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# THE ISSUE OF PALESTINIAN INTERNAL REFUGEES IN ISRAEL CASE STUDY: IQRIT AND KAFR BIR`IM VILLAGES

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**ABSTRACT:**

*THE PURPOSE OF THE PAPER IS TO ANALYZE AND HIGHLIGHT THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE PROBLEM OF PALESTINIAN INTERNAL REFUGEES IN ISRAEL. ALSO, THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER ARE TO ANALYZE THE FACTORS THAT DETERMINED THE FORMATION OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM; TO HIGHLIGHT THE PARTICULARITIES OF THE INTERNAL REFUGEE POPULATION AND TO PRESENT THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS THE PROBLEM OF INTERNAL REFUGEES. THE PAPER IS DIVIDED INTO FOUR MAIN SECTIONS. THE FIRST PRESENTS GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE FORMATION OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM. THUS, THIS SECTION IS HIGHLIGHTED THE HISTORICAL PROCESS THAT LED TO THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS, BUT ALSO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS PHENOMENON. THE SECOND PART HIGHLIGHTS THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF PALESTINIAN INTERNAL REFUGEES IN ISRAEL. THE THIRD PART OF THE PAPER PRESENTS THE POLICIES PROMOTED BY THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENTS IN RELATION TO THE ISSUE OF PALESTINIAN INTERNAL REFUGEES. THE LAST PART HIGHLIGHTS THE CASE STUDY OF THE PAPER THAT IS BASED ON THE STORY OF PALESTINIAN RESIDENTS IN THE VILLAGES OF IQRIT AND KAFR BIR`IM.*

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**KEY WORDS:** ISRAEL, INTERNAL REFUGEES, PALESTINIAN REFUGEES, IQRIT, KAFR BIR`IM

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Israeli society is characterized as heterogeneous, being marked by the existence of several cleavages that significantly affect the relationship between the various communities within it. However, the strongest and most persistent conflict is ethnic, pitting the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel against each other. Therefore, it is important to understand the causes of this cleavage, and the research topic chosen for this study presents a perspective on the evolution of this particular ethnic conflict in Israeli society.

The subject of the Palestinian internal refugees in Israel is intensely debated in the literature and there are several narratives on the causes that triggered this phenomenon. The research topic chosen in this study is relevant because the issue of Palestinian internally displaced persons is a point of reference in the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israeli

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society. Moreover, the problem of Palestinian internal refugees in Israel is an issue whose implications persist even today.

The purpose of the paper is to analyze and highlight the main features of the problem of Palestinian internal refugees in Israel. Also, the objectives of the paper are to analyze the factors that determined the formation of the Palestinian refugee problem; to highlight the particularities of the internal refugee population and to present the Israeli government policy towards the problem of internal refugees.

The research methodology is based on a systematic approach that has a double dimension that of the historical narrative, from the perspective of the appearance and evolution of the problem of Palestinian internal refugees in Israel, as well as the analyzing the impact that this issue had in relation with the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society. Therefore, the essential elements used for this purpose are represented by the consultation of books and specialized articles dealing with this subject.

The paper is divided into four main sections. The first presents general considerations regarding the formation of the Palestinian refugee problem. Thus, this section is highlighted the historical process that led to the Palestinian refugee crisis, but also the characteristics of this phenomenon. The second part highlights the main characteristics of Palestinian internal refugees in Israel. The third part of the paper presents the policies promoted by the Israeli governments in relation to the issue of Palestinian internal refugees. The last part highlights the case study of the paper that is based on the story of Palestinian residents in the villages of Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im.

## **2. THE FORMATION OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM**

The 1948 war in Palestine was the culmination of an ethnonational conflict between Arabs and Jews. The conflict culminated in the creation of Israel, the displacement and flight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Jews to Israel, and the reallocation of land previously owned by Arabs to Jewish groups and individuals [1].

Given these aspects, it is important to mention that, the Palestinian refugee is defined by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as "a person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years immediately preceding the outbreak of the conflict in 1948 and who has lost his home and means of livelihood as a result of this conflict." This term, which was expanded to include the children of such a person, includes both external refugees who fled to neighboring Arab nations and internal refugees who fled to different parts of Israel (mostly Arab localities) [2].

