

The Syrian Golan: Five Decades of occupation

Photo Essay

Photographer : Filippo Menci

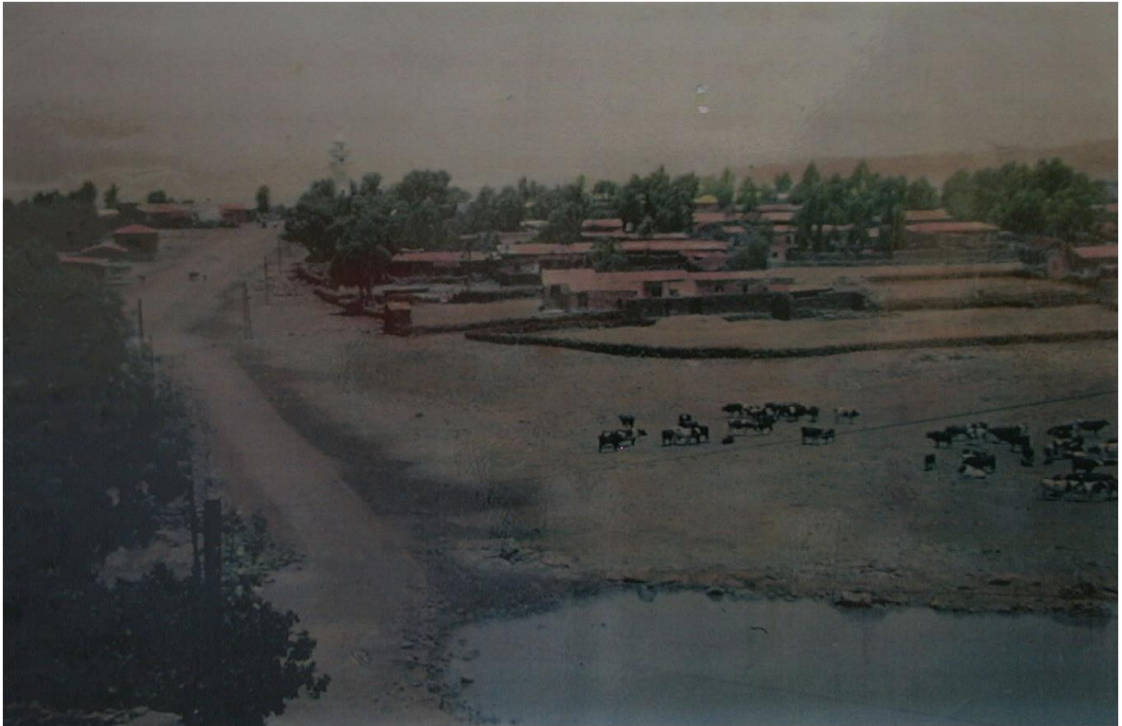
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Chapter 1: 1967, Israel invades, occupies, forcibly transfers Syrians and destroys their villages



- 1) The village of Al Khushniyeh before it was destroyed by the Israelis following 1967 occupation (archive photo), and the Mosque of Al Khushniyeh abandoned after 1967 war and destroyed by military training.

The area known as the Syrian Golan is a mountainous region and plateau in southwest Syria that borders Lebanon to the north, Jordan to the south, and Israel to the west. The overall landmass of the Golan is 1,860km², which is approximately 1% of the total landmass of Syria. From a military perspective, the Golan offers exceptional geo-strategic value with commanding positions overlooking southern Lebanon, much of southern Syria as well as northern Israel. The mountainous terrain peaks at 2,224 meters above sea level at what is known as Mount Hermon or Jabal al-Shaykh in Arabic.



2) Israel occupies the Golan, 1967, archive photo.

During the first few days of the 1967 Arab Israeli War, at an Israeli Military General meeting, **General Rehavam Zeevi declared that the Golan had to be cleared of its population.** Israel seized and occupied 1,250 km² of the Syrian Golan (roughly 70% of the Golan, containing 344 villages and farms). The Israelis secured control over its natural resources, cleared it from its indigenous population and forcibly transferred approximately 131,000 out of 137 occupied Golan inhabitants into Syria.



