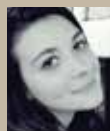




# Every Day is a Return

by Alia Al Ghussain



In a balmy summer evening, people are milling around the Iqrit church. Some sip tea, while others sit on the hilltop, smoking cigarettes as they watch the sunset. They are waiting for a talk to begin.

Half an hour after the scheduled beginning time, everyone has congregated in the church. Fawzi Hanna, a middle-aged man with a professorial air about him, begins his lecture. The topic is Palestinian villages that were destroyed during the Nakba in 1948. It has particular resonance with this audience, and in the place, because Iqrit is one of those villages. Except, unlike many former residents of destroyed villages, they residents have returned to their land.

Iqrit was a Palestinian Christian village, located 25 km northeast of Akka. Although it was originally intended to be part of an Arab state under the 1947 UN Partition Plan, it was seized and forcibly depopulated during the Nakba. On Friday, 6 November 1948, an Israeli commander informed the villagers that they should prepare to leave for Rama, a village in the Northern Galilee. He reassured them that their departure was temporary and for security reasons. In reality, the evacuation was not temporary; the villagers were not allowed to return.

Three years later, the villagers, all of whom are Palestinian citizens of Israel, petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court to allow them to return. On 31 July 1951, in an unusual move, the Court recognised the villagers' right to their land and their right to return to it. The Court declared that the land was not abandoned and therefore could not be placed under the Custodian of Enemy Property. The villagers planned to return to



*The kitchen area, attached to the Iqrit church.*

their village on Christmas Day, 1951.

On Christmas Eve, the Israeli army bombed and demