Afforestation: Memory, and the Politics of Landscape in Jerusalem



Abstract

In 2021, wildfires in the Jerusalem hills unveiled the ruins of depopulated Palestinian villages erased since 1948. Beneath the burned pine and cypress forests lay ancient agricultural terraces, silent witnesses to centuries of Palestinian presence.

This article examines the Zionist afforestation campaigns—spearheaded by the Jewish National Fund—as tools of settler colonialism aimed at reshaping Palestine's natural and historical landscape. Far from environmental restoration, these efforts concealed dispossession and transformed indigenous spaces into symbols of erasure. Through historical and environmental analysis, this article explores how trees became instruments of ideological domination, replacing rooted Palestinian life with manufactured narratives of belonging.

In late August of summer 2021, huge wildfires broke out in the mountains of Jerusalem, engulfing around 30,000 Dunams of land in flames. After this natural disaster was quenched, the true reality of the burnt land was exposed, which Israeli authorities had been attempting to cover up for decades.

After the embers died out, it appeared that the fires exposed the ruins of depopulated Palestinian villages that had been destroyed in 1948 and occupied ever since. Among the remains were the agricultural terraces of these villages, which had been built by their native inhabitants long before their expulsion; archeologists estimate the time of their construction to 600 years back, while Palestinian farmers believe them to be much older.

These terraces, which Palestinian farmers call "Masāteb" (plural of "Mastaba") as an indication of their firmness, were built to facilitate planting crops, vines and olive trees on mountain slopes.

Historically, olive trees and grape vines were commonly grown in these lands due to their benefits, such as preserving soil moisture and providing nutrition for the Palestinian farmers; olive trees, namely, prevent soil erosion. Both of these trees comprise a natural barrier against wildfires, given their leaves' quality of preserving moisture without much need for irrigation. Palestinian farmers long ago learnt how to deal with the nature of their country, and over decades, the relationship between the Palestinians and their land was shaped by its utility.

Yet today, forests of non-native pine and cypress trees dominate the natural topography of western and southern Jerusalem, with a high susceptibility to catching wildfires... So where did these pine and cypress forests come from? And what happened to the olives and vines?

Over the past century, the Zionist movement, and subsequently the occupation institutions, have worked on large-scale afforestation of wide parts of Palestine, and especially the villages occupied in 1948 – frequently under the pretext of "contributing to a flourishing nature". This claim, however, did not stand long, particularly in shade of the negative effects of pine and cypress afforestation campaigns on the environmental and biological systems of the country.

With the emergence of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, the Zionists began promoting their endeavors of occupying Palestine by denying Palestinian existence. This denial also extended to the nature of Palestinian land, as early as Theodor Herzl's quote in 1898, saying that Palestine was "a poor and neglected land... and its meadows are barren".

This mission was commissioned to the Jewish National Fund (JNF), one of the most significant systems founded for the aim of achieving settler colonialism in the land of Palestine. The Fund was founded in 1909, since which it took charge of re-constructing the natural scenery of Palestinian land in accordance with the requirements and intentions of the Zionist movement in the country.

The JNF launched a series of afforestation campaigns in 1920, in collaboration with the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA) – founded by the Zionist Barronm Maurice de Hirsch. The JNF's agricultural projects received the support of British colonial authorities, which advised planting trees to combat soil erosion, creating sand dunes, and aiding the storage of groundwater. Concurrently, this project also satisfied the need of British economy, which was in high demand of lumber after the First World War.

British and Zionist afforestation efforts were intensified, and the JNF began establishing and developing plantations in a systematic manner by collecting donations and buying lands in Ottoman Palestine to create settlements and settler-colonial agricultural projects for Jewish

immigrants, providing them jobs. The JNF also launched a worldwide donation campaign from Jewish people, and granted each family and school a monetary fund known as the "Blue Box". It also assigned the day of February 15, according to the Jewish calendar, as a holiday for planting trees, with the aim of mobilizing settlers towards the idea.

The afforestation efforts focused on regions such as Hebron, the coastal plains, and cities with symbolic value, such as Jerusalem. Trees were planted in new neighborhoods, around governmental facilities, and in historical and religious sites. As more time passed, these efforts turned into an expansion strategy aiming for land acquisition, as the planted lands expanded and united to form joint pieces of land in preparation for subjugating them to Jewish control. This was achieved after the war of 1948, when these lands were taken over under total Israeli control.

