

Palestinian American Congress
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City of Sacramento Mayor and City Council
Sacramento Sister City Council
915 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mayor, Council members and Sacramento Sister Cities:

We are writing regarding the proposal by the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) that Ashkelon, Israel become a Sister City with Sacramento.

We write as Palestinian-Americans who live and work in Sacramento and are concerned about not only Ashkelon's history of ethnic cleansing but also the current discriminatory treatment of Palestinians, who are today second-class citizens of Israel and include those who do or might want to live in Ashkelon. Below is more detailed information which we feel it is important for the City Council and Sacramento Sister Cities to know in considering the JCRC's proposal.

Before voting on the JCRC's proposal, we request that you meet with us to discuss these concerns.

1. Ashkelon was built on the lands of the Palestinian town of Majdal Asqalan, whose history dates back to at least 2000 BCE when it was a Canaanite settlement. Although conquered by various groups over time, including the Philistines, Persians and others, the Canaanite population remained. Their descendents, the Palestinian people, lived in Majdal Asqalan until 1948, when the army of the newly-declared state of Israel began its ethnic cleansing and terrorization of the native Palestinian population.

Many Palestinian residents of Majdal Asqalan who were displaced by Israeli forces and fled to nearby Gaza, thinking they would be able to return when the Israeli army left. The army did not leave, and Israel began moving mostly European and other recently immigrated Jews into the Palestinians' homes. Two years later, the Israeli army completed the ethnic cleansing, forcing virtually all of the remaining Palestinians to leave by loading them into trucks and taking them to Gaza.

Jewish-Israeli historian Benny Morris writes about Majdal Asqalan:

“What is clear is that after a year and a half of bureaucratic foot-dragging, the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] in 1950 wanted this last concentration of Arabs in the southern coastal plain to leave, and engineered their departure. The Majdal Arabs' own uneasiness at life as a ghettoized minority, under military rule, hemmed in by barbed wire and a pass system, dependent on Israeli handouts, largely unemployed and destitute, cut off from their relatives in Gaza and from the Arab world in general, served as a preparatory background. [...] When these [methods] proved insufficient with the remaining hard-core Histadrut-protected inhabitants, the army availed itself, in September and early October, of cruder methods - shooting in the night, threatening behaviour by the soldiery, unpleasant early-hour-of-the-morning visitations, frequent summons, and occasional arrests. The use of these methods was hidden from the Israeli public and, probably, lacked Cabinet authorization. To sweeten

the pill, the military government offered some fulsome carrots in the form of financial incentives [...] Until Israel's Defence Ministry and Cabinet records are opened, the exact decision-making processes behind the Majdal transfer will remain unclear."
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_and_After)

In an effort to erase the memory of Palestine, Palestinians, and their culture, Israel renamed the town Ashkelon. To this day, the Israeli government has refused to allow any of those Palestinian refugees that it displaced from Majdal to return to their homes and lands as required by United Nations Resolution 194, passed in December 1948, and other international law. Many of these refugees and their descendants live a few miles away in the Gaza strip, which has been blockaded and under siege since 2006.

Journalist Dan Lieberman writes:

"The nightmare for the expelled residents of Al-Majdal did not end with their arduous trip to Gaza. Without going into detail, the years from 1950 until the present have been years of internment in refugee camps, brutal occupation, constant strife, military raids in their neighborhoods, destruction of facilities, denial of everyday life, denial of livelihood, denial of access to the sea, denial of access to the outside world. In 1994, after the signing of the Oslo accords, Israel constructed a 60-kilometer fence around the Gaza Strip and from December 2000 to June 2001 reinforced and rebuilt parts of the fence. ... the lives of the surviving Al-Majdal refugees and their descendants evolved from being wards of the United Nations to virtual imprisonment in an overly crowded environment."
(Source: http://www.alternativeinsight.com/Ashkelon_Speaks.htm)

The ethnic cleansing of Ashkelon was part of the overall ethnic cleansing of Palestine first by Zionist militias and then the Israeli army that principally took place from 1947-49. It is known in Arabic as the Nakba, which means the Catastrophe and it is documented in works such as *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* by Jewish-Israeli professor Ilan Pappé, on the website, PalestineRemember.org and on the website of Zochrot, an organization of Israeli Jews who seek to raise public awareness of the Palestinian Nakba, especially among Jews in Israel, who they feel bear a special responsibility to remember and amend the legacy of 1948.

