

The Real Story Behind Israel's "Blooming Desert"

Though the official narrative of the state of Israel claims that it has turned the land it occupies from an empty desert into a lush, agricultural wonder, the actual fate of the land following Israel's establishment in 1948 tells a very different story.

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It has often been said that Israel, since its establishment in 1948, has presided over the "miracle" of making the country's "[desert bloom](#)." That [heavily promoted narrative](#) — which asserts that the Palestinians have long lacked the capacity, knowledge or desire to properly develop agriculture in the region — has often been used as a legitimizing factor in Israel's establishment. As former Israel Prime Minister Shimon Peres [once said](#), "The country [Palestine] was mostly an empty desert, with only a few islands of Arab settlement; and Israel's [cultivated] land today was indeed redeemed from swamp and wilderness."

Were it not for Israel, the desert would have remained unproductive and fallow – or so the story goes.

There is, however, another side to this story, one that shows that the "blooming desert" of Israel is a convenient disguise for the degradation and destruction of Palestine's natural resources, a means of obfuscating the worst of occupation by wrapping it in the cloak of Zionist mythology. While [a central theme](#) of Zionist mythology has long been the need for the Jewish Diaspora community to re-establish itself by returning to agricultural labor, the truth of Israel's agricultural "success" involves the unsustainable use of occupied resources and the deliberate destruction of the land and water still used by Palestinians today.

Erasing a rich history

Though the official narrative of the state of Israel claims that it has turned the land it occupies from an empty desert into a lush, agricultural wonder, the actual fate of the land following Israel's establishment in 1948 tells a very different story. Indeed, prior to 1948, the historical record demonstrates that Palestinian farms were very productive and that both Palestinian Arabs and Jewish settlers were successful farmers. For example, [a UN report](#) on agriculture in Palestine between 1945 and 1946 recorded that Palestinian-grown crops accounted for nearly 80 percent of Palestine's total agricultural yield that season, with Palestinian farms producing over 244,000 tons of vegetables, 73,000 tons of fruit, 78,000 tons of olives, and 5 million liters of wine.

Two years later, when the majority of Palestinians were forced from their land during the "Nakba" that founded the state of Israel, the farms and orchards that had previously been tended by Palestinians were left abandoned, as their owners fled under the threat of death at the hands of Zionist militias.

As Israeli historian and journalist Meron Benvenisti detailed in his book *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948*:

By April 1948 Jewish farmers had already begun harvesting the crops that had ripened in the abandoned fields and picking the citrus fruit in Arab groves. [...] by mid-1949 two-thirds of all land sown with grain in Israel was abandoned Arab land."

Thus, it was land theft that was largely responsible for Israel's initial agricultural production, not the labor or agricultural expertise of Zionist settlers.

In addition, the claim that Israel turned an undeveloped desert into an agricultural wonder seems to be – in part – projection on the part of the Israeli state. Indeed, as Benvenisti noted, following the removal of Palestinians, the vast majority of centuries-old fruit orchards that had long been maintained by the native inhabitants of the land were untended, neglected and, in some cases, bulldozed to make room for ever-expanding settlements.

According to Benvenisti's research, that neglect led to a situation in which "entire tracts of productive citrus trees, especially in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area, were earmarked for the construction of housing developments," as was the case for Palestine olive groves and pomegranate orchards that the land's new occupants [considered](#) "an annoyance." Part of the reason for the destruction of the land was that it would weaken Palestinian claims to return to the land, as keeping agricultural infrastructure intact "might have made possible the absorption of the returning refugees."

Current Israeli government policy, particularly its support for the construction of illegal settlements on Palestinian land, is the continuation of this effort to erase Palestine's history by targeting its agricultural heritage as well as its natural wonders. Indeed, Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* [noted](#) back in 2011 that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's steady push for Israeli expansion into Palestinian territory had been coupled with "his insistence on seeing nature and landscape as no more than an obstacle to the realization of his settlement vision."

Covering a crime with water-sucking pines

Another project central to the "desert bloom" mythology is Israel's "afforestation" of the desert, which has helped "[turn the desert green](#)" through the planting of non-native pine trees. These forests, largely planted by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), [have been touted](#) as a "miracle." Yet, the pine stands, much like Israel's treatment of Palestine's agricultural legacy, have been motivated by a need to cover up the events that led to the creation of the Israeli state.

Indeed, [more than two-thirds](#) of all JNF forests and sites lie on top of the ruins of Palestinian villages [demolished](#) during and after the founding of Israel, and the group's continuing afforestation efforts are aimed at acquiring land in the occupied West Bank to prevent "trespassing" and "conceal" Palestinian villages in order to prevent the return of Palestinian refugees.

Moreover, the effort to maintain a forest of non-native trees – regardless of whether its chief aim is to cover up the true history of Palestine or "green" a desert — has come at a great

cost to the natural environment. As journalist Max Blumenthal [has noted](#):

Most of the saplings the JNF plants at a site near Jerusalem simply do not survive, and require frequent replanting. Elsewhere, needles from the pine trees have killed native plant species and wreaked havoc on the ecosystem.”

They also become fodder for forest fires that have caused major damage and mass evacuations throughout Israel over the years.

Another ecological consequence of JNF forests is their likely effect on Israel’s horrendous drought, considered to be the worst the region has faced in [over 900 years](#). As studies have shown in other countries where non-native pine plantations have been introduced in vast numbers, pines consume a [significant amount](#) of water – [leading to droughts](#) and even the disappearance of [entire rivers](#) – as well as [fundamentally alter](#) and [degrade](#) the soil. While these forests have been presented as an ecological miracle, they are instead destroying the environment and degrading the land’s resources, suggesting that the main driver behind the long-standing project is aimed at covering up the ruins of Palestine.