3) **Evacuation of Syrian civilians, hands raised, from their homes in the Syrian Golan by the Israeli forces.**

Israel's widespread, indiscriminate destruction of civilian property which was not justified by absolute military necessity amounts to a **war crime and a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention**. Only six Arab villages remained in the extreme north of the Syrian Golan: Majdal Shams, Masa'da, Buq'atha, 'Ein Qinyeh, Al Ghajar, and S'heeta with a remaining population of 6,400. In 1970 S'heeta's population was evacuated, the village was partially destroyed and a military post was built in its place. It was completely destroyed in 1974 after the war and with no compelling military reasons; its population was forcibly transferred to the neighboring village, Masa'da. Therefore today only five villages remain. **Forcible transfer is a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court**. The inhabitants of S'heeta are still fighting today for the return to their village. The right to return is guaranteed under International Law.



4) Buildings destroyed by military training, Ein-fiet (above) and Al Mansoura (below), Golan Heights.

Israel succeeded in depopulating the Golan through a number of means, including its regime of Military Orders that were introduced to administer the newly occupied territory and declare certain areas closed military zones, thus preventing the inhabitants from returning even after the war. Military Order 39 of the 27th of August 1967, for instance, ordered that 101 villages in the Occupied Golan be declared closed military zones. Nobody was allowed to enter the villages listed without special permission. Anyone who violated this order was subject to a punishment of five years imprisonment or a fine of five thousand Israeli Liras, or both. **Ethnic cleansing is a crime against humanity.**



5) Church of Banias, damaged during the 1967 war and afterwards abandoned.

Before the 1967 uprooting and expulsion of the local Syrian population, only 6% of the Golan population was Druze. Like Greater Syria, the Golan was somewhat ethnically and religiously diverse. Today approximately 25,000 Syrians remain in the Occupied Syrian Golan (mostly Druze with a Christian and Muslim minority).



6) Syrian Regional government house in Qunaytra abandoned after 1967 war and destroyed by military training.

Before the occupation the largest center was Qunaytra, which had a population of approximately 28,000. Qunaytra was partly regained by Syria following the 1974 armistice agreement. Israeli occupying forces used Qunaytra for military training from 1967-74 and completely destroyed the remainder of the town by blasting it with dynamite as they withdrew in 1974.



7) The mosque of Jubatha El-Zeit before the Arab village was destroyed and the Jewish settlement of Neve Ativ was built on top of its ruins in 1972.

Like Qunaytra, Jubatha El-Zeit village was also destroyed by the Israeli Army after the war. The village did not pose any security threat to the Israeli occupying forces and there were no major military operations taking place that could have made the destruction of Jubatha an absolute military necessity. **Israel's action in destroying the village of Jubatha El-Zeit while under its effective control, without any justification on the basis of absolute military necessity, violated the Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention.**



8) The village of Hemah after it was destroyed.

Under the laws of occupation, occupation is considered a temporary condition. The duties of an occupying power are spelled out primarily in the 1907 Hague Convention and the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as in certain provisions of Additional Protocol I and Customary International Humanitarian Law. **The prolonged occupation of the Golan which has resulted in both unlawful deportation and transfer of civilians as well as extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly amount to grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention.** Moreover, the 1907 Convention set out that private property cannot be confiscated and that the occupying States shall administer the property of the occupied state in accordance with the rules of usufruct.



9) Ruins of the old Arab village of Z'aoura are still used as a training site by the Israeli army.

Ruins of destroyed Arab villages are still used for military training by the Israeli Army. In 1992 Israel adopted its *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*, which solemnly declares the inviolability of life, body, dignity, property a value of the State of Israel. Since Israel annexed the Golan (and therefore it considers that area an integral part of its State), it is compelled, by its own laws, to respect and protect property, dignity and life there. Moreover, the unlawfulness of the annexation, does not shrink Israel's human rights obligations, since both, the International Court of Justice and the Human Rights Committee clearly pointed out that the international instruments for the protection of human rights Israel has ratified are applicable in all territories where the state exercises jurisdiction, including occupied territories.

Chapter 2: Settlement expansion and the exploitation of natural resources



10) The ceasefire line separates Syria proper from the Occupied Golan Heights, Majdal Shams.

