



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Israel/Palestine

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Events of 2015

Minorities in Israel and Palestine experienced continued hardship during 2015. Ahead of Israel's elections on 17 March subsequently won by Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud Party, Netanyahu issued a much publicized warning that 'Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls'. This reflected a broader atmosphere of racist incitement against Palestinians that played a critical part in the election's outcome. Nevertheless, the election was unprecedented in the inclusion of a major Palestinian party. Following a January Supreme Court ruling raising the minimum electoral threshold for parties to enter the Knesset, Palestinian citizens of Israel integrated their four main political parties into a Joint List with a common platform in order to achieve political representation. While, encouragingly, their political concerns gained significance in discourse surrounding the election, the Court's ruling also effectively forced the abandonment of their participation through multiple parties with diverse ideologies and agendas. Furthermore, though Palestinian citizens of Israel exercised voting rights, Palestinians living under Israeli rule in the occupied territories – unlike Israeli settlers living in their midst – remained without the right to vote. The grassroots 'Real Democracy' campaign, however, gave small numbers of Palestinians in the occupied territories the ability to vote through volunteer Israeli proxies.

In November, steps were taken by Prime Minister Netanyahu to use legislation to erode the rights of non-Jewish minorities in Israel by advancing the 'Nation-State' bill, which defines Israel as 'the nation-state of the Jewish people', not of its citizens, of whom around one-fifth are non-Jewish Palestinians. Similar ethno-nationalist concerns appeared to guide other official policies during the year, such as a parliamentary vote in June to extend a law that enables the government to refuse granting Israeli citizenship or residency status to Palestinians who are married to Israelis. In December, reports also emerged that the Education Ministry had banned a novel featuring an Arab–Jewish romance from being used in high schools on the basis that it threatened 'the identity and heritage of students in every sector.'

While Palestinians in Israel with recognized citizenship are still subjected to wide ranging discrimination in housing, social welfare, education, criminal justice and other areas of their lives, the difficulties facing Palestinians without Israeli citizenship in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are even more acute – dispossession of land, restricted movement, prosecution by military courts and above all the pervasive threat of violence from security personnel or ultra-nationalist settlers.

This was underlined by the death in July of 18-month old Ali Dawabsha, who was murdered along with three family members in a firebomb attack on their home by settlers.

A rise in violence between Israelis and Palestinians was sparked in Jerusalem on the eve of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, in mid September when Israeli security forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and clashed with Palestinian youths protesting increased arrivals of Jews to pray there. Sovereignty over the religious site, known as the Temple Mount in Judaism, is fiercely contested and of immense cultural importance to both Jews and Muslims. The Israeli government responded to the unrest by placing restrictions on Muslim access to the mosque, including a ban on men under the age of 45 who wish to pray there on Friday – a decision strongly criticized in a resolution adopted by UNESCO's board.

Violence subsequently spread throughout Israel and the occupied territories, with widespread confrontations between Israeli security forces and Palestinians, particularly in East Jerusalem and around Hebron. Near-daily attacks on Israeli security personnel and civilians took place, primarily in the form of stone throwing and stabbings, while systemic violence against Palestinians intensified, with an estimated 4,192 Palestinians – an average of 69 every day – shot by Israeli security forces from 1 October to 30 November. The same period saw 17 Israeli and 102 Palestinian fatalities. Human rights organizations raised concerns about attacks on Israeli civilians by Palestinians and excessive use of force by Israeli military and police, condemning repressive police acts and extra-judicial killings. Amid ongoing tensions, celebrations in Bethlehem, a cherished centre of cultural heritage for Palestinian Christians, were marred by clashes on Christmas Day between Israeli security and local youths.

Throughout the year, numerous attacks against Muslim and Christian holy sites were perpetrated by extremists in Israel and so-called 'price tag' incidents – acts of violence or arson perpetrated by settler youths in the occupied territories. In February, for instance, a Greek Orthodox seminary was set ablaze in Jerusalem, a day after a similar attack on a mosque near Bethlehem. In June, another fire left a church in the Galilee region containing fifth-century mosaics in ruins. Olive trees, an important symbol of Palestinian resilience and rootedness to the land as well as a vital source of livelihood, have also been targeted. In January alone, settlers reportedly uprooted or vandalized around 5,600 trees in the West Bank, representing 60 per cent of those attacked during the whole of 2014, and eventually capped the year by destroying 50 olive trees near Nablus. While these and other incidents pose a direct threat to the survival of Palestinian heritage in the area, Palestinian cultural life remains vibrant. In 2015, Gaza held its first ever film festival. Focusing on human rights, it took place in the Shujaiyya neighbourhood, which remained badly damaged by heavy fighting and Israeli bombardment during the summer of 2014.

The Arabic language, spoken by Palestinians and many Mizrahim (Jews originating from the Middle East and North Africa), has remained intrinsic to the culture and identity of both groups. Since the state's founding in 1948, Arab – including Jewish-Arab – culture and music has been widely censured and suppressed in Israeli society, but for the first time ever, in summer 2015, a Mizrahi Arabic-language song topped the music charts in Israel. While more and more young Arab Jews are now exploring their cultural heritage, Mizrahi culture remains widely denigrated, as evidenced before the March election when openly racist remarks were made about the community by several prominent Ashkenazi (Jews originating from Central or Eastern Europe) leftists. The erasure of Palestinian cultural heritage continued with the removal of Arabic from street signs in Be'er al-Sabe/Be'er Sheva, home to tens of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel, and in East

Jerusalem where, as tensions mounted in October, the city council approved new Hebrew street names as part of ongoing efforts to assert control over Palestinian neighbourhoods.

Further efforts to dislocate Palestinians from their land came in various forms. Protection and relative impunity granted to settlers by Israeli authorities alongside continuous settlement expansion – over 900 new settlement housing units were approved in July – means destruction and expropriation of Palestinian property is set to continue. A rare victory was won in January, however, when the High Court of Justice indefinitely halted construction of a section of Israel's separation barrier through the ancient agricultural terraces of the UNESCO-recognized West Bank village of Battir. The barrier has more broadly harmed Palestinian cultural rights and heritage by not only isolating and in some cases damaging archaeological sites as well as the natural environment, but also by annexing large swathes of Palestinian land, restricting access to holy sites and threatening the very existence of affected villages.

Also in the West Bank, Bedouin continuously faced pressure by authorities pushing them off their ancestral land in Area C, where Israel retains exclusive control over security, planning and construction, while communities inside Israel also continued to face home demolitions and dispossession of their traditional semi-nomadic lifestyle, particularly in Naqab/Negev desert villages 'unrecognized' by Israel as legal. A significant Supreme Court ruling in May denied Bedouin indigenous land rights, solidifying legal justification for future expropriation of Palestinian land within Israel and the West Bank. By failing to acknowledge the distinct historical and cultural heritage of the Bedouin, the court failed to recognize the Al-Uqbi family's ownership of a large plot of land including the 'unrecognized' village of Al-Araqib, bulldozed for the 92nd time by the end of 2015. Earlier, in May, the Israeli Supreme Court also approved a state plan to demolish the 'unrecognized' village Umm al-Hieran, to evict its residents and in its place build a new Jewish town, and at the end of November the government approved a plan for five new settlements that threaten to displace thousands more Bedouin. However, in early 2016, when the government declared intentions to develop a town over the ruins of a depopulated Palestinian village, members of Israel's Druze community, intended to be the new inhabitants and having themselves historically faced state confiscation of land, widely rejected the proposal.

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