

JNF: Ethnic Cleansing Disguised as Environmentalism

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A man sits on a bench at Jerusalem's Independence Park, built in 1955 and financed by the JNF-USA, on the site of the Arab Mamilla Cemetery. Israeli authorities bulldozed or removed at least 1,500 tombs in the cemetery and simply threw away the human remains, according to an investigation by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz. (SCHÖNING/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES)

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The Nakba Continues

By Jonathan Cook

THE EFFORT TO STRIP a major international Zionist organization of its status as a charity in Britain because of its role in aiding war crimes is being stepped up—in a campaign that has implications for tax-exempt donations reaching Israel from North America and the rest of Europe.

The British state is being asked to account for its financial and moral support for the UK branch of the Jewish National Fund (JNF UK), which stands accused of complicity in the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homeland.

The JNF UK describes itself as “Britain’s oldest Israel charity.” Noting its role in “building Israel for over a century,” the organization boasts: “Every penny raised by JNF UK is sent to a project in Israel.”

The United States has its own organization, JNF-USA, whose slogan is “Your voice in Israel.”

Donations from these overseas charities were used to buy most of the 250 million trees planted across Israel since 1948. That was the year when 750,000 Palestinians were forced out at gunpoint from their homes by the new Israeli army. Those expulsions were an event Palestinians call their *Nakba*, the Arabic word for “catastrophe.”

Afterwards, the Israeli army laid waste to many hundreds of Palestinian villages, turning them into rubble. Forests planted over the villages were then promoted as efforts to “make the desert bloom.”

In fact, the trees were intended primarily to prevent Palestinian refugees from ever being able to return to their villages and rebuild their homes. As a result, millions of Palestinians today languish in refugee camps across the Middle East, evicted from their homeland with the help of the forests.

JNF branches raised the funds for a parent organization in Israel, the Jewish National Fund-Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael (JNF-KKL), that enforced the expulsions by using donations to plant the forests. The Israeli state’s ethnic cleansing of the native Palestinian population was effectively disguised as a form of environmentalism.

The U.S., Canada, Britain and many other European states have long treated their local JNF fund-raising arms as charities. The JNF UK received charitable status in 1939, nearly a decade before Israel was created as a Jewish state on the ruins of the Palestinians’ homeland.

The forests are still managed with money raised through tax-deductible donations in Britain, the U.S. and elsewhere. In the case of Britain, donations to the JNF have been eligible for Gift Aid since 1990, meaning that the British government tops up donations by adding its own 25 percent contribution.

Critics have noted that in effect the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian villages has been subsidized by western publics.

It is the continuing sanction of these crimes—and others—by European and North American officials that is being belatedly given scrutiny by human rights activists in Britain.

A campaign launched in 2010 called “Stop the JNF”—backed by various Palestinian solidarity organizations—has hoped to shame British officials into ending the JNF’s charitable status.

The campaign gained parliamentary support a year later, when 68 MPs signed an early-day motion condemning the JNF’s activities and calling for its charitable status to be revoked.

The motion was sponsored by Jeremy Corbyn, then a backbencher but now the outgoing leader of the Labour Party, and attracted cross-party support, though no MPs from the ruling Conservative Party backed it.

Nonetheless, the campaign has faced stiff institutional resistance. Over the past six years appeals to the Charity Commission, a department of the British government, to intervene and remove the JNF UK from its list of registered charities have been repeatedly rebuffed.

Rather than seeking explanations from the JNF UK, British officials have largely ignored the evidence they have been presented with.

The campaign has highlighted one specific and egregious example of the JNF UK's work. The organization raised donations to create a large recreation area west of Jerusalem called British Park, which includes Britannia Forest, on the sites of three Palestinian villages that were destroyed by the Israeli army after 1948.

Similar parks over destroyed villages have been named after countries where the donations were raised. The JNF is also responsible for United States Independence Park, Canada Park, France Park, and South Africa Park.

A sign at the entrance to British Park reads: "Gift of the Jewish National Fund in Great Britain."

Many of those who donated to such projects, often Jews encouraged to drop pennies into the JNF's iconic fund-raising "blue boxes" at schools and synagogues, had no idea how their money was being used.

Stop the JNF UK included testimony from Kholoud al Ajarma, whose family was expelled from the village of Ajjur during the *Nakba*. Today the family lives in the overcrowded Aida refugee camp, next to Bethlehem in the West Bank.