Today, the indigenous population only retains control over 4.8% of the Occupied Golan, the rest has been expropriated for military use or allocated for settlements. In order to maintain the occupation and secure control over the Golan's natural resources, approximately 23,000 Jewish settlers have been illegally relocated to the Golan, and accommodated in 34 settlements (33 agricultural settlements and 1 town). Israeli settlements violate the laws of occupation. **The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits an occupying power from transferring its citizens into the territory it occupies and from transferring or displacing the population of an occupied territory within or outside the territory. At the International Criminal Court, these acts are a war crimes.**



11) Aerial view of Merom Golan Kibbutz, Jewish settlement established in 1967 immediately after the war.

Israeli settlements were built in a number of places over destroyed Arab villages and farms, which in turn meant that Israel had seized control of the land and resources. Each year Israeli authorities attract new settlers with the prospect of new jobs and encourage their arrival through socio-economic incentives.



12) Rimonim Hotel in the settlement of Neve Ativ built above an Arab cemetery which was part of the destroyed village of Jubatha.

Strong economic motivations underpin the occupation of the rich volcanic plateau, home to a huge variety of valuable natural resources and extremely fertile soil that is the Syrian Golan. The exploitation of the natural resources has been secured and carried out mainly through the establishment of economic activities directly in the occupied territory.

The nature of the Settlement Industry in the Occupied Golan is fourfold: settlement products, constructions on occupied land, provision of services to the settlements and touristic infrastructures.



13) Urban planning in Merom Golan Kibbutz.

Israel has used the spatial planning as an instrument to further the marginalization of the Arab sectors, on one side, and to extend the illegal settlements, on the other; thus adopting a discriminatory, double-standard approach. Israel imposes severe building restrictions upon the Arab population, which has led to both the significant increment of real estate prices, and the phenomenon of unauthorized abusive construction.



14) Construction workers, Majdal Shams.

Israeli building restrictions impede the expansion of the Arab villages.



15) The urban planning of Majdal Shams.

Since the Arab villages cannot expand, in order to meet the necessities of a growing population, the Arabs of the Golan are forced to build new houses literally on top of existing ones and on land once used for agriculture. The impact on the economy of the Golan is devastating. Some products, like grapes, are no longer cultivated because of lack of space.



16) Daneal, 14, and Amir, 17, bring up the wood in their third floor house.

The lack of proper infrastructure and space affect the daily life of the Arab population of the Golan. Israel is in total control of the land use, roughly 470,000 dunams are allocated for grazing fields for livestock, 100,000 dunams for nature reserve parks, 100,000 dunams for military use and 845,000 dunams are allocated for agricultural use.



17) A forest area in the Golan Heights.

From an agricultural perspective, the disintegration of volcanic rocks has produced an extremely fertile soil in the Syrian Golan. Prior to the 1967 occupation, the Golan produced grain, vegetables, milk, wool, honey, meat, eggs and fruit for the local population. Today Israel produces for example 7,500 tones of grapes for wine which amounts to 21% of Israel's total grape production and 38% of its exports. Israel produces 7,000 tones of mangos a year in the Occupied Golan which amount to 32% of Israel's total mango production, 70% of the mangos grown in the Occupied Golan are exported. Israel grows 25 million roses a year in the Occupied Golan, 90% of which are exported.



22) The Plateau, Nimrod.

Following Israel's colonization of the territory, Israeli agricultural settlements have been established and are producing wine, beef, fruit and mineral water for the Israeli domestic and export market, generating considerable wealth for the Israeli economy. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, Israel has attempted to strengthen the exploitation of natural resources in the Golan. **Israel's appropriation of land, water, and other natural resources for the benefit of settlements and Israelis violates the Hague Regulations of 1907, which prohibit an occupying power from expropriating the resources of occupied territory for its own benefit.**



23) Farmers trimming apple trees, Masa'da.

Israeli laws were enforced in the Golan after the illegal annexation of 1981. According to these laws the private ownership of water is prohibited, thus all water resources fall within the Israeli state administrations. As a consequence, the native inhabitants are forced to purchase the water - even for irrigating their farms - from the Israeli government. Moreover, the Israeli Water Authority must approve any private operation involving the use of water, such as the construction of tanks to collect rainwater.