After the establishment of the occupation state, the JNF continued its afforestation projects, in cooperation with the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture. The president back then, Ben Gurion, called on the population to unite in "flowering the desert", while speaking in the opening of the second Knesset session in 1951: "We must plant hundreds of thousands of trees across an area of 5 million Dunams, which is a quarter of the country. We must cover all the mountains and slops, the hills and rocky lands that are unsuitable for planting, the coastal dunes and barren lands in the Naqab desert with trees [. . .] this is only the beginning of making right the humiliation endured by the generations. Endured by the people. Endured by the land. We have put all our professional power for the sake of the homeland."

According to Ben Gurion, the afforestation project carries a dual significance: it creates plenty of job opportunities on one hand, and solidifies the bond between new immigrants on the other. In his opinion, "planting trees is the only way to help the Jewish people develop a strong emotional bond to the land". Thus, afforestation played a major role in forming national identity and creating a sense of belonging, and became a tool for those who joined plantations to acquire a position similar to the "native peoples" through participating in building the country and leaving their mark on the land. Up until the end of the twentieth century, this form of promoting work encouraged Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. Eventually, as Ben Gurion described in his speech, these projects created a radical change in the natural scenery of Palestine.

Afforestation focused mainly on the mountain range extending from the Galilee to Jerusalem, and then north of the Naqab desert. Between 1950 and 1960, trees were planted across an area

of 190 thousand Dunams, and in the following 10 years, increased to 210 thousand Dunams. By 2007, the size of afforested lands reached 530 thousand Dunams, and now covers around 1.18 million Dunams – only 242 thousand of which are considered original, and the rest were planted by the Zionist movement. Conifers (pines and cypresses) cover 40% of these lands, and eucalyptus covers 13.5%, while native trees, such as oaks, carobs and olives, comprise no more than 5.1%.

These afforestation campaigns are linked to the goals set by the Occupation state after the Nakba, which manifests in the erasure of depopulated Palestinian villages. In the mountainous region of Jerusalem, particularly, all that is Palestinian has been erased, with its ten-thousand-year-old history, and replaced with Zionist Judaization. The product of the European colonial mentality was the transfer of Europe as a place to Palestine, so that settlers could familiarize themselves and not feel estranged to their new environment. The speed at which pine trees grow in almost barren areas also aided this project, and did not require much irrigation.

These lands whose people were exiled were registered as "Absentee Property", a legal maneuver that allowed "Israel" to acquire their possession and transfer them to the ownership of the JNF, making the latter the single biggest landowner in Palestine. Thus, seventy-one depopulated villages were transformed into areas of tourist attraction, more than half of which were covered with dense forests by the afforestation campaigns.

Through planting pine and cypress forests over the ruins of depopulated villages, the Zionists sought to deny Palestinian existence. The most prominent of such examples of artificial vegetation is the "Jerusalem Park", which conceals the villages of Al-Qabu, Illar, Suba, Ein Karem and others. Strolling through these villages, one can still see remains of ruined Palestinian homes between the pine trees, as in 'Ajjur in the Jerusalem countryside, in which the "British Park" was established. "Israel" also established public parks and forests inside depopulated villages, such as the villages of Imwas and Yalu in the Ramla countryside.

These trees tell the settler-colonial story of the land of Palestine. For Palestinians, the Israeli occupier uprooting their trees symbolizes the looting of their land. The axes used to cut down their trees are carried by hands that have the blood of thousands of Palestinians on them, and the olives being picked by hands other than those that planted them is a tale of continuous suffering at the hand of the colonizers.

On the other hand, conifers that now dominate the natural scenery of Palestine have become a symbol of Jews in diaspora. These trees, green year-round, aim to decrease the constant anxiety they suffer, and provide them with a connection to a land that is not theirs, in an attempt to build a connection between a people without a land and a land they do not belong to.

References:

COP26: Jerusalem Wildfires in Summer 2021, When Climate Change-Related Wildfires Expose the JNF's Colonial Afforestation Project. 06.11.2021. https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/19171.html

"Making the desert bloom": How Zionist colonialism planted trees and uprooted a people, Nadav JoffeandAdèle Ribout.07.08.2024. https://bitly.cx/3k9tA

"تاريخ مختصر للغابة الاستعمارية في فلسطين". فريق التحرير. نشر على موقع باب الواد بتاريخ ٢٦.١١.٢٠٢٤ يمكن مراجعته على الرابط التالي: https://shorturl.at/33oVu

"في فلسطين... مستوطنات أشجار من غير هذه البلاد" رند عبد القادر. نُشر بتاريخ ٠٨.٠٩.٢٠٢٣على موقع درج. يمكن مراجعته على الرابط التالي: https://bitly.cx/tGUFo

"التشجير الاستعماري في فلسطين ١". محمد يونس. نُشر بتاريخ ٢٤.٠٨.٢٠٢١ على موقع باب الواد. يمكن مراجعته على الرابط التالي: https://bitly.cx/8Q3T