from “absent” Palestinian refugees and internally-displaced Palestinian citizens of Israel, the JNF's [express mandate](#) is the acquisition of land in any area within the jurisdiction of the Government of Israel “for the purpose of settling Jews on such lands and properties”.

The Israeli government uses the JNF's status as an [independent, private entity](#) to allocate land and resources, through the JNF, to Jews only, as such an entity is not obliged, under Israeli law, to determine the allocation of land and land policies for the benefit of all citizens, as a governmental entity would.

The Context of Afforestation

The 1961 covenant signed between JNF and the State of Israel [stipulates that](#) “reclamation and afforestation of Israel's lands shall be concentrated in the hands of [the JNF]”. The JNF collects massive amounts of funding internationally to expand its mission, under the guise of environmentalism and development. [According to the JNF](#), during “the 109 years of its existence, KKL-JNF planted over 240,000,000 trees on an area of about one million dunam.” while trying to promote these activities as an ecological green good deeds, defacto... the JNF has carried out extensive afforestation – a process of planting large amounts of trees – including in mainly-Palestinian populated areas such as the Galilee and the Naqab and also over the ruins of palestinian uprooted villages.

¹ Pursuant to the 2016 ‘swap agreement’, the JNF must technically allow Palestinians (citizens of Israel) to participate in land bids, however, if Palestinians obtain land through this process, the state has guaranteed that the JNF will be “compensated” with additional parcels of land granted to them by the state. Read more about the agreement and the legal steps carried out to put an end to the JNF's foundational policy of discrimination [here](#).

Afforestation has been consistently used by Israel to dispossess Palestinian lands; in 1979, then-Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon, mentioned that afforestation, *inter alia*, is meant to “preserve state land” and the future establishment of permanent (Jewish) villages on such land **is an important objective to realize the goal of “Judaizing the Galilee”**.²

Afforestation work in the Naqab, among other policies and tactics that Israel employs, aims at evicting Bedouin citizens from their ancestral lands and confiscating these lands for the proliferation of Judaization (read more about the Bedouins in the Naqab [here](#)). One egregious example of Israel’s afforestation work to confiscate lands belonging to Bedouin citizens is the village of Al-Araqib, which Israel, as of December 2022, has destroyed 211 times to make way for, among other things, two JNF forests.³

Looking Ahead

In 2017, Israel committed to allocate 30 million shekels a year for afforestation work to be carried out in cooperation with the JNF under the “*Socio-Economic Development Plan for Negev Bedouin*”.⁴ Under this plan, Israel is dispossessing lands of Bedouin citizens under the façade of bridging economic gaps between Bedouins and the general population – gaps that are the result of Israel’s systemic racial discrimination against Bedouin citizens.

The new government – per the coalition agreements (see [here](#), for example) – has committed to expand the long-held Israeli practice of ‘Judaizing’ the Naqab and prioritize the “preservation of state land”. The government has also committed to planting in the occupied West Bank (Area C), expanding its colonial project of confiscation of private Palestinian land in violation of international law. (See [Adalah’s Position Paper Adalah’s Analysis of the New Israeli Government’s Guiding Principles and Coalition Agreements and their Implications on Palestinians’ Rights](#)).

² According to Archival records uncovered by Akevot. See more [Afforestation – a tool for landgrab - Akevot](#)

³ The state and the JNF began afforestation work in the land in 2006, welcoming diplomats from 49 countries to the inauguration of the ‘Ambassador’s Forest’ in the southern part of Al-Araqib. In 2009, the JNF joined forces with God-TV, a Christian evangelical television channel, to begin planting one million trees on the western land of the village. See more [From Al-Araqib to Susiya: The Forced Displacement of Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line](#)

⁴ See [Hebrew] plan [here](#), and the extension of budgeting and authority until 2026 [here](#).