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Israeli policies of dispossession reminiscent of South African apartheid

Plans to displace bedouins in Israel are reminiscent of the forced removals of blacks in Sophiatown.

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The implementation of the Praver Plan is expected to uproot around 30,000 bedouins from their homes

During the forced removals of the South African suburb of Sophiatown in 1955, around 65,000 residents were moved and "**dumped in matchbox houses**" in black townships. Only a few years before that, in 1948, Bedouins of Israel's Naqab/Negev region, who Israel had not expelled, were also **forcibly moved** "from their ancestral lands into a restricted zone called the Siyag (literally, 'fenced in')". And, just as Sophiatown was completely bulldozed, the Negev village of Al-Arakib was recently razed to make way for a Jewish National Fund forest.

As a South African it is particularly difficult not to see the stark parallels between the experiences of black South Africans under apartheid and of Palestinians today.

Haunting echoes of apartheid's forced removals

Sophiatown, a once vibrant, predominantly "black" residential area, was targeted by the apartheid government in its programme of forced removals. In accordance with apartheid-inspired segregation and settlement of whites on land previously inhabited by black South Africans, Sophiatown became the "whites-only" suburb of "Triomf" (Triumph).

In a haunting mirror, on September 12, 2012, the Bedouin village of Al-Arakib in Israel's Negev region was demolished for the thirty-ninth time - despite tenure dating back to the Ottoman period. More recently the government won the right to build a Jewish settlement on the site of the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran. The planned Jewish settlement will become Hiran.

The villagers of Umm al-Hiran and Al-Arakib are citizens of Israel: Its Arab citizens that Israel prides - and parades - as proof of its democracy. They are, however, not Jewish, a critical determiner of who is entitled to what land and how rights are allocated. If the state has its way, Al-Arakib will be forested over by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), and, with Umm al-Hiran, join the fate of around 500 Palestinian villages that have been wiped from the face of the "Jewish State" since 1947 (a process that started before the state came into being in 1948). Many of these villages now lie buried beneath Jewish settlements and JNF recreation parks and forests.

JNF's Zionist socialisation

Like so many Jewish children, I had a **JNF Blue Box** (money box); "the small Blue Box and the Big Jewish Dream" that has become a symbol of Jewish-Zionist identity. I had certificates representing trees planted in my name. These were integral to my socialisation into Zionism: I was helping to make "**the desert bloom**" and enabling "my people" to return to "our" homeland.

What I did not know was that my "right" to the land was contingent on the dispossession of Palestinians from their land and rights. Discovering the truth was jarring.

The ruins in the JNF South Africa Forest in the Galilee enthralled me as a child visiting Israel; I believed I had stumbled upon an ancient archaeological site. I have since learnt that these ruins are the remains of the destroyed Palestinian village of Lubyā. Like many other South African Jews, I have sponsored trees in this forest.

JNF's inherent racism

The JNF, established in 1901 to acquire land for Jewish settlement, plays a critical role in socialising and educating Jews into Zionism, and institutionalising the belief that Jews have a right to land and rights at the expense of Palestinian rights. The JNF is also central to the state's ownership, and ongoing appropriation, of land. With the state's identity premised on "the land" (*Eretz Yisrael*), the JNF, a quasi-governmental organisation, arguably embodies the state.

The JNF owns 13 per cent of land and along with the Israel Lands Administration manages 93 per cent of all land. Its constitutive tenets are inherently racist, stipulating that only Jews may use or lease JNF land. Some of this land was purchased prior to 1948, but the larger part was transferred by the state post independence. This allowed the state to surrender its responsibility of equality to all its citizens by passing its authority to the JNF which could then openly practice exclusion.

The JNF **unashamedly confirms**:

"It is not a public body that works for the benefit of all its citizens of the state. The loyalty of the JNF is given to the Jewish people and only to them is the JNF obligated. The JNF, as the owner of JNF land, does not have a duty to practice equality to all citizens of the state."

In other words the JNF owes loyalty to me, but not to 20 per cent of Israel's population, its Palestinian citizens, not to mention Palestinians dispossessed by the Nakba. And according to its Jewish-only policy, I have more right to land - a South African of Lithuanian origin - than Palestinians who have lived on the land for centuries. And despite its racist policies, the JNF is still given authority to manage most state land.

'Judaisation' of the Negev

The JNF further positions itself as an innocuous **environmental organisation**:

"Over the past 109 years, JNF has evolved into a global environmental leader by planting 250 million trees... bringing life to the Negev Desert and educating students around the world about Israel and the environment."

The truth is quite different.

To ensure that the villagers of Al-Arakib can never return, the JNF has begun planting a forest of environmentally damaging, non-indigenous eucalyptus trees to conceal evidence of its existence. Further exposing the JNF's hypocrisy, in the process of forced removals, the state uprooted hundreds of indigenous olive trees.

Al-Arakib and Umm al-Hiran are but two of the many so-called unrecognised Bedouin villages targeted by the state; villages unrecognised despite the thousands who live in them - unrecognised to render the inhabitants powerless. As part of the Praver Plan, the state **plans to expel** 30,000 Bedouins from their villages in the Negev, and forcibly move them to designated

townships. This will devastate livelihoods, sever them from their land, destroy ancestral lifestyles, and corrode at their communal identity and sense of belonging. In close collaboration with the JNF, the state plans to settle 250,000 Jews in the Negev.

Simply put, the idea is to make the Negev Jewish and ensure that the non-Jewish inhabitants live in manageable enclaves.

With our own history of apartheid, particularly disquieting was discovering the role of the South African JNF in enabling this displacement of Bedouins. **Certificates** are even available to **support the project**:

"[O]ur goal is to bring 250,000 new residents to the Negev... JNF South Africa is making a difference by assisting young pioneers to establish farmsteads... located in the Negev highlands between the Telallim Junction to the town of Mizpe Ramon... built on available sites in the Negev that are neither protected nature reserves nor army training areas. Most of the sites have been chosen for their scenic location and in many cases have been *built on previously disturbed sites*." [my emphasis]

Would Sophiatown too be a previously disturbed site?

Apartheid?

The UN/ICC **definition of apartheid** is "systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime".

For many Jewish South Africans the apartheid analogy that is gaining traction is painful and is being determinedly challenged. As South Africans we know apartheid, and it was brutal. White South Africans, however, cannot know the pain and humiliation of dispossession and oppression. Rather, we can know what it means to be privileged at the expense of someone else's oppression.

It is not for the oppressor to decide how the oppressed should understand their oppression.

But, how is whites-only different to Jewish-only? And, if the forced removal of 30,000 Bedouins to make way for 250,000 Jews is not "systematic oppression... with the intention of maintaining the regime", what, then, is it?