Chapter 2

1976 Land Day

1976 Land Day, the Day 1948 Palestinians Mobilized against State Policies

On March 29 and 30, 1976, the Israeli security forces killed six 1948 Palestinians during a general strike and demonstrations against a policy of land confiscations by the government. The peak of these confiscations was in October 1975, when the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture published The Galilee Development Plan, which spelled out the government’s intention to expropriate over 20,000 dunams (more than 5,000 acres), most of which was located in the Galilee where the highest concentration of 1948 Palestinians lived. The vast majority of the land expropriated was to be turned over for the construction of a military training camp and Jewish industrial zones.

Despite the deaths, no investigation was held in the aftermath of the 1976 Land Day, no government official accepted responsibility, and none from the security forces who committed the killings was punished. This was in contrast to the official response to the 1956 Kufor Qasim massacre, for example, which provided some investigation and punishment of the guilty, however partial. Ever since 1976, March 30, is celebrated as Land Day, a national day for all Palestinians worldwide.

Although the literature marks March 30, 1976, as Land Day, I will argue in this chapter that Land Day was in fact a long-drawn-out mobilization process, rather than a single event, that started at least a year before, in early 1975, following a wave of land confiscation in the 1970s. In addition, I will argue that the 1976 Land Day was not a premeditated 1948 Palestinian plan of a day of violent resistance, but the outcome of a long
protest cycle. As will be detailed later in this chapter, the initial official mobilization of 1948 Palestinians on this topic came on July 29, 1975, when a group of 1948 Palestinians held a meeting in Haifa to discuss the Galilee Development Plan. In this meeting, the National Committee for the Protection of Arab Land in Israel (hereinafter, the Land Defence Committee) was established. Then on August 15, 1975, the Land Defence Committee held another meeting in Nazareth to discuss ways to stop the Israeli plan. This was followed by a national conference held in Nazareth on October 18, 1975, to protest against the confiscation, and decide on a strategy for action.

The 1948 Palestinian community was attempting to have a dialogue with the Israeli authorities to persuade them to halt the confiscation. However, after the failure of their attempts to convince the Israeli authorities to change their plans, or even meet with the 1948 Palestinian leadership to negotiate, the Land Defence Committee met in Nazareth on March 6, 1976, and called for a general strike later that month. The strike was planned for March 30, 1976, in an attempt to put some pressure on the Israeli authorities to negotiate. However, the Israeli authorities’ response, as will be detailed later, tried without success to prevent the strike from happening through a number of ways including putting pressure on the 1948 Palestinian leadership to cancel the strike decision, threatening to dismiss workers who strike on that day, and using police and security forces to intimidate participation.

In fact, Israeli police and military forces entered Palestinian towns and villages in the days before the strike and killed two Palestinians on March 29, 1976. Then, on March 30, 1976, a number of violent confrontations between Israeli police and security forces and 1948 Palestinian demonstrators took place. In some cases, like in the 1948 Palestinian town of Sakhnin, Israeli soldiers declared siege and used force to enforce it. By the conclusion of the day’s events, four more Palestinians had been killed and hundreds had been injured and arrested.

In the aftermath of the 1976 Land Day, a confidential Israeli government policy document aimed at reducing the number and influence of 1948 Palestinians in the Galilee was leaked revealing the Israeli government’s intentions and plans for the 1948 Palestinians. The Koenig Memorandum, named after its main author Israel Koenig, then the North District Commissioner, was based on a peculiar reading of the status of 1948 Palestinians in Israel and recommendations regarding the state’s policy toward the minority. The memorandum, leaked to the Israeli newspaper Al-Hamishmar and published on September 7, 1976, is the first publicly available document that shows that the policies of discrimination and containment, to which the 1948 Palestinian citizens have been subjected since 1948, reflect planning and