

Al-Marsad's annual report of activities 2017

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(Above) Workshop with Al-Marsad, Cornell Law School Legal Clinic and student parental committees, Al-Marsad office, September 19, 2017 - Majdal Shams, Occupied Syrian Golan

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1. INTRODUCTION

Al-Marsad, as a human rights organization in the occupied Syrian Golan [hereafter the 'Golan'], has continued during 2017 to increase its efforts to monitor, document, research and advocate the human rights situation in the Golan; and examine to what extent the Israeli policies at the national and international level reflect, if at all, respect for international human rights law and international humanitarian law.



(Above) Workshop Al-Marsad team and Cornell Law School Legal Clinic Al-Marsad office, September 22, 2017 - Majdal Shams, occupied Syrian Golan

2017 witnessed new developments in Al-Marsad's work performance in several areas which have reflected the organization's credibility and efficiency. The local community's confidence in the organization continued to increase as more people and groups approached Al-Marsad for cooperation, obtaining legal consultations and to file complaints against various Israeli authorities (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, local councils, local planning committees, and others) concerning policies and practices that violate their basic rights. 2017 also witnessed a shift to filing more cases before courts, primarily to the labor courts.

Al-Marsad continues to strengthen its relationship and cooperation with local and international human rights organizations, and maintains regular contact with these organizations with respect to consultation and cooperation in defending human rights in the Golan. Al-Marsad also established stable relationship with local grassroots organizations and initiatives in the Golan. A special relationship in particular was established with the Fateh Mudarris Centre for Arts and Culture.

This report summarizes Al-Marsad's activities during 2017.

2. Changes in the organization's activities

As noted in previous years, the daily living situation of the native Syrian population in the Golan remains precarious and challenging. Israel continues to attempt to benefit from the ongoing conflict in Syria to strengthen its control over the Golan and claim 'sovereignty' over the region. It does so through settlement expansion and the exploitation of natural resources (creating 'facts on the ground'), and also by accelerating 'Israelization' policies designed to undermine the Syrian and Arab culture and identity of the population. Meanwhile, the growing militarisation of the region by various actors (the Israeli army, the Syrian regime and its allies, and rebel groups) has resulted in regular military activity, causing concern amongst the local population.

Unlike in 2016, no students from the Golan travelled to Damascus to study at its universities in 2017. Family visits to Syria have stopped completely since 2012.

Following the demolition of a Syrian home in Majdal Shams in 2016 by the Israeli authorities, dozens of partial demolitions of buildings constructed without permission took place in 2017, according to administrative demolition orders (partial demolitions conducted by local people themselves and the Israeli authorities). This included some parts of farmers' estates. Due to discriminatory planning policies it is extremely difficult for Syrians to obtain building permits, therefore, they are forced to build without them.

Furthermore, people in Majdal Shams are starting to lose hope that the planned extension of the village – 'New Majdal Shams' – will take place. The extension is threatened by the Israeli authorities' plans to designate 20,000 acres of land around Majdal Shams and Ein Qynia as a national park. Given the shortage of land available to build on within the approved boundaries, some local people are starting to sign agreements with the Israeli authorities stating that land is Israeli state owned in order to obtain permission to build on it. Others are increasingly building in their fields, which is reducing the available land for agriculture and having a negative impact on this sector.

Meanwhile, following government approval in October 2016 to expand Katzrin settlement by 1600 settlement units, construction is underway and much of the infrastructure is complete. In 2017, the Israeli planning committee approved plans for the construction of two additional blocks of settlement units. The total number of approved units is expected to reach 3000. The Israeli settler population in the Golan now exceeds the Syrian population.

As a result, Al-Marsad has committed additional resources to bringing these issues to the attention of the international community.

In 2017, Al-Marsad has established close relationships with the EU delegation and European Diplomatic Missions in Tel-Aviv, as well as EU bodies in Brussels. This culminated in a visit to Majdal Shams by 23 deputy ambassadors and senior diplomats from EU countries, and the EU delegation, in December 2017. The delegation received a field visit, a presentation about the human rights situation in the Golan and the rest of Syria, and Al-Marsad publications.

