

Israel Accused of Trickery to Snatch Palestinian Refugee Lands

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[Jonathan Cook: The View from Nazareth](#) 26
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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Palestinian families warned of subterfuge designed to pressure them into signing over to Israel their rights to 1948 property

Palestinian leaders in Israel have warned that they suspect the Israeli government is behind recent efforts to trick the families of refugees from the 1948 war into signing away the rights to their lands.

The alert has been issued to an estimated 300,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel descended from refugees who were forced out of their villages during the 1948 war but remained inside the new Israeli state's borders.

Palestinians refer to the dispossession of their homeland as the Nakba – the word for “catastrophe” in Arabic.

Experts say Israel has been working to pressure refugees into selling the title to their lands for decades as a way to undermine a Palestinian right of return, one of the key demands in any peace agreement.

“Israel has a strong interest in reducing the number of refugees with a claim on these lands so that in the event of an agreement the issue of a Palestinian right of return is weakened,” said Hillel Cohen, a researcher on the Palestinian refugee issue at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

“Israel hopes to be able to say to the international community, ‘But the refugees sold their land – where can they return to?’”

Khaled Suleiman, aged 64 and from the Israeli coastal city of Acre, told Middle East Eye his family was among those approached by lawyers trying to persuade them to sell.

Nearly 800,000 Palestinians like Suleiman's parents became refugees in 1948 and were stripped by Israel of their rights to any property they could not carry with them, under legislation from 1950 known as the Absentee Property Law.

Barred from village

While most Palestinians were forced outside the borders of the newly formed Israeli state, Suleiman's family were among the 30,000 Palestinian refugees who managed to stay close to their former homes.

They eventually received citizenship and became part of Israel's large Palestinian minority, numbering today 1.6 million, or a fifth of the population.

Nonetheless, Israel continues to bar the Suleiman family from returning to their former village, Alma, north of the Galilee town of Safed. The homes there were destroyed decades ago by Israel, along with more than 500 other Palestinian communities.

Today the family's 17 hectares are controlled by an exclusively Jewish agricultural community of the same name as their razed village.

Suleiman said he was shocked to discover that a lawyer - from within the Palestinian minority - had approached his nephew trying to pressure him into selling the family's lands to the government.

The lawyer led his nephew to believe that he had one last chance to win compensation and that the deadline would expire at the end of next month.

"These people are worse than crooks," Suleiman said. "We sent him packing."

Suleiman and dozens of other families approached in recent months have been left wondering why the lawyers sought them out now and how they know so much about them.

"He knew about how much land we owned in 1948, where our plots were located, and how to find us," he said.

Palestinian leaders in Israel strongly suspect they know the answer.

Hana Swaid, a former Palestinian member of the Israeli parliament who now heads an organisation dealing with land issues, told MEE that the Israeli government's fingerprints were all over the lawyers' scheme.

These lawyers have access to official lists of absentee property that are extremely difficult to get hold of. Someone is clearly helping them - and you don't need to look far to understand who it is.

Government's guiding hand?

Reports of lawyers making similar approaches to refugee families in Israel have been pouring in, leading to fears that an organised campaign to persuade refugees to sell their lands is under way.

The High Follow-Up Committee, an umbrella body representing the main Palestinian political leadership in Israel, recently launched a series of meetings in Israel's largest Palestinian communities to raise awareness.

"It seems clear that the Israeli government is the guiding hand behind these approaches," said Maysana Mourani, a lawyer with Adalah, a legal centre for the Palestinian minority that has been closely involved in the awareness-raising campaign.

At stake, say campaign organisers, is one of the core principles of the peace process: the right of the refugees to return to their lands or receive internationally arbitrated compensation as part of a final resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Cohen, of Hebrew University, told MEE Israel had shown an interest from the outset in persuading internal refugees – those still living inside Israel – to sign away rights to their lands.

Although the Absentee Property Law made no provision for compensation for refugees, he said, the Israeli parliament made an exemption for the internally displaced. They were allowed to seek compensation under later legislation, the Land Acquisitions Law of 1953.

Cohen said officials had imposed no deadline for the internal refugees, now numbering 300,00, to sell their lands to the state.