The official Israeli narrative regarding the refugee issue took shape in the second half of 1948 and crystallized into a coherent treatise the following year. According to this narrative, the flight of refugees would not have occurred if Arab leaders had not decided to oppose the establishment of a Jewish state by force, in flagrant violation of the UN Resolution 181– first by mobilizing local Palestinian forces and the Arab Liberation Army, then by direct military intervention [3]. According to the Israeli version, this flight was accelerated at various stages of the war as a result of several Arab actions: Arab leaders` calls for the Palestinian population to temporarily abandon their homes until the battle could be won; false scare propaganda by Arab media and authorities about Jewish soldiers` behavior towards the Palestinian population; the flight of Palestinian society`s social, economic, religious, and political leadership shortly after the commencement of hostilities; and the violence perpetrated by members of the Arab Liberation Army and other Arab volunteers

against the Palestinian community in the area. Therefore, Israel had nothing to do with the establishment of the refugee crisis [3].

The study of the Palestinian refugee crisis and its roots was shattered in the mid-1980s when archival evidence from the 1948 conflict was released and made available in Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States. New Israeli research, based on extensive data obtained in various archives, showed that Israel was also responsible for the emergence of this problem, first and foremost as a result of its forces' expulsions [3]. In contrast to prior Israeli investigations, these studies essentially adopted a critical and revisionist approach that was unambiguous and well-defended, as is appropriate for academic research. Their findings cast doubt on the official narrative about the origins of the Palestinian refugee crisis. New research shows that while everyone agrees that Israel played a role in the genesis of the refugee crisis to some degree or another, perspectives differ on the magnitude of that involvement [3].

During the first four months of the battle, irregular Arab troops – locals and volunteer militants from Arab countries carried out the majority of the attacks against Jewish civilian objectives. However, Arab victories on the battlefield did not prevent 50,000 to 75,000 Palestinian Arabs from fleeing their homes at this time; the fugitives accounted for 4 to 6% of the 1.3 million Arabs living west of the Jordan River in late 1947 [3]. In the initial wave of exodus, Palestinians mostly went to the country's heavily Arab populated interior, particularly Nazareth and Nablus, as well as neighboring Arab countries. While most of the fleeing Arabs expected a quick triumph, many chose to leave their homes until the battle was ended to avoid the perils and discomforts of war [3].

Faced with a dual threat to the viability of a Jewish state in both the diplomatic and military arenas, the heads of the Jewish community and Haganah commanders resolved to shift strategy in the Arab-Israeli conflict: abandoning a defensive posture and going on the offensive. This took the form of what became known as Plan D, a strategy of action prepared by the Haganah in early March 1948 to win the battle against the irregular Arab forces in Mandate Palestine [3].

Two months after the beginning of Plan D, an entirely different reality emerged: the local Palestinian forces, as well as the Arab Liberation Army, had been defeated. As a result, Jewish forces controlled nearly all of the territory assigned to the Jewish state, and the Arab people of these areas fled. At the same time, the departure of Arabs from their villages in the Sharon region was completed, and several villages along the main road linking Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem were abandoned by their inhabitants [3]. In total, 200,000 to 300,000 Palestinian Arabs fled to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Transjordan, as well as densely populated Arab areas within Mandate Palestine, such as Nablus and Hebron. It should be noted that Jewish leaders attempted to stop the Arabs from fleeing, for example in Haifa [3].

The departure of Palestine Arabs in the months of April and May 1948 was the result of several factors, direct and indirect: the general deterioration that followed the outbreak of hostilities in December 1947 accelerated greatly during this period due to escalation in the level of fighting between the two sides [3]. This degradation resulted in widespread chaos: law and order were not enforced, transportation and supply of critical commodities and services became more difficult, and economic activity came to a halt. The Palestinian population was the main victim of the growing chaos; unlike the Jewish community, which had built a network of economic and social institutions over three decades of British Mandatory administration in preparation for statehood, the Arab community had no alternative systems to rely on once British civil services and other functions ceased to

operate. The disintegration of Palestinian society in such circumstances weakened Palestinians` ability to bear the demands of war and increased the flow of refugees [3].