Al-Marsad established a strategic project/partnership with the Cornell Law School Legal Clinic, as a result of which two professors and five students from the clinic visited Al-

Marsad in September 2017 for seven days. Al-Marsad organized dozens of interviews for them with the native Syrian population and several field visits. The result of the visit was a UN submission: “Observations and Topics to be Included in the List of Issues on the Occasion of the Human Rights Committee’s 2018 Review of the State of Israel’s Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”. This will be submitted in Spring 2018.

Al-Marsad also established a partnership with the UK Bar Human Rights Committee (BHRC). Since mid-2017, Al-Marsad has been cooperating with the BHRC for a joint UN advocacy project (currently still ongoing). Al-Marsad met with the team in October 2017 in London to develop the partnership and has since been in regular communication.

In 2017, Al-Marsad worked on a comprehensive study on the living conditions of the native Syrian community of the Golan: ‘Forgotten Occupation: Life in the Syrian Golan after 50 Years of Israeli Occupation’. Due to be published in Spring 2018. Al-Marsad also continued to conduct broader legal research with regard to the ongoing armed conflict in Syria.

3. Important changes within Al-Marsad

The general assembly and the board of directors held 4 meetings during 2017. Two new members joined the general assembly, and elections will be organised during March/April 2018.

The Board:

A. Committee

1. Atef Safadi, press photographer with European Pressphoto Agency (EPA)
2. Naif Fakhreldeen, M.A Veterinary
3. Madad Ewidat, farmer

B. Audit Control Committee

4. Madad Kalany, M.A in Aviation Communications
5. Dr. Munir Fakher Eldin, Assistant Professor of Arab Studies at Birzeit University

Four international interns, from Italy, Ireland, and the Netherlands, joined Al-Marsad.

During 2017, Al-Marsad strengthened its relationship and cooperation with various international and regional human rights organisations.

International: having joined the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) in 2016, Al-Marsad partnered with this organisation to conduct an advocacy tour to Belgium in October 2017. Al-Marsad also developed new relationships with the UK Bar Human Rights Committee (BHRC) and Cornell Law School.

Regional: Al-Marsad started to work with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) regarding permanent residency issues. It maintained good relations with Al-Haq (Ramallah), Al-Mezan (Gaza), Civic Coalition for Defending Palestinian’s Rights in Jerusalem (Jerusalem), Adalah (Haifa) and De-Colonizer (Tel Aviv).

These new and ongoing partnerships with international and regional NGOs allowed Al-Marsad to expand its reach in terms of advocating key issues, obtaining support for project activities – in particular EU and UN advocacy - and providing effective legal advice and representation to local people.

In 2017, cooperation with grassroots organisations (school parent committees, farmers, young activists, workers' groups) increased and Al-Marsad provided them with assistance and consultations on a daily basis.

Al-Marsad also cooperated to a greater extent with a grassroots organisation called Fateh Mudarris. This organisation consists of artists and community activists, and Al-Marsad has assisted it in the running of cultural activities based on cultural rights.

Al-Marsad also coordinated with a community activist to scrutinize the policies and procedures of the local authorities and local council. This action resulted in a reduction of the price paid for electricity paid to the local council in Majdal Shams. We now work with this activist to produce the same result in the remaining Syrian villages.

As a result of the initiatives above, Al-Marsad was able to develop its internship program to include local activists and volunteers.

As was the case in 2016, Israeli policies to increase 'facts on the ground' required greater attention on issues such as settlement expansion, natural resource exploitation, activities and policies of the local councils, and discrimination in housing and planning rights. Therefore, Al-Marsad has continued to focus on project activities such as advocacy (both locally and internationally), strategic litigation, and the provision of legal consultations to the local community.

Increased cooperation with the local community has resulted in a greater demand for legal advice, and consequently has led to more communication and complaints being filed with the Israeli authorities (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, local councils, local planning committees, and others).