The JNF-KKL planted Britannia Forest on land to which her family and many others still have the title deeds. In doing so, the JNF in Israel violated the protected status of such lands in international law.

In her submission, Al Ajarma wrote: "It was British pounds that helped destroy my village. The Jewish National Fund is not merely planting trees. These trees have been used as a weapon of war, a weapon of colonization."

Israeli scholar Uri Davis has observed that the establishment of British Park and other such foreign-financed parks "ought to be classified as an act, and as a policy, of complicity with war crimes."

In fact, the barrister for the Charity Commission in the UK, Iain Steele, conceded in a submission that it was possible the JNF had violated the Al Ajarma family's rights by creating British Park on their land.

Nonetheless, the Charity Commission has on two occasions refused to consider revoking the JNF UK's charitable status.

In June last year a Commission official even wrote to the campaign with a defense that appeared to strip the term “charitable” of all meaning. He wrote: “In simple terms, the test for charitable status is a test of what a charity was set up to do, not what it does in practice.”

The Commission’s apparent reasoning is that, so long as the JNF includes fine-sounding words in its mission statement, what it does in practice as a “charity” does not matter.



A photo taken from the Palestinian village of Ramadin shows the illegal Israeli settlement of Sansana, south of the West Bank town of Hebron, April 9, 2017. According to research by “Stop the JNF,” contributions from JNF UK have aided this religious settlement. (HAZEM BADER/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Last April, “Stop the JNF” appealed the Commission’s decision to the First-Tier Tribunal. The judge, however, told them that neither Al Ajarma nor the campaign itself had a legal right to be heard.

He concluded instead that only Britain’s attorney general could overrule the Charity Commission’s decision. In October the attorney general rejected the campaigners’ claims without investigating them.

In an attempt to revive the case, “Stop the JNF” has submitted more than 4,000 letters of protest to the attorney general in late November, calling on him to reassess the organization’s continuing charitable status.

The establishment's apparent unwillingness to confront the JNF UK's historical record is perhaps not surprising. The JNF was one of the key organizations that helped to realize a British government promise made in the 1917 Balfour Declaration to help create a "Jewish home" in what was then Palestine.

Two years later Lord Balfour declared that the colonization of Palestine by Zionist Jews from Europe was "of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 [Palestinian] Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."

Little, it seems, has changed in official British attitudes since.

Steele, the Charity Commission's barrister, successfully urged the First-Tier Tribunal not to get involved, arguing that it would be "drawn into matters of intense political controversy, for no obvious benefit to anyone."

Kholoud al Ajarma and many millions more Palestinians might dispute that assessment. They would have much to gain should Britain finally demonstrate a willingness to confront its continuing role in aiding and comforting those like the JNF accused of complicity in crimes against international law in historic Palestine.

As the "Stop the JNF" organizers wrote in their own letter to the attorney general: "These people [Palestinian refugees like the Ajarma family] are not defined by the JNF as recipients of their charity, but they have human and legal rights which the actions of this charity unacceptably violate."

The campaign has not only focused on the JNF's historic role in dispossessing Palestinians. It points out that the JNF is still actively contributing to grossly discriminatory and racist policies in Israel—another reason, they say, it should be barred from being considered a charity.

The JNF UK's accounts from 2016 show that it has funded the OR Movement, an Israeli organization that assists in the development of Jewish-only communities in Israel and the occupied territories.

One such Jewish community, Hiran, is being established on the ruins of homes that belonged to Bedouin families. They were recently forced out of their village of Umm al-Hiran—a move the legal rights group Adalah has described as "reminiscent of the darkest of regimes such as apartheid-era South Africa."

The JNF claims the forest will "help mitigate climate change."

On its website, the JNF-KKL congratulates "Friends of JNF UK" for supporting the establishment of nearby Hiran Forest. The JNF claims the forest will "help mitigate climate change"—once again disguising ethnic cleansing of Palestinians as a form of environmentalism.

The JNF UK's annual accounts for 2014 and 2015 also reveal that it contributed money to the Israeli army under the title "Tzuk Eitan 9 Gaza war effort"—a reference to Israel's Protective Edge attack on Gaza in late 2014, whose death toll included some 550 Palestinian children.