The thousands of wealthy families who fled the country in the first wave were joined by much of Palestinian society`s political leadership, as well as members of the free professions and other educated classes, in the second wave. The psychological warfare waged by Jewish troops against Arab forces, and sometimes civilians, to force their surrender, exacerbated the low spirits and despair that surrounded Palestinian Arabs and pushed them to flee [3]. Arab citizens in various places were ordered to leave their homes by the Arab Higher Committee or local Arab commanders, mostly for strategic reasons. As Jewish military pressure mounted in April, Palestinians became concerned that, now that they had gained the upper hand, the Jews would exact horrific revenge on them for the innumerable atrocities the Palestinians had committed against Jews over the years throughout the struggle [3].

Moreover, in the third wave, the Israeli offensives of the "Ten Days" and subsequent clearance operations likely drove over 100,000 Arabs into exile in Jordanian-controlled eastern Palestine, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria. [4]. Therefore, between November 1947-October 1950, an estimated 600,000 to 760,000 Palestinian Arabs departed their homes, moving to other parts of Palestine or abroad [4].

### **3. THE INTERNAL REFUGEE POPULATION**

Internal refugees accounted for about 28,000 of the 156,000 Palestinian Arabs who stayed in Israel at the end of the 1948 war. The term designated primarily citizens who were unable to return to their homes before the commencement of hostilities and were forced to relocate elsewhere in the State of Israel [3]. They were dubbed "Present-Absentees" as time went on. The phrase encapsulated the peculiarity of their situation: they were "absentees" in terms of their possessions, but "presents" in terms of the governmental machinery. Because they lived in the country, the Arabs vehemently opposed the term "absentees". They saw this as a kind of discrimination, repression, and a government attempt to whitewash its seizure of their lands [3]. Also, the term al-muhajjarun refers to Palestinians who remained in Israeli territory during the 1948 war, or who returned to Israel after the war, but were unable to return to their old homes and villages, which had been abandoned or destroyed during and after the fighting [5].

Internal refugee movements differ from external refugee movements in several ways: the distance traveled is typically shorter; the refugees are less likely to experience interim camp life or be subjected to official social policy, and their stay within the same country keeps them closer to their original communities [2]. As a result, unlike external refugees, they are less likely to be fully removed from their previous social environment. However, these facts do not always imply that the complexity of difficulties caused by the internal refugee phenomenon will be lessened. On the other hand, being a "refugee at home" may result in ongoing conflict as a result of power redistribution, with refugees later emerging as a disadvantaged group, even when compared to their counterparts who remained in their home locales. Internal refugees may thus be classified as minorities at both the national and community levels [2].

Internal refugees were divided into four categories: Arabs who fled to territories under enemy control that later became part of the State of Israel after their homes were seized by the IDF; Arabs living in the "Triangle" that was annexed to Israel as a consequence of the Rhodes Agreements [3]. These people became Absentee owners of their lands, which had been in the state`s hands since the beginning; Arabs who returned to the country after the war, whether willingly or without permission; Arab citizens who were forcibly evacuated

from their settlements during the war or shortly afterward for security, development, or Jewish settlement goals [3].

Ninety percent of the internal refugees came from the north, with the majority hailing from communities in Galilee. Part of it came from the cities of Haifa and Acre's coastal districts. Approximately 90% of Israel's internal refugees were Muslims, with the remaining being Christians [3]. The majority of the refugees were integrated into Arab villages that survived the conflict, almost all of them in the Galilee region. In Nazareth, between 3,000 and 6,000 people were settled. Around a thousand people settled in each of Acre and Tamra, 800 in Majd al-Kurum, 600 in al-Reine, and several hundred in other Galilee communities. Arab villages in the "Triangle" and Wadi Ara also welcomed refugees. [3].

The war and the departure of the refugees were devastating events for the Arabs who remained in Israel-controlled territory. Four-fifths of the Arab population had departed, and the Arabs had seemingly become a minority in a Jewish state overnight. The Arab economy had collapsed [6]. In Arab communities, there was widespread unemployment as well as serious food shortages. Thousands of families have split apart as a result of the fighting. Friendships, families, and property were cut off over the armistice lines. Fearful of the treatment they may experience at the hands of the Jews, Israeli Arabs were aware of the severity of the battle and Arab preparations for the Jews in the case of an Arab triumph. Many people doubted the Israeli state's long-term viability, and all were unsure of their status within it [6].

