

Fury at Israeli Plan to Build Town on Historic Muslim Village

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Netanyahu government agrees to first new Palestinian community in 68 years – exclusively for the Druze – on refugees' land

An Israeli government plan to build hundreds of homes for the country's Druze population faces stiff opposition after it was revealed that the new community would be located on the lands of Palestinian refugees.

The town, due to be built west of the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel, would be the first new community for members of Israel's Palestinian minority since the state's founding 68 years ago.

The country's 1.6 million Palestinian citizens are a fifth of the population.

Leaders of the Palestinian minority expressed outrage that officials had selected a site where two Palestinian villages were located until their destruction following the 1948 war that established Israel.

Archival evidence shows that the Israeli military razed more than 500 Palestinian villages after the war to ensure their residents could not return.

"The decision to build a Druze town on these destroyed villages is designed to light a fuse under the relations between the Druze and other members of Palestinian minority," Samer Swaid, a Druze political activist, told Middle East Eye.

"This is all about Israel reinforcing its divide-and-rule policies over us."

The choice of location is particularly sensitive because one of the destroyed villages, Hittin, has [great historical and symbolic importance](#) to Palestinian Muslims.

The village was established on the orders of Saladin to commemorate his victory in a famous battle against the Crusaders in 1187. The Crusaders' defeat, at the Horns of Hittin, led to their exodus from the Holy Land.

After 1948, Israel razed all of Hittin apart from its ancient mosque.

'Detached from reality'

Sheikh Muwaffik Tarif, the Druzes' spiritual leader in Israel, [was reported](#) to be "taken

aback” by the plan, sources close to him told the Israeli daily Haaretz.

A former Druze government minister, Salah Tarif, also objected, telling the newspaper the idea was “detached from reality”. He added that it was “a band-aid that’s meant to cover up the real problem – the condition of the existing [Druze] towns.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [announced the plan](#) for the town last week as part of “extensive activity” to promote the Druze population. The town would “facilitate the reduction of [economic] gaps between Druze towns and other towns” in Israel, his office said.

Some 400 houses are to be built in an initial phase, but eventually the town is expected to comprise 2,500 homes.

Israel has 115,000 Druze citizens inside its recognised borders, and a further 25,000 in the Golan, Syrian territory occupied by Israel in 1967 and later annexed in violation of international law.

The Druze are a secretive religious sect, an off-shoot of Islam, that emerged in Egypt in the 11th century. Today, most Druze communities are located in the mountainous areas of Lebanon, Syria and what is now northern Israel.

Unlike other Palestinian citizens and the Druze in the Golan, the Druze community in Israel are required to serve for three years in the Israeli military.

In return, the Druze were given the status of a separate national group. Israel categorises other Palestinian citizens simply as “Arabs”.

That has entitled the Druze to a separate school system, with its own curriculum. Traditionally, the chief benefits of military service for the Druze have been access to security-related jobs after the draft, including in the police and as prison guards.

Confiscated lands

But critics, including from within the Druze, say the community has otherwise faced the same, or worse, discrimination in land allocations and budgets as other Palestinian citizens.

“The Druze have not benefited as a community from the draft,” said Hana Swaid, a former member of the Israeli parliament who now heads the Arab Centre for Alternative Planning. “On the contrary, their loyalty and deference to the Israeli leadership were exploited to their disadvantage.”

Swaid told MEE that research by his centre showed three-quarters of Druze land had been confiscated and many of their 14 existing towns and villages in Israel lacked master-plans, making it impossible for new development.

“Many Druze families cannot get building permits for their homes, meaning they can be demolished, or they cannot connect legally to basic services like water and electricity,” he said.

Swaid noted that, after sweeping land confiscations from the Palestinian minority, the Israeli

state had nationalised 93 per cent of Israeli territory, reserving most of it for the Jewish population. Only 3 percent was left in the hands of the Palestinian minority, resulting in severe overcrowding and unlicensed building.

“Of that 3 percent, only about a fifth of the land is authorised for development. That is why Palestinian communities are suffocating.”

This week the Israeli media [reported](#) that Netanyahu’s office was beefing up the enforcement of house demolitions in a move that it is feared will target 50,000 unlicensed Palestinian homes in Israel.

Close to Tiberias

The National Planning Council is reported to have considered 10 different locations for the Druze town before settling on the area by the Sea of Galilee.

Netanyahu said the new town’s proximity to the city of Tiberias and major highways would help to “advance the Druze population economically and socially”.