24) Baniyas waterfall in the Syrian Golan. The Golan Heights is the only territory controlled by Israel where precipitations are significant.

The Occupied Syrian Golan is an abundant source of water. It has been estimated that the average annual rainfall for all of Israel is approximately 7,900 million cubic meters annually, much of this rain occurs in the northern region of the Syrian Golan where there are two major water sources. One in the west consisting of the drainage basin of the Jordan River and its tributaries: the Baniyas, the Dan and the Hasbani. The other is in the south, where the border is demarcated on one side, by the Yarmuk River, one of the Jordan River's largest tributaries, and on the other, by the Galilee Lake (although to what extent has been hotly debated).



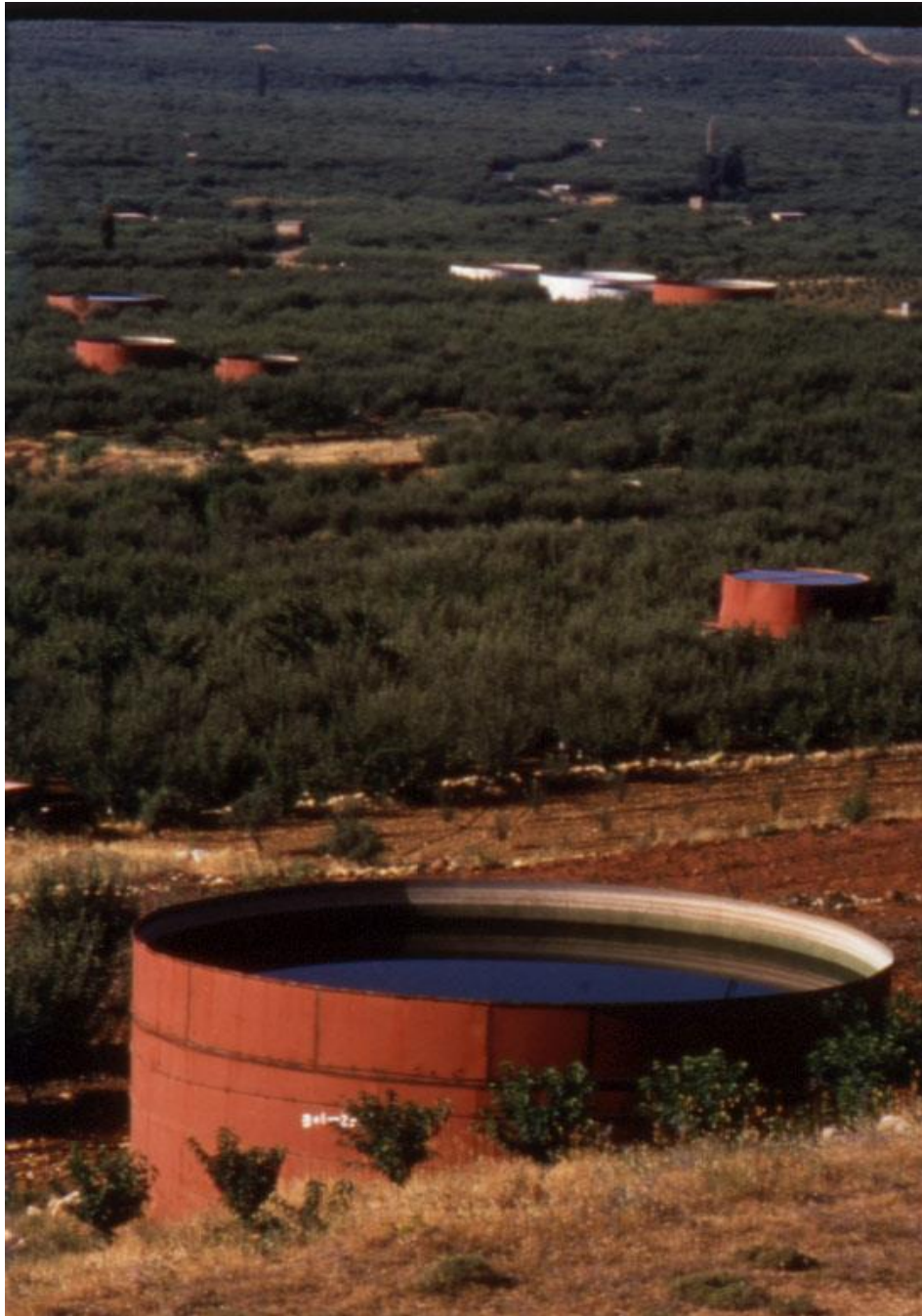
25) Birkat ram. The Golan Heights are rich in lakes.