Only 69,000 Arabs were counted in Israel during the first census in November 1948, compared to around 860,000 in the same area before the war. However, the best estimate of Israel's Arab population at the end of 1949 is 160,000 people or about 12.5% of the country's total population [6]. This increase was due to three factors: under the conditions of war prevailing in November 1948, not all Arabs were counted; under the terms of ceasefire negotiated with Jordan in March 1949, Israel was given a narrow strip of territory along the border (the "Little Triangle") that had roughly 31,000 Arab peasants; there had been a constant influx of Arab refugees into the country both illegally and under the rules of the family reunification program [6].

The Arab minority in the fledgling state of Israel was in shambles. It was completely bereft of leadership above the municipal level, being divided along regional, religious, and familial lines. Unconvinced by the Arab troops' loss, Israeli Arabs were skeptical of the new situation's long-term viability, hoping, at very least, that the refugees would be permitted to return. Their financial condition was dire, and their immediate worries were the safety and unity of their families, as well as the integrity of their property [6].

The Arab minority that remained in Israel after 1948 was ruled by the army rather than by the civilian police force, which began to deal with law and order among the Jewish population. The military rule was forced upon the Arabs through a special military unit called "the military government", which was the main Israeli official mechanism governing the Arabs remaining in Israel [7]. Approximately 80% of the Palestinians who resided in the territory that ultimately became the state of Israel turned into refugees, as a result of the 1948 war. Some of the nascent state's founders saw the fact that a sizable Arab minority remained within the Jewish state's borders as a temporary issue. Moreover, several of these leaders wanted and wished for a reduction in these numbers, if not a full departure of the Arabs. Therefore, the military government was expected to be the body that would supervise and regulate the Arabs in such a way that their ongoing removal from Israel would be facilitated [7].

The majority of the internal refugees settled near their original villages. They had social and economic ties with these communities before, and they also wanted to stay close to their native villages in the hopes of returning to their homes later [2]. Another key consideration in the selection of resettlement areas was the reunification of fragmented (original) communities and kinship groups, with geographic concentration being the most important attribute of group formation for internal refugees. However, a new relationship between the community of origin and the kinship groups began to emerge. Unlike the traditional concept of kinship structure based on biological relatedness, the former was redefined in a way that embraced the latter within a broader framework. Instead of sharing a common great-grandfather, the new kinship was based on the old village's name [2].

Only 40% of Arabs in Israel obtained citizenship immediately after the Citizenship Law of 1952 was passed and an additional 40% received citizenship over time. The remaining 20% were classified as "present absentees" or "internal refugees" under Israeli law, which included their children born in Israel. These people were not granted citizenship at the time, ostensibly to encourage them to leave Israel voluntarily [7].

Because Arabs in Israel are part of the Arab world and Palestinians, they have been classified as a "hostile minority" from the start. The majority of Arab-Jewish interpersonal contacts are formal, technical, and asymmetric, with minority-majority relationships [2]. If the Arabs in Israel are placed on the periphery of the Israeli political and economic system, the internal refugees are situated on the periphery of the periphery. If there is an uneven minority-majority relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel, the refugees are a "minority within the minority". They are minorities twice: first as refugees in local Arab groups, and then as Arabs in a Jewish-dominated nation [2].

#### **4. ISRAELI POLICY TOWARDS THE PROBLEM OF INTERNAL REFUGEE**

In the crises that followed Israel's establishment, the fledgling state's leadership had little time or energy to devote to subjects that did not directly address pressing concerns or current problems that required an immediate response. This was how the internal Arab problem was regarded in the early years of statehood. Because the formation of government policy and practice in Arab areas was seen as incidental and even insignificant in comparison to the immense and urgent responsibilities before of them, Jewish authorities delegated it to lower-level officials [5].