2. Ashkelon is home to the Shikma Prison, built during the period of British colonial rule of Palestine. In 1969, the Israeli army issued an order that this prison be used to hold Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza who were resisting Israel's military occupation of Palestinian lands. Israel continues to use this prison to hold West Bank and Gazan Palestinians in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring and holding prisoners and detainees outside the occupied territory (in this case the West Bank and Gaza).

The families of West Bank and Gaza prisoners are not allowed to visit them because the prison is inside Israel, and Israel restricts the movement of Palestinians, again in violation of International law. There are documented reports of human rights violations from the prison including torture, denial of appropriate medical care, denial of basic human rights, denial of family visits, and holding of prisoners without charges for extended periods of time (administrative detention). Conditions in the prison have resulted in the deaths of a number of Palestinian prisoners. There are reports of Palestinian prisoners having been held in solitary confinement for years.

Conditions inside the Ashkelon prison have been documented by Addameer, a Palestinian human rights organization and Amnesty International.

3. Segregation and discrimination. After the 1947-48 ethnic cleansing, some Palestinians remained inside what became the state of Israel. They were subjected to military rule until 1966.

Today, while they are technically citizens of Israel, Palestinians do not have the same rights, benefits or access to land as Jewish Israelis. In essence, Israel has two separate classes of citizenship, and the segregation does not even pretend to be equal.

Prior to the ethnic cleansing that began in 1947, Palestinians owned over 92% of the land in what is now the state of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. By expropriating the land that belonged to of Palestinian refugees, the state of Israel now owns 93% of the land while Palestinians, who make up 20% of the population now only own 3.5%. Furthermore, the large majority of land owned by the state of Israel is managed by the Israeli Land Administration (ILA); by law half of the ILA Board members must be from the Jewish National Fund, a semi-private organization whose mandate is to buy land and distribute land solely to Jews. Human rights groups have challenged the ILA for discriminating against non-Jews in its land policies, but this discrimination persists.

According to the 2010 Israel Statistical Abstract, there were 4,000 “Arabs” living in Ashkelon (Israel uses “Arabs” instead of Palestinian citizens of Israel, in an attempt to deny both the history and existence of Palestine and the Palestinian people.) According to the human rights organization, Mossawa, the situation of Palestinians citizens living in Ashkelon is similar to the situation in other parts of Israel. While it appears on the face of law that Palestinian citizens can legally live anywhere in Israel, there are many policies that make it very difficult and undesirable—if not impossible—for them to live in predominately Jewish areas, which is most of the country. Such discriminatory practices are similar to those operating in the U.S. prior to the Civil Rights movement; such practices excluded African Americans and other minority groups from housing developments, employment, public facilities, and transportation.

Adalah, The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel reports: “2011 marked a further escalation in the legislation and enactment of discriminatory and anti-democratic laws by the Israeli Knesset. Between January and April 2011, several laws have been enacted that threaten the rights and harm the legitimate interests of Arab citizens of Israel, on the basis of their national belonging. The laws concern a broad range of rights, including land rights, citizenship rights, the right to political participation, the rights to freedom of expression and association, and the rights to a fair trial and freedom from torture and ill-treatment.”

Palestinian citizens of Israel have been subject to attacks, escalating in recent months, by Jewish extremists. Israel is also currently engaged in a campaign to ethnically cleanse Jerusalem of its Palestinian population. Furthermore, there have been statements by Israeli government officials supporting the ethnic cleansing of all Palestinians from Israel.

As the intent of Sister Cities is to foster “friendship, goodwill, and cooperation for a better world for all”, then the foundation of any such relationship must be respect for human rights, for international law, and for human dignity. These important values are not reflected in Ashkelon’s history or in the current situation in which its native Palestinian people face discrimination, segregation and threats of further ethnic cleansing.

We ask the Sister City Council and City Council to address these serious concerns before taking any action regarding having Ashkelon be a sister city to Sacramento.

Sincerely,

Palestinian American Congress, Sacramento Chapter