A United Nations commission of inquiry found evidence that Israel had committed war crimes by indiscriminately targeting civilians—a conclusion confirmed by the testimonies of Israeli soldiers to *Breaking the Silence*, an Israeli whistle-blowing group.

Equally troubling, an investigation in November by *Haaretz* discovered that, under Israeli government pressure, the JNF-KKL has been secretly directing vast sums of money into buying and developing land in the occupied West Bank to aid Jewish settlers, again in violation of international law.

The funds were covertly channeled to Himnuta, effectively the JNF's subsidiary in the occupied territories, disguised as funds for projects in Jerusalem.

In December, the JNF's role in assisting Jewish settlers take over the properties of Palestinians under occupation was highlighted in a court hearing.

A Jerusalem judge temporarily froze a lower court ruling that would have allowed the JNF-KKL to evict the Sumreen family from their home in Silwan. Himnuta has been battling to secure the eviction for 30 years.

Last year the JNF managed to force a Palestinian family off their land near Bethlehem, clearing the way for rightwing Jews to establish a settlement on their land.

Veteran Israeli journalist Raviv Drucker recently observed that the JNF-KKL had rapidly converted itself into a banking fund for the settlers. He added that its “coffers are bursting with billions of shekels [and] the settlers’ appetite for land is at a peak.”

Given the lack of transparency in JNF-KKL's accounts, it is difficult to know precisely where the funds originated. But as more than \$70 million has been spent by the JNF-KKL over the past two years in the West Bank, according to *Haaretz*, there must be a suspicion that the funds include money raised by the JNF UK, as well as money from North American branches.

Research by “Stop the JNF” suggests the JNF UK has had no opposition to making “charitable” donations to settlements in the West Bank. Its contributions have ended up aiding Sansana, a community of religious settlers close to Hebron, according to the campaign.

Settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are considered war crimes under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The JNF UK's chairman, Samuel Hayek, has defended his organization's fundraising from criticism, stating in a letter in 2010 to the *Guardian* newspaper: “Our environmental and humanitarian work is not based on any political or religious affiliation, but rather on supporting Israel and its population—whatever their background.”

However, as the JNF UK states on its website, every penny raised in Britain is “sent to a project in Israel”—much of it via the JNF in Israel.

The JNF-KKL is a major landowner in Israel. Under a special arrangement with the Israeli government, it owns 13 percent of Israel's territory—often lands seized from Palestinian refugees.

The arrangement includes a provision from 1961 that the primary aim of the JNF in Israel is to acquire property “for the purpose of settling Jews on such lands and properties.”

In 2004 the JNF-KKL explained its role. It was “not a public body that works for the benefit of all 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 the JNF land, does not have a duty to practice equality toward all citizens of the state.”

In marketing and allocating lands only to Jews, the legal group Adalah has noted, the JNF in Israel intentionally rides roughshod over the rights of a fifth of the country’s population who are Palestinian by heritage.

In other words, the JNF is integral to an Israeli system that enforces an apartheid-style segregation, preventing Israel’s Palestinian minority from accessing and benefiting from a substantial part of Israel’s territory.

This institutionalized discrimination has been made even more explicit since Israel passed in 2018 the nation-state Basic Law, which has constitutional-like status. According to the Basic Law: “The State views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value, and shall act to encourage and promote its establishment and strengthening.”

As the “Stop the JNF” campaign notes, British charities should abide by legal responsibilities enshrined in UK legislation such as the Equalities Act of 2010, which makes it illegal to discriminate based on “color, nationality, ethnic or national origin.”

The JNF UK, they note, is failing to abide by this core legal principle. It is operating in a foreign state where it has helped over many decades to fund activities that grossly violate both British law and international law.

The evidence suggests that the even larger donations made to the JNF-KKL from North America are being funnelled into the same discriminatory operations.

However, a 2011 challenge to the tax-exempt status of JNF-USA for violating U.S. legislation against religious and ethnic discrimination failed to effect change. The Internal Revenue Service appeared to accept the argument that such laws apply only to charities using their money inside the U.S., not overseas.

As long as Western states apply this distinction, it seems the JNF-KKL will be able to continue relying on its overseas fundraising arms to help it entrench a system of apartheid, conferring superior land rights on Jews than on Palestinians.

Jonathan Cook is a journalist based in Nazareth and a winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. He is the author of [Blood and Religion](#) and [Israel and the Clash of Civilisations](#) (available from AET’s Middle East Books and More).