The combination of all of these significant water reserves, in a region where water is one of the most precious commodities, makes the Golan a very strategic area for Israel. Israel's exploitation of an occupied territory's natural resources is a clear violation of article 55 of the Hague Regulations.



26) Israel pumps water from Ram lake and feeds it to the Jewish settlements.

The Israeli national water company Mekorot monopolizes all the water in Israel. The UN condemned Israeli discriminatory measures such as the practice carried out by Mekorot, which channel water from Ram Lake directly to Israeli settler farms at preferential rates, whereas Arab farmer's use of water from the same company is tightly restricted. Mekorot co-operates with the private company Mei Golan who **extracts water from the Occupied Golan and sell it throughout Israel**. Mei Golan extracts water from the Salukia spring in the Syrian Golan and has a bottling plant in Katzrin.



27) Water tanks in the farming area of Majdal shams. Arab farmers collect rainwater in these tanks because the lack of water due to the discriminatory water distribution policies.

The consequences of this illegal exploitation for the economy of the Arab population of the Golan, in particular the farmers, are disastrous. **The looting of natural resources is not only illegal under International Humanitarian Law; it also violates basic human rights, like the adequate standard of living, and the right to work.**



28) Vineyard in Katzrin.

Settlement products, grown in the occupied territory, exploiting its natural resources, enable Israel not only to satisfy its own internal demand, but also to operate in the global market, often deliberately omitting to mention the actual origin of the products; thus misleading the purchasers.



29) Golan Heights Winery, located in the Israeli settlement of Katzrin.

The Golan offers a great variety of climate and land types. This is only one of the Israeli Wineries based in a settlement in the Golan that produces 5.5 million bottles a year of 46 different wines, 25% of which are exported.

The prohibition of pillage in occupied territories is a principle of Customary International Humanitarian Law and a war crime at the International Criminal Court. The exploitation of the natural resources in the Golan matches the elements of the crime of pillage, for which not only the State of Israel, but also natural and juridical persons are responsible.



30) The Golan Heights Winery hall.

The occupying power under International Humanitarian Law is obliged to act only as the temporary administrator. The area under occupation does not fall within the sovereignty of the occupying power, which must respect the interests of the local population, and under no circumstances can profit from the occupation. **The exploitation of natural resources of occupied territories, not merely for the purpose of meeting the cost of the occupation but “in pursuance of a deliberate design to further the general war of the belligerent without consideration of the local economy, is plunder and therefore a violation of the laws and customs of war.”** (The Nuremberg Tribunal, 1946). Although the control of land and water has been one of the main operations of the occupation since its early stages, during the last few years, with the backdrop of the conflict in Syria, Israel has further expanded its colonial plan to the exploitation of gas, oil and wind energy.

