

The plight of the Bedouins, and Canada's responsibility

Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian people of Arab ethnicity have been systematically and increasingly deprived of human rights and access to their lands. At the time of the United Nations' Partition Plan in 1947, Palestinians comprised 70 % of the population but were allotted 44% of historic Palestine. After 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel, Palestinians were left with 22% of historic Palestine. Since the war of 1967, Israel has occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip in contravention of international law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The plight of the Bedouin people, both in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, is an important, though lesser known, part of this story of dispossession. The Bedouins were formerly a

nomadic pastoral people; today they are sedentary, raising animals and growing grains for their livelihood. The Bedouins are distinct in their lifestyle, culture and language; many live in so-called "unregistered" villages. Those living within Israel proper are Israeli citizens, yet many Bedouin villages receive no public services of any kind from the Israeli government. Forced transfer plans violate Bedouin citizen rights under both Israeli law and international law, including the right to property, dignity, equality, adequate housing and freedom to choose one's residence.

Bedouins living in the occupied territories number more than 30,000 in 183 residential communities in Area C, the less populated regions of the West Bank that are under complete Israeli control. The majority are refugees from the Negev region who were forced to resettle in the West Bank after 1948. Many of their villages are unrecognized and deemed illegal by Israel because they do not have building permits, which are almost impossible to obtain. Bedouin villages are denied basic rights such as electricity and water. As Israel expands its settlements in Area C, these Bedouin villages are in constant danger of demolition.



Above: Bedouin shepherds and their sheep in the shadow of an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Below: the village of Kahn Al-Ahmer, just east of Jerusalem. Last year, the Israeli government had plans to demolish the village and move the 180 residents to a new site next to a garbage dump. International and local protest and legal action led to a postponement of the displacement. Other villages in the West Bank have not been so "fortunate"—and the long term plan continues to be continued forced displacement to make more room for Israeli settlement and development.



Bedouin villages in the Negev remain within the State of Israel but are also subject to forcible transfer. Currently there are four major development projects in the Negev: 1) the southern extension of HWY 6 (Trans-Israel Highway); 2) the expansion of Beka'at Kana'im military firing zone; 3) the Ramat Beka special military industrial zone (IMI Systems weapons testing facility) which, if developed, will lead to the eviction of thousands of Bedouins and expose others to environmental and health risks; and 4) the Sde Barir phosphate mine (which also requires the evacuation of thousands of Bedouin residents and exposes thousands more to health risks.)



Protesters at Kahn Al-Ahmer opposing the creation of a road that would facilitate the demolition of the village.

There are several reasons why this issue should concern us as Canadians. 1. The forced displacement of indigenous peoples conflicts with our sense of justice and decency. 2. What happens to the Bedouins in Israel and the West Bank bears uncanny resemblances to the policies of our residential schools, which tried to erase or marginalize entire ethnic groups. 3. The establishment of Israeli settlements in the West Bank—at the expense of Bedouins' historic attachment to the land—is a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids an occupying power from settling its citizens on occupied land. When the Fourth Geneva Convention is violated, the signatories to this convention are obligated to ensure compliance. Canada is a signatory. We have a legal obligation, not only a moral one.

For information on how Palestinian communities, including Bedouin villages, are devastated by Israel's promotion of tourism to West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements, see Amnesty International's recent report at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/israel-opt-tourism-companies-driving-settlement-expansion-profiting-from-war-crimes/>

This sheet was prepared by Gerhard Neufeld, with fellow members of the Mennonite Church Manitoba Working Group on Palestine and Israel. It accompanies letters to our government representatives calling for advocacy on behalf of Palestinians living under the military occupation of Israel, with whom Canada has a free trade agreement and many cultural and political ties.

Dear Mr. Champagne:

We wish to commend our Canadian government for its current efforts to correct the injustices of our colonial past, acknowledging the displacement of Indigenous communities from their land, and promoting the reconciliation goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

To be consistent with our stance in our own country, however, we urge the government to take a public stand in supporting other Indigenous communities who are currently being displaced and colonized in violation of international law. One such group are the Bedouins of Israel and Palestine.

As an advocacy group focused on human rights in Israel and Palestine, we request that our Canadian diplomats in Israel draw attention to the plight of Bedouin communities in Israel proper and in Area C regions of the West Bank, doing all they can to influence Israel to protect those communities. As a number of news outlets have highlighted in recent months, Bedouin villages are routinely being denied essential services, forbidden to build, and regularly subjected to harassment and violence from Israeli settlers who are impinging on Bedouin farm and grazing land. Please consider the recent [report](#) from Amnesty International, which includes Bedouins among those most adversely affected by Israel's ongoing occupation and economic development of West Bank land.

We do not feel these infringements are purely an internal matter for Israel, thus exonerating Canada from responsibility. As a signatory of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Canada has an obligation to hold fellow-signatories accountable for any violation of the convention, which forbids nations to settle its own population on lands that it is occupying through conquest. As Canada's own stated policy acknowledges, the continued growth of settlements in Israel is a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace.

We believe that Canada, historically a peace-promoting nation and currently a close friend of Israel, is in a strong position to advocate for the well-being of all people living in Israel and the West Bank, particularly those minorities who are voiceless and prone to institutional discrimination and injustice.

We would be very pleased to hear from you about how Canada is addressing this and other human rights issues in Israel.

Sincerely yours,

Mennonite Church Canada working group on Palestine and Israel

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