Foreign Minister Sharett ordered the formation of an expert committee to look into the issue of internal refugees on September 11, 1949. This group which dealt with policy development, merged with another committee, which functioned under the Ministry of Agriculture's auspices and focused on finding practical solutions (settlement and employment) to the problem by the end of 1949 [3]. The Refugee Rehabilitation Authority was formed from the merger of the two bodies. During its four years of existence, the authority was in charge of formulating and, to some extent, enforcing policy regarding internal refugees. It shifted its focus overtime to find places for refugees to settle, but its results were disappointing. The authority was only able to rehabilitate a small percentage of the internal refugees during its time in operation: about 1,500 people [3]. This was due to two factors. First and foremost, the authority lacked executive authority to carry out policies and was plagued by a lack of enthusiasm from the government. Second, the refugees themselves refused to accept the alternative living arrangements that had been provided to them, insisting that they be permitted to return to their former residences. The government, on the other hand, declined security and settlement concerns, and turned down such demands [3].

The Land Acquisition Bill was submitted to the Knesset in May 1952. The bill's opening note mentioned that the land in question could not be returned due to "needs of security and necessary development" [8]. Its goal was twofold: to establish a legal basis for the seizure of this land and to grant compensation rights to its owners [8]. The Land Acquisition Law (Validation of Acts and Compensation) applied to all land that was used for critical development, settlement, or security reasons between 14 May 1948 and 1 April 1952, and was still needed for one of these objectives on 1 April 1952. The Land Acquisition Law was utilized to expropriate 1.2 million dunams in the year following its introduction. Expropriated from private ownership were 311 000 dunams, with 304 700 dunams coming from Arab proprietors [8].

Individual expropriation orders based on the Land Acquisition Law legalized the seizure of nonabsentee land, and the established compensation process was used for both dispossessed nonabsentee citizens and present absentees [8]. The officials who began working on a solution in 1951 were able to achieve their goal. Israel's legislative drive to create a legal foundation for the seizure and reallocation of appropriated Arab land came to an end with the passage of the law [8].

On 10 March 1953, the Knesset passed the Land Acquisition Law (Validation of Acts and Compensations). The law had two goals: to establish a legal framework for the acquisition of lands, whether they belonged to internal refugees or regular residents; it granted compensation rights to the original landowners [3]. The Development Authority was the entity in charge of such transactions. In most cases, compensation was paid in cash, but if the property was utilized for agriculture and was the owners' principal source of income, and they had no other land on which to live, the Development Authority was required to provide replacement land. The Development Authority and the owners agreed on a compensation figure [3]. If the parties were unable to reach an agreement, the district court had the right to set the amount at the request of one of the parties. Protests erupted in Arab countries and among Palestinian Arabs when the Land Acquisition Law was passed. They claimed Israel was attempting to seize Palestinian assets and utilize the proceeds to fund the settlement of Jewish immigrants. Israel replied that the bill did not imperil its commitment to compensate abandoned Arab property in any way [3].

Many internal exiles had stopped filing claims for compensation for their lands by the end of the 1950s. This was due to several factors: some internal refugees did not want to occupy alternative lands that belonged to other Arab refugees who might one day return to the country; the level of compensation went against the grain of portion of the claimants; large landowners who did not make a living from agriculture prior to the founding of the State of Israel were skeptical of the compensation plan. They preferred to wait, hoping that a solution to repay them with land will be discovered in the future; the process of filing compensation claims and establishing title to land was time-consuming and fraught with complications. Some of those who were entitled to compensation were discouraged by this state of affairs, and they decided not to file claims [3].

The Knesset passed legislation after nearly six years of debate and negotiations inside and between the government, the JNF, and the JA. It was made up of three bills that worked together to create a new legal land category and a joint administration while keeping ownership in the hands of the three partners. The bills presented to the Knesset in 1959 termed the new category "People's Land", and were entitled: "Basic Law People's Land", "The People's Land Administration Law" [8]. The first bill established a policy of no transfer ownership, equivalent to the inalienability of JNF land, and described the new category as containing state, DA, and JNF land. The second bill defined the no-sale policy's exclusions.



The third measure established a joint entity known as the "People's Land Administration" that would administer the new category under the authority of the Agriculture Ministry [8]. It also changed existing legislation to formalize the no-sale policy and the administration director's power over the entire parcel of the land question. The legislation was passed by the Knesset in late July 1960, and it formed the foundation of Israel's new land system, along with a covenant between the government and the JNF specifying the parameters of cooperation. All state, DA, and JNF landholdings were included in Israel Lands. It could only be sold or transferred among the three partners, with a few exceptions [8].

Therefore, the 1948-60 combined legislation consolidated the spatial and demographic changes that occurred on the ground during and immediately after the war. It gave legal force to the Palestinians' displacement while also normalizing and stabilizing the geographical transformation that their displacement enabled. Only Israeli Jews and certain worldwide audiences appear to have been fooled by Israel's use of legal machinery to remove linkages between appropriated Arab land and its displaced owners. The majority of Palestinians were not persuaded, and many refugees continue to want their lands back [8].

## **5. CASE STUDY: IQRIT AND KAFR BIR`IM**

Kafr Bir'im is located roughly two miles from the Israeli-Lebanese border and nine miles east of Iqrit and had a population of about 950 in 1948. According to official data from 1945, the Kafr Bir'im lands had 12,244 dunums and Iqrit had 21,711 dunums under the British Mandate in Palestine [9]. The residents of Kafr Bir'im are mostly members of the Maronite Church, which is under the jurisdiction of the Maronite Patriarch of Bkerke in Lebanon. Also, Iqrit had roughly 500 residents who were members of the Greek Catholic Church, whose Patriarch resided in Damascus and Beirut, although they had their bishop of Galilee living in Haifa [9].

Long before the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, the residents of Kafr Bir'im had maintained close ties with the Palestinian Jews [9]. Moreover, in 1948, when fighting broke out between Arabs and Jews, and the army of Qawuji arrived in Kafr Bir'im, the residents not only refused to join the Arabs in their struggle, but also denied them shelter and food. As a result, the residents of Kafr Bir'im were convinced that the Israeli authorities would be appreciative [9].

When the Israeli Army eventually arrived in Kafr Bir'im in October 1948, unlike Arabs in other villages, the residents did not flee, but instead welcomed the soldiers with customary bread and slat. The villagers of Kafr Bir'im appeared to have nothing to worry about, because of their well-known goodwill toward Jews [9]. Nevertheless, the villagers of Kafr Bir'im were informed shortly after the army arrived that an Arab counter-offensive was expected and that, due to the village's vital location near the Lebanese border, they would be forced to evacuate for the time being. Moreover, the villagers obtained an assurance that they would be allowed to return once the fighting ended [8].

Despite the Kafr Bir'im community split, the former leadership structure, religious as well as political remained in the country after Israel's inception. The residents of Kafr Bir'im have been represented by this leadership in negotiations with the Israeli government over their right to return to their homes [8]. Given that the people of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit were not allowed to return to their villages after the end of the war, their representatives sent a request to the Prime Minister, Mr. David Ben Gurion. In a formal letter dated June 13, 1949, his adviser for Arab affairs, Yeshua Palmon, promised the locals permission to return soon. [8]. However, the situation did not change, and in 1951, the villagers who are now Israeli citizens, chose to take their cause to the Israeli High Court of Justice [8]. Several court decisions were

issued as a result of the legal battle. First, Iqrit's five men urged the Court to stop Israeli authorities from preventing them from returning to their homes [9]. On July 31, 1951, the Court acknowledged the villagers' right to their land and their right to return to it, ruling that the military authorities had no legal right to prevent residents from returning. The lands had not been abandoned, according to the Court, and could not be placed under the Custodian of Enemy (or Absentees') Property. Outsiders could be denied access by military authorities, but no permanent inhabitants [9].

Nevertheless, the army took action to correct the omission because, as the Court had pointed out, no expulsion order had been issued. Individual expulsion orders were issued by the military governorship and distributed to the villagers [9]. As a result, the villagers have gone to Court and been upheld, found themselves in an even worse situation than before. There had been no expulsion order before, but now that one had been issued, the expulsion was legalized. Civilians were not allowed to live in Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit, which were proclaimed closed military zones [9]. Moreover, the army carried out their legal action against the locals by destroying their homes. On Christmas Day 1951, while the matter was still pending in court, army sappers systematically blew up every house in Iqrit [9].