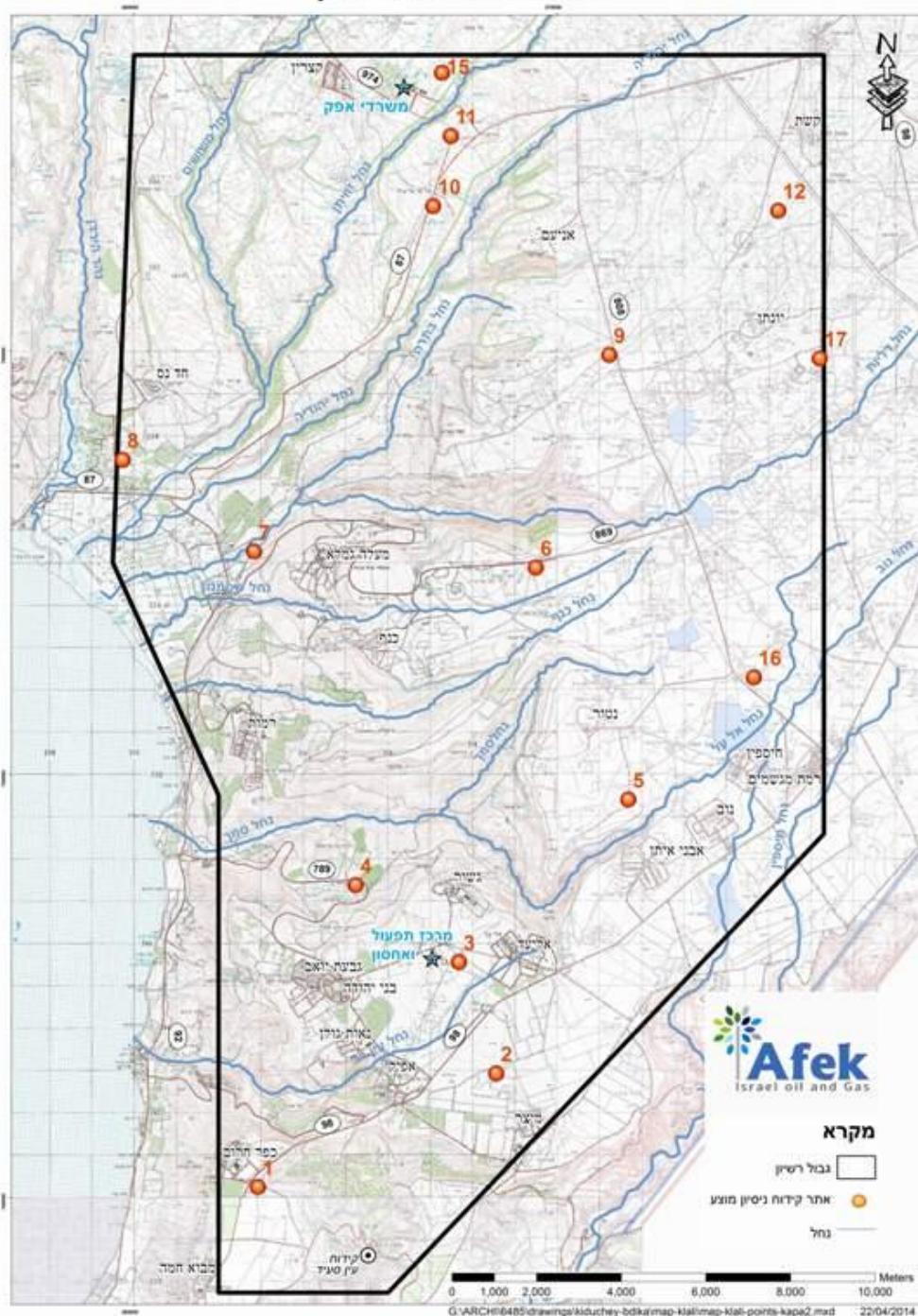


31) Golan Heights wind farm, mount Tal-Hezeqa.

Since 1993 Israel has extended its usurpation of natural resources to wind. In January 2012, the District Council for Planning and Construction approved the construction of a 400-dunam wind farm. Turbines have thus been installed around Majdal Shams by Israeli companies, such as Mei Golan and Multimetrix, as well as a United States-based company, AES Corporation.

In 2014, the Ministry of National Infrastructures, Energy, and Water Resources also granted a conditional license to the Eurocom Group subsidiary Enlight Renewable Energy Solutions Ltd. for producing 400 megawatts of electricity from wind-driven turbines in Golan (in Emek Habacha, Emek Haruchot, and Ruwach Bereshit). The project is financed by Bank Hapoalim.

חיפושי נפט רמת הגולן



32) The Israeli oil company Afek's drilling sites in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

Afek Oil and Gas (previously named Genie Israel Oil and Gas) is an Israeli private company, almost fully owned by an American corporation - Genie Oil and Gas. In February 2015 Afek announced that it has finished preparations on the ground and has begun drilling for oil in the south of the occupied Golan. In October 2015, above-ground tests discovered the presence of oil and natural gas reserves that Afek claim could make Israel self-sufficient. On the 1st of February 2016 the Northern District

Committee for Planning and Building approved a two-year permit extension to Afek Oil and Gas to explore for conventional oil in a 39,500-hectare zone south of Katzrin.

Chapter 3: Daily life for the natives: family separation and minefields



36) Families peer through binoculars and talk on the phone to their relatives who are across the ceasefire line in Syria proper and a man communicating with

his family across the border with a megaphone from an area called the “shouting hill station” or the “valley of tears”.

In 1974, following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, a disengagement agreement was made between Syria and Israel in which a demilitarized zone was set up between the two states. Following this agreement, family members from both Syria proper and the Occupied Golan were able to meet near the ceasefire line fence. Every family in the Golan has relatives in Syria, who they are permanently separated from. The military orders issued by Israel after the occupation banned civilians who were forcibly displaced from returning to their homes and properties in the Golan. This broke down all means of communication between the Syrians who remained in the Occupied Golan and their family members who were forcibly displaced to Syria. **Family separation violates the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which states that the “widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family”. Forcible transfers and deportations are prohibited under Article 49 of the fourth Geneva Convention.**



37) Syrian men gathering at a wedding, Majdal Shams. The Druze are the majority still inhabiting the remaining Arab villages of the Golan Heights.

Between 1967 and the implementation of the ‘Golan Heights Law’ in 1981 applications for family reunifications were submitted to the Military Governor. There were no guarantees that reunifications would be granted by the Israeli authorities. For those applications that were successful, family members either returned to the Occupied Golan or had members of their family join them in Syria proper. The reunification was under the condition that it was a ‘one way ticket’.



38) Local women prepare the traditional bread.

Because of the ‘one way ticket’ condition for reunification, many Syrian nationals who had married a resident of the Golan were permanently separated from their family in Syria. In recent years, under the Nationality and Entry into Israel Law (Amendment No 2) 2007, family reunifications have been stalled and are now heavily restricted for all Arabs in Israel and the Occupied Territories, including the Occupied Syrian Golan. The huge restrictions on family reunifications were only supposed to be temporary.



39) Shahda Braik, 73 prepares the mate tea. Great Hospitality is a value in the Druze society.

The restrictions that have faced the indigenous population of the Occupied Golan for the last 43 years mean that some people live less than half a kilometer from their families and yet are faced with the prospect of never being able to see them again.



41) The Church of Ein Qinyye. A Christian minority still lives in the Golan Heights.

Druze, Christian and Muslim people lived in peace in the Golan before the Israeli occupation. The human rights which are violated by the existence of illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Syrian Golan include: the right to sovereignty over their natural resources; the right to freedom from discrimination; the right to family; the right to privacy; the right to property; the right to an adequate standard of living; freedom of movement and the right to self-determination.



42) The native Syrians travel document from the Israel authorities list their nationality as “undefined”.

In 1981 the Knesset passed the ‘Golan Heights Law’, which replaced the military rule, and illegally annexed the Golan. Domestic Israeli laws and administration were extended to the Occupied Syrian Golan. **Israel’s annexation has violated the UN Charter, customary international law, international treaties and fundamental principles of International Law including the prohibition of the use of force against another state which amounts to the crime of aggression. The UN Security Council declared this act illegal and null and void under International Law, urging Israel to comply with the 1907 Hague Convention and the Fourth Geneva Convention.**

According to the identity cards Israel release to the Arab inhabitants of the Golan their nationality is *undefined*. They hold no passport, instead they receive a travel document. They refuse the imposition of Israeli nationality.



43) An Israeli military outpost surrounded by mines above houses inhabited by the locals in the center of Majdal Shams.