Samer Swaid, who is not related to Hana Swaid, said most of the Druze rejected a town built on refugee land and wanted their confiscated lands to be returned so they could expand existing communities.

“There is, for example, a lot of confiscated land near Daliyat and Isifiya [two Druze villages south of Haifa] that could be given back to us so we could build there.”

Swaid, a leading official in the [Druze Initiative Committee](#), which rejects military service for the Druze, noted that hundreds of Druze protesters from Daliyat clashed violently with police in 2010 when the government took more land to lay a gas pipeline between the centre of the country and Haifa.

“The government always finds Druze land available for its own projects, just not when we need to expand.”

A press release from Netanyahu’s office [claimed](#) that the 14 existing communities could not be further developed because they were located in hilly terrain or next to nature reserves.

Hana Swaid said these were “just pretexts” for inaction. “Israel has built many rural Jewish settlements on lands confiscated from the Druze villages. It seems these restrictions apply only when the Druze want to build.”

Refugees’ rights violated

A 1965 planning law recognises some 120 communities as Arab. It is all but impossible for most Palestinian citizens to live outside these communities or a handful of cities where Palestinian neighbourhoods exist.

But while Israel has built hundreds of rural communities exclusively for Jewish citizens since Israel’s creation 68 years ago, Hana Swaid pointed out that no new communities for Palestinians had been established.

The decision to build the town was approved by Netanyahu’s government in late 2012, but

the location – over the two destroyed villages of Hittin and Nimrin – came to light only this month.

Suhad Bishara, a lawyer specialising in land issues for Adalah, a legal centre for Palestinian citizens, told MEE the development of the new town would violate the rights of the refugees to their land guaranteed in international law.

As part of Israel's international obligations, she said, refugee land was supposed to be held in trust by an official, known as the custodian, until the issue of the refugees had been settled.

"Building on this land means the refugees cannot receive restitution in the future," she said. "It complicates the picture of any future peace agreement."

'Present absentees'

In addition to the millions of Palestinian refugees and their descendants living outside Israel's borders, one in four of the Palestinian population inside Israel are reported to be refugees. The internally displaced are officially classified as "[present absentees](#)" – present in Israel but absent from their homes.

All of the residents of Nimrin, a small village in 1948, were forced outside Israel's borders. But some of Hittin's families managed to remain close by their village.

Makbula Nassar, a Palestinian journalist whose mother's family was from Hittin, said the internal refugees lived nearby in communities such as Eilaboun, Nazareth and Deir Hana.

"They have been actively struggling to get access to their lands, and especially the mosque, since the 1980s," she said. "The authorities immediately declared the mosque off-limits and an antiquity site."

The mosque, which was built on Saladin's orders, has been fenced off since 2000. "Why If the mosque is an antiquity, is the state allowing it to fall into ruin? No one is caring for it."

Jewish groups have also opposed the decision to build the town. Late last month a protest was staged outside Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem by a historical society that recreates the Battle of Hittin, as well as by archeologists and members of neighbouring Jewish communities.

They argue that, given the area's historical significance, Israel ought to be pressing the United Nations to declare it a World Heritage Site and ban development.

Site of pilgrimage

Despite the opposition of many Druze leaders, government officials have highlighted the support of Ayoub Kara, a hawkish Druze member of Netanyahu's Likud party and the deputy minister for the development of the Druze.

"These lands belong to the state," Kara [wrote recently](#) in the Makor Rishon newspaper. "The place doesn't disturb anyone. It's desolate."

A spokesman for Netanyahu's office declined to comment on the criticisms.

Raneen Geries, an activist with Zochrot, a Jewish-Palestinian organisation seeking to educate Israeli Jews about the Nakba, Israel's dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948, said she believed the government was hoping to win wider Druze support by exploiting their religious attachment to the area.

The new town will be located next to an ancient shrine to Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and the foremost prophet of the Druze. In Arabic he is known as Nabi Shuayb. The shrine has long been a major site of Druze pilgrimage.

In recent years Israel has massively developed the site, building a major road to the shrine and a large car park, further damaging the remains of Hittin and encroaching on its surviving mosque.

Nassar, who serves on the board of ADRID, a Palestinian organisation defending the rights of the internal refugees, said in the past there had been fears that highlighting Hittin's problems would stir conflict with Druze religious leaders.

That view strikes me as wrong. For centuries Muslims, Christians and Druze shared the land. Now is the time to make an alliance with the Druze to support the cause of Hittin and Nimrin.

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