Also, a portion of the territory of Kafr Bir'im was allocated to two Israeli settlements, one Kibbutz Bir'im and the other Moshav Dovev. These new landowners began hiring the former owners as wage laborers on their property. The Knesset enacted a property acquisition measure in 1953, giving the lands to the Israel Development retrospectively [9]. Furthermore, the Israeli Air Force fired incendiary bombs on Kafr Bir'im (the village had been previously mined) on September 16, 1953, after the decision of the Court that the villager should return after the transfer of the land to the Land Authority. The village was reduced to a mound of ruins, only the church remained. [9].

The Israeli government has tried to resolve the issue of Arab refugees in the villages of Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im by offering compensation. Nevertheless, the government and the uprooted made conflicting assertions about what had been done in this case in the summer of 1972. According to Mr. Reuven Aloni, deputy manager of the Israeli Lands Office, there were 90 families in Kafr Bir'im, the majority of whom had been rehabilitated but had not signed formal agreements. Six families did sign, and in exchange, they received 155,000 Israeli pounds and 272 dunums of land. [9]. Mr. Aloni stated that there were 80 families from Iqrit in Israel, and they possessed 3,000 dunums. He also mentioned that 55 families signed agreements in exchange for their 1,500 dunums of more fertile land and 700,000 Israeli pounds. [9]. On the other hand, the people of Iqrit refuted Mr. Aloni's claims in an open letter published in Haaretz. They claimed that no family from Iqrit left the country before or after the state of Israel was established. Also, they pointed out that there 126 families have refused to sign an agreement, representing 616 people and 4,500 dunums. Only 31 families were able to agree, and these cases only involved 400 dunums [9].

The villagers' connection to Kafr Bir'im, which has astounded observers, is not to farming, which many have abandoned, but to the land, the areas where their homes formerly stood, the church, and the cemetery, where they have continued to bury their dead. They do not want to return to farming now that they have become laborers. [9]. Moreover, the villagers suggested in 1965, a compromise solution. They agreed to stay temporarily where they were on the condition that the land is registered in their names and that they would not return to their village until a peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel was reached, but they did not receive a favorable response [9].

Many intriguing points were presented in the public discourse over the villagers of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit, addressing the three main official grounds against return, namely

security, the likelihood of future requests, and the potential damage to the Zionist ideology [9]. On the topic of security, the government maintains, based on testimony from military officials, that the villagers' return to a region so close to the border posed a security threat [9].

The second point, that if the villagers of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit were allowed to return, many other such demands would follow, drew a lot of attention. In 1948, Haaretz published a list of twenty communities in the Galilee district alone that had suffered similar fates to Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit. Therefore, the government was concerned that the villagers return to Bir'im and Iqrit would trigger a chain of demands from other Arabs who had lost their villages in 1948 [9].

Last but not least, the third issue presented by the cases of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit is the Zionist predicament and the worry that if it was admitted that Zionism had committed an act of injustice against the Arab inhabitants of the villages, Zionism's ideology would be weakened [9].

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Given the information presented and analyzed above, it can be seen that the issue of Palestinian internal refugees has been one of the most important causes of the perpetuation of the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society since the founding of the state of Israel. Therefore, resolving the issue of Palestinian internal refugees could significantly contribute to improving relations between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that over time various Israeli governments have sought to resolve this issue by adopting a compromise solution that does not jeopardize national security, but that satisfies Palestinian internal refugees to some extent. However, as it emerged from the analysis of the paper, this desideratum could not be achieved most of the time, especially because the Arab internal refugees did not receive the right to resettle in the localities of origin.

Moreover, the case study presented highlighted the fact that the issue of Palestinian internal refugees has as its main component the ethnic factor and not the religious one (the internal refugees from Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im being Christians). Also, given that the Israeli government is delaying resolving the issue of Arab internal refugees in Iqrit and Kafr Bir'im, it demonstrates that this is still a current issue, for which a compromise solution has not yet been found to that all actors involved in the conflict. Therefore, the issue of Palestinian internal refugees has not yet been resolved, leading to a sharpening of the ethnic divide between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society.

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