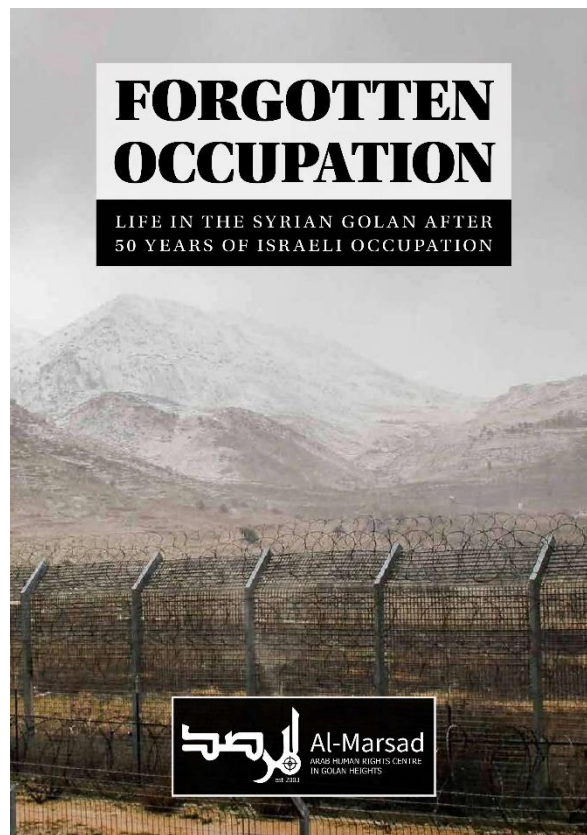
As per last year, the changes mentioned have resulted in an increase of activities for the project team. This has meant that team members are under increasing work pressure. In particular, the success of legal representation and advice is creating a lot of additional work for Al-Marsad's lawyer. Similarly, the development of new and existing relationships with other NGOs has been very successful, but leads to increased pressures on the organisation to provide partners with the information they require.

4. Research reports

Al-Marsad's legal research in 2017 focussed on the issues of discriminatory policies against the native Syrian population; settlement expansion; land mines; natural resource exploitation, such as water and oil; planning and housing rights; forcible transfer and property destruction. In addition, legal research was conducted on the armed conflict in Syria proper.

- Reviewing and updating existing Al-Marsad research and publications, and conducting new research to produce a comprehensive study on life under

occupation in the Golan: *'Forgotten Occupation: Life in the Syrian Golan After 50 Years of Israeli Occupation'*. In addition to significant desk research, this involved interviews with Syrians on a broad range of human rights issues.



(Above) Cover photo of the “Forgotten Occupation” publication

- Desk research and interviews for a joint UN submission with Cornell Law School, *'Observations and Topics to be Included in the List of Issues on the Occasion of the Human Rights Committee's 2017 Review of the State of Israel's Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights'*.
- Desk research and interviews for joint UN submissions with the UK Bar Human Rights Committee (BHRC).
- Three brochures, 'Know Your Rights', were published, and 9,000 copies were disseminated in workplaces, residential areas and shops etc. Furthermore, electronic versions of these publications were made available through Al-Marsad's website and Facebook page. Facebook was also used to respond to receive questions from workers and respond to them.

5. Advocacy promoting human rights situation in the occupied Syrian Golan

- Coordinated visit for 23 deputy ambassadors and senior diplomats from EU countries, and the EU delegation, to Majdal Shams, to learn about the human rights situation of the Syrians in the Golan.



(Above) Visit of EU delegation and European Diplomatic Missions to the Golan

- Contact with European politicians, government officials, NGO and IGO representatives, and journalists – both directly (meetings in Europe, calls, letters) and by a mailing list and social media platforms.
- 2 week long advocacy tour to the UK, Ireland and Belgium to raise awareness about the human rights situation of Syrians in the Golan. This included twenty meetings with European government / EU officials, politicians, potential donors, NGOs; a presentation to a European Parliament delegation; and three university presentations.



(Above) Dr Nizar Ayoub of Al-Marsad presenting to a university in Ireland

- Meetings and field visits in the Golan with local and international individuals and delegations, including: journalists, NGOs, IGOs (including WHO, UN, ILO and ICRC representatives), universities (including: Columbia and Cornell, United States; SOAS, United Kingdom; Leiden University, Netherlands)



(Above) Visit of World Health Organization during to the Golan – Al-Marsad office

- UN advocacy: submission for Israel's Universal Periodic Review (UPR); correspondence and meeting with UN representatives regarding labour rights at the UN base in Golan; Regular contact with NGO branch of ECOSOC regarding consultative status.
- Contact with Israeli authorities and ministries (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Interior, State Comptroller, Land Mine Authority, planning committees and others)
- Contact with Israeli controlled local councils (designated by the Minister of Interior).



(Above) A group from Germany – Al-Marsad office 2017



(Above) World Health Organization – Qasioun Clinic, Buqa`ta Village

6. Outputs delivered for the target group

The native community of the Golan has been identified as a main target group of Al-Marsad's work in addition to other target groups such as the Israeli audience/authorities and the international community (UN, EU). In 2017, outputs delivered for the target groups are as follows:

Advocacy

- Two questions were asked in the European Parliament about the human rights situation in the Golan. The Golan was also raised in questions and debates in the British and Irish parliaments. These questions resulted in the EU, Britain and Ireland reiterating their position on the illegality of Israeli settlements, the Golan's status under international law, etc.
- Continued media coverage about the human rights situation in the Occupied Syrian Golan and Al-Marsad.
- Al-Marsad published two op-ed articles about the human rights situation in the Golan; and a letter from the director of Al-Marsad appeared in a leading UK newspaper.
- Corrections obtained in two leading UK newspapers for inaccuracies in their reporting about the Golan.
- Increase in Al-Marsad website traffic and followers on social media platforms.
- Increased awareness among diplomatic missions in Tel Aviv and EU institutions in Brussels about the human rights situation in the Golan.
- An international travel organisation (Lonely Planet) amended language on its website to make clearer that the Golan is occupied territory and not part of Israel (however, additional changes are required).

- Local community playing increased role in local advocacy (through cooperation with grassroots initiatives).

Legal consultations, representation and correspondence

- Correspondence with the local councils over school building deficiencies led to the building of new school rooms, removal of safety hazards and installation of A/C in classrooms.
- Correspondence with the local council in Majdal Shams regarding discriminatory prices resulted in a reduction of these prices.
- The Israeli military committed to clear landmines from around a military base in Majdal Shams by the summer of 2018 (Note – similar promises have been made in the past, so Al-Marsad will follow this issue closely).
- Al-Marsad has a stronger relationship with the local community as a result of legal consultations, raising awareness (workshops) and litigations before Israeli courts.

Research

- Continued use of Al-Marsad research by inter-governmental bodies (e.g. UN), journalists and academics.

7. Litigations and legal consultations

- 669 people received legal consultations on political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights (labour rights, housing rights, right to education, permanent residency status, and discriminatory policies related to utilities, etc.).
- Two administrative petitions were filed according to the Law of the Right to Obtain Information 1998 regarding utility prices and municipal taxes for people with special needs.
- Correspondence with the local councils regarding discriminatory prices in electricity in the village.
- Correspondence with the local councils regarding suspected structural deficiencies in school buildings.
- Correspondence with local planning committee to scrutinise the maintenance of infrastructure in Majdal Shams (electricity, water and roads)
- Correspondence with the Israel Ministry of Defence regarding the presence of landmines inside and around Syrian villages.
- Correspondence with Israeli Ministry of Interior regarding applications for permanent residency.
- Preparation of a petition to the Supreme Court challenging the presence of landmines and military bases inside and around Syrian villages is ongoing.

8. Staff members' implemented activities

During 2017 the staff members have implemented the following activities:

A. Majdoleen Safadi, Accountant

- Prepares salaries and transfers them to employee's bank accounts;
- Follows daily administrative and financial issues;

- Pays taxes and office bills, monitors the bank account, follows-up on financial issues with the accounting office and the project auditor;
- Prepares financial reports in coordination with the project auditor;
- Updates the organization's website, entering data on a regular basis;

B. Salman Fakher-Eldeen, Field Researcher

Salman is responsible for the human rights field visits program. During 2017 he was engaged along with the rest of the team in the reception of international and local delegations. During the reporting period Salman, mostly in cooperation with the rest of the staff has carried out several field tours.

Salman also organizes interviews for the international researchers/interns so they can conduct their legal research. He participates in meetings with Israeli and Palestinian NGO's in Palestine/Israel and coordinates meetings for raising awareness among the local community.

C. Karama Abu Saleh, Lawyer

Karama is a lawyer and member of Israel's Bar Association. Karama has been conducting various activities, including:

- Providing legal advice to the Arab population of the Golan (669 consultancies were given to local community groups and individuals during 2017);
- Correspondence with various Israeli ministries and authorities (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, state comptroller, local councils, the authority of land mine cleaning, Ministry of Education, Israeli Water Company – Mekorot, local councils, Israeli local and district planning committees);
- Following up on Al-Marsad's file with the Israeli non-profit registrar office in Jerusalem (approval of the meeting's minutes of the organization's committees, preparing narrative and financial forms and sending them to the non-profit registrar office in Jerusalem);
- Following up on the clearing of land mine fields with the Israeli Comptroller Office and the Israeli army;
- Bringing cases from a labour project to the labour courts (implementing a project on labour rights);
- Registration of 3 Golani children in the population registry with the Ministry of Interior;

D. Nizar Ayoub, Director

- Leads the organization's daily work;
- Leads the internship program (Contacts interns, chooses interns, supervises the interns' daily work and assists them conducting their research);
- Conducts legal research (drafting statements, position papers and legal reports);
- Follows-up with Al-Marsad's applications for consultative status with ECOSOC and The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN);
- Conducts fundraising (contact donors, draft funding proposals and establishing relationships with donors);
- Reports to the donors;
- Networks with local, regional and international human rights NGOs.

E. Nazeh Brik

- Leads the settlements program;

- Observes and documents settlements activities.

9. Interns

During 2017, four interns have contributed to Al-Marsad work. The interns conducted their work in cooperation with the local staff, under the daily supervision of the director.

10. Conclusions and highlights

2017 witnessed increased levels of international and local advocacy and cooperation with other human rights organisations. Al-Marsad established solid relationships with key representatives in the EU institutions in Brussels, the EU mission and various European diplomatic missions in Tel Aviv. Al-Marsad continued to participate in multiple collaborative initiatives with different organisations across several specific fields. For example: collaboration with FIDH to raise awareness among the EU institutions in Brussels about the situation in the Golan; local advocacy initiatives with human rights NGO Adalah regarding the issue of landmines in the Golan; UN level advocacy with the BHRC.

In 2017, the number of field visits to the Golan increased. This is a clear indicator of how successful the program has been and how awareness has grown through word of mouth and social media activity. Some groups continue to return to Al-Marsad for a visit every year; the International Labour Organisation (ILO) being the most prominent. During the reporting period, the most important visit was that of 23 deputy ambassadors and senior diplomats from EU countries, and the EU delegation.

The success of the field tour program led to the creation and marketing of an alternative tourism program in order to encourage more tourists to visit the Syrian villages. The rationale being that tourists can see for themselves life under occupation whilst also supporting the local Syrian economy by staying in local hotels and eating in local restaurants. Al-Marsad intends to focus more on this initiative going forward.

Similarly, Al-Marsad launched a small scale pilot project on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in October 2017, and plans to turn it into a formal program by the beginning of 2019. This is another step in the right direction in terms of Al-Marsad's institutional development.

During 2017, Al Marsad continued to work on strategic litigation, often relying on information obtained through the 'law of the right to obtain information', before the Israeli courts and other state agencies to seek to obtain equal treatment for Syrians in the Golan. Information obtained through this law has been critical to demonstrate discriminatory policies affecting Syrians compared to Jewish-Israeli settlers. Further, legal advice and representation has been a major part of Al-Marsad's work during this period. The organisation provided over 300 consultations on multiple issues to Syrians in the Golan.

Al-Marsad managed to further strengthen its relationship with the local community through the creation and support of local grassroots initiatives and the continued provision of legal advice and representation. Concrete success on key discriminatory issues has helped to demonstrate to local people that it is possible to obtain redress for human rights

violations. However, work remains to be done: many people – in particular women – are still reluctant to discuss human rights violations for fear of reprisals from the Israeli authorities or because they believe that change is not possible.

Al-Marsad updated much of its existing legal research and obtained new information to produce a definitive record of the situation in the Golan: *'Forgotten Occupation: Life in the Syrian Golan After 50 Years of Israeli Occupation'*. Going forward Al-Marsad intends to focus more, if possible, on innovative ways to record and publish research on the living situation of Syrians in the Golan. For example, through blogs, videos, art work, etc.