Continuing the attack on Palestinian agriculture

Today, the stark difference in agricultural development in the land tended by Israelis and Palestinians derives from policies that often receive little coverage in the media and are largely absent from the “desert bloom” narrative. Indeed, much of the coverage the issue has received paints Palestinian agricultural successes as either the work of foreigners offering aid or resulting from the “[theft](#)” of Israeli-settlement agricultural infrastructure.



Palestinian water tanks vandalized by Israeli settlers in Hebron. (Photo: ISM Palestine / Flickr)

Such reports fail to acknowledge the realities of the issue, such as the illegal blockade of Gaza that has crippled its economy and agricultural sector, as well as Israel’s destruction of agricultural infrastructure in Gaza and the West Bank. Gazan agricultural infrastructure [was ravaged](#) by Israel in times of war and, in the West Bank, Israeli soldiers [regularly demolish](#) rain cisterns, pipelines and irrigation systems installed by Palestinians, citing as a reason that such structures lacked the “proper authorization” from Israel. Farmers themselves, mainly in Gaza, are [often targeted directly](#) by Israeli soldiers if they come too close to the border fence.

The Israeli government has also targeted Palestinian agriculture through chemical warfare. The use of [white phosphorus](#) as a weapon against Gaza, for example, has had major consequences for the area’s farmers. In addition to the chemical weapon’s [often deadly effects](#) on the human body, it has [destructive effects](#) on the environment and plants, as its incendiary nature often leads to the spontaneous ignition and burning of trees, forests and farmland. It also lingers in the environment for several years.

Beyond the use of chemical weapons, Israel has also directly targeted Gazan farmland with herbicide. In 2015, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [admitted to using](#) herbicides and germination inhibitors to kill off vegetation along the Palestinian side of the border, damaging over 420 acres of land. [A year later](#), tactic was repeated, this time destroying around 400 acres of farmland. The IDF [has stated](#) that it sprays the chemicals over the

vaguely defined “no-go zone” it has established along the border “in order to enable optimal and continuous security operations.” However, the area [accounts for](#) a third of Gaza’s arable land and 17 percent of the entire territory.

Furthermore, the herbicides, like white phosphorus, have consequences for the environment long after they are sprayed. As Anwar Abu Assi, manager of the chemical laboratory at Gaza’s Ministry of Agriculture, [told Al Jazeera](#) in 2016:

Herbicides are sprayed in high concentrations. Thus, they remain embedded in the soil, and then find their way to the water basin. This constitutes a real hazard for the population.”

The targeting of Palestinian agriculture in the present and its treatment by the Israeli and American press suggest another and nefarious way in which Israel’s “desert bloom” mythology has manifested. In order for Israel’s agricultural “superiority” to remain unchallenged, Palestinian agriculture must also be suppressed. Were Palestinian agriculture able to develop unimpeded and flourish, it would call into question the idea that the land was barren before the Zionists, threatening the latter’s legitimacy.

The cover-story for all conquerors and colonizers

The myth of Israel “making the desert bloom” has its basis in neo-colonial narratives that have long been used in other settler states such as Canada, New Zealand, the United States and Australia. In the cases of the latter countries, the native inhabitants and their culture have also inaccurately been depicted as “primitive” and incompetent, a narrative that suggests that the land would have remained “wild” and undeveloped were it not for the “fortunate” appearance of European settlers. Such narratives cast the settlers as both superior and normal while the natives become inferior and abnormal, thus obfuscating the settler’s status as foreigner and conqueror.

Zionist mythology reinforces similar themes. For example, as in the United States Native Americans were considered as uncivilized and wild as the natural environment, Zionist mythology [reinforces](#) the idea that all Arabs are “sons of the desert” while the desert similarly represents a barbaric obstacle to “progress” and development.

Another historical analogue is the 19th century concept of “manifest destiny” — the idea that the expansion of the United States had been preordained by God himself, which led the U.S. to break many of its numerous treaties with indigenous tribes and even go to war with Mexico in order to acquire the land it coveted. The Israeli government similarly sees its expansion and control of all of Palestine as a matter of fulfilling prophecy and “redeeming” the Holy Land. This effort of redemption continues to feed Israel’s expansion. As Netanyahu [has said](#), Israel is “obligated to develop all parts of the country – the Galilee and the Negev [the West Bank].”

Living the myth and the lie

Yet, no matter how much evidence exists to the contrary, Israel will never tell the real story behind the “miracle” of making “the desert bloom.” It will never tell the real story precisely because it can’t – to do so would mean demolishing the neo-colonial narrative at the center of the settler state, a narrative that is the pillar of its legitimacy.

Indeed, if Israel has not actually improved the land by making “the desert bloom” but instead degraded the land, the legitimacy of the state of Israel itself becomes questionable, as it suggests that its native inhabitants – the Palestinians – were better caretakers of the land than the current occupiers. For this reason, Israel must continue to propagate the myth regardless of the facts, and continue to deny Palestine’s rich cultural history and agricultural legacy.

With Israel now facing the consequences of its mistreatment of the land and its resources, the historical revisionism once used to sell the disparity between Israeli and Palestinian agricultural prowess has become ineffective. For that reason, Israel must now use other tactics — chemical warfare through toxic agrochemicals, the physical destruction of Palestinian agricultural infrastructure, and illegal blockades – in order to keep the artificial narrative alive, creating the illusion of primitivism and scarcity where none exists.

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