In the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli conflict and from the beginning of the occupation Israel has made substantial efforts to fortify the territory against attacks with anti-tank ditches, the establishment of military outposts along the length of the ceasefire line, and minefields throughout the Occupied Golan. Landmines placed by Israeli occupying forces have since constituted a real and lasting threat to the citizens of the Golan. These minefields are concentrated in the area around the ceasefire line, but they are also present in Arab villages and between agricultural fields. In August 2011 the army laid a new batch of anti-personnel mines in the Occupied Golan along the border with Syria, after demonstrations involving Palestinian Syrian refugees took place at the ceasefire line. All Israeli mines in the Golan have long ceased to have any military importance. After continued advocacy of Al-Marsad about the landmine issue in the area, Israel cleared part of the minefields in and around Majdal Shams. Sadly there are still dangerous minefields in Majdal Shams that are left untouched. Some of these are found in people's backyards and only a few hundred meters away from a primary school. Moreover, in the center of Majdal Shams a military outpost still exists, surrounded by a minefield.



44) Amir, 17, plays with his cousins in their backyard adjacent to a mined area.

To date, Israel is not party to the “Mine Ban Treaty” and it has declared a state of permanent security alert, giving military needs a high priority and treating its defense system, including landmines, as a state secret. Therefore, official documentation on the use and location of landmines is limited. Estimations resulting from our fieldwork and existing resources indicate the existence of approximately 200 minefields in the Occupied Golan covering 36.000 dunams of land in total.



45) Agricultural fields scattered with mines.

Landmines deny populations the fulfillment of their agricultural needs by rendering land unusable and furthermore they inhibit freedom of movement. The native Syrian residents of the Occupied Golan have traditionally been primarily occupied with farming and grazing cattle and as such the economic impact the minefields have had and still have is not to be underestimated. After the confiscation of their land, the farmers have generally not been compensated. In some rare cases farmers have received some compensation for lost lands, but the compensation was far below market value and these cases were the exception to the rule.

Apart from the civilian casualties, Al-Marsad has frequently received reports of incidents where farm animals were killed by mine blasts, resulting in serious economic loss for the owners. It should be noted that much of the minefields threatening Arab villages today have been laid on land confiscated from Arab farmers. The Israeli army on the pretext of their need to lay new mines justified the confiscation. Confiscated lands include grazing areas, as well as land inside and in the direct vicinity of villages.



46) Workers discharging wood besides a mined area, Majdal Shams.

Since 1967, many civilians have become victims of the landmines placed in the Golan. Difficulties arise in measuring exact numbers, as no official record of landmine casualties is available for inside the state of Israel. Instead, casualties are listed under the umbrella category of “Victims of Hostile Activities”. Out of 66 accidents recorded, a staggering 87% involved victims under the age of 18, of which 39% were under the age of 10. Many accidents have also happened in areas considered to be risk-free. The vast majority of injuries and deaths belong to native Syrian residents of the Occupied Golan.



47) Children playing in their backyard only a few meters away from mined areas, Majdal Shams.

Mines are often moved by natural conditions such as rain, snow or natural earth movements, displacing the mines and rendering safe areas dangerous. The fences are not designed to stop this, and the situation is worsened by the fact that the Golan is a mountainous area, causing mines placed on the hills to slide downhill, out of the fenced areas. One example is the case of the 4 year-old Amir Abu-Jabel, who was killed by a landmine a few meters away from his house in 1989. He was playing in the backyard of his house when a mine that was swept into the area by rain detonated. (Al-Haq Affidavit #3 2000, Amir Abu-Jabel's father). **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Israel is a party, states in Article 6 that every child has an “inherent right to life.” Israel is also violating Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which also grants the inherent right to life.**



48) Saleh Barar lost the right side of his body, including his eye, forearm and leg at the age of 12. The danger of minefields is an actual threat to civilian security.

Israel ratified Amended Protocol II to the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons which expressly forbids the use of mines against civilians and imposes a set of minimum precautions in order to protect civilians from mines. According to Al-Marsad's information, the Israeli efforts in this area have resulted in most minefields in the Golan now indeed being fenced off and indicated with warning signs. However, most is not all and the effects of the exception to the rule in a matter like this can be disastrous. Our field workers report that even though most minefields are indeed surrounded by fences, the fences are occasionally in an inadequate state. Al-Marsad has observed broken fences, fences that have fallen down and warning signs facing the wrong way. **Israel's landmines are violating the Fourth Geneva Convention which provides for the protection of the civilian population which find themselves in the hands of an occupying power of which they are not nationals.**