He added that there was little information about these sales because neither Israeli officials nor Palestinians in Israel had an interest in publicising such deals.

Land-dealing taboo

For Palestinian society, land dealing with Israel is considered taboo.

But some refugees admitted that Israel had been using various forms of pressure long before the latest lawyers' ruse to persuade families into signing away their rights.

Ziad Awaisi, an official in ADRID, a committee representing the internally displaced, told MEE that the Israeli authorities had exploited the refugees' extreme vulnerability in the state's early years and the fact that the Palestinian minority was living under harsh military rule until 1966.

My grandfather told me that people from his village, of Saffuriya, were threatened in 1949 with being denied an identity card unless they sold their land to the government.

Others were told they would never get a licence to build a home, at a time when they were still living in United Nations tents. The security services had a lot of ways to intimidate the refugees.

Suleiman said he could remember his father being visited in the 1960s by the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence services, when they had tried to pressure him into selling.

"My father was a strong nationalist and refused, but I believe some other families from our village did sign, either because they were desperate for money or because they were scared," he said.

According to Cohen's best estimate, based on data about compensation received under the 1953 law, as much as a quarter of the land belonging to the refugees may have been sold to the Israeli state over subsequent decades.

Alexandre Kedar, a law professor at Haifa University, said most compensation to Palestinian refugees in the state's early years had been based on outdated land values that significantly reduced the sums they received.

'Present absentees'

The latest reports of lawyers approaching families indicate that efforts to pressure the

refugees into land sales have not ended.

There are also rumours that Palestinian lawyers from Israel have been visiting refugee camps in Jordan trying to get refugees there to sign documents transferring their lands to Israel.

According to Mohammed Kayal, a senior official in ADRID, the lawyers are paid by the Israeli state for every refugee they find and persuade to sell their land.

A fifth of Israel's Palestinian citizens are believed to be classified as "present absentees" according to the Absentee Property Law - denoting that they are present in Israel, but absent from their land.

Rights group have warned that the lawyers accused of tricking the refugees tell them that a recent high court ruling entitles them to a one-off compensation deal.

In fact, the court case applies exclusively to those affected by a different law, governing compulsory land purchase orders.

The judge in that case ruled that Israeli citizens who had originally refused government compensation could apply for it for a limited time, even if the statute of limitations had expired.

The window for applying for the retrospective financial compensation in these cases closes at the end of next month.

Suhad Bishara, of Adalah, said the lawyers had been misleading refugee families like the Suleimans.

"They are trying to put pressure on them by making them believe that this will be their last chance ever to gain compensation," she said. "But this court ruling is irrelevant to their rights."

Homeland 'not for sale'

The awareness-raising campaign has been conducted under the slogan: "Don't surrender our parents' and grandparents' lands."

Mourani told MEE that Israel had confiscated some 7,000 square km - or a third of Israel's total territory - from Palestinian refugees using the Absentee Property Law.

In subsequent years it expropriated a further 1,200 square km of land, much of it from Palestinian citizens, under the 1953 Land Acquisitions Law, she added.

Mohammed Barakeh, head of the Follow-Up Committee, warned at a recent meeting in Nazareth: "Our homeland is not for sale."

He added: "Israel wants the signatures of the victims [of 1948] so that it will look like they have accepted both their expulsion from their lands and the Zionist account of the Nakba."

But lawyers behind the drive to persuade Palestinian families to sell their land said they had done nothing wrong.

Ayman Abu Raya, head of a law firm in Sakhnin, who has led calls for lawyers to help locate refugee families, called the awareness campaign “ugly”.

“We have never misled anyone, and everything we do is within the law,” he told MEE. “We specialise in these kinds of compensation cases. The families are entitled to money and we help them get it.”

He denied government involvement and said his firm located land deeds for refugees in the local land registry offices. He said he had won “substantial compensation” for many families.

Bishara, a lawyer with Adalah, said even if refugees did sell land it should not undermine their rights in international law.

“The right of return is not just an individual right but a collective matter for the Palestinians. It is a bigger issue than these land sales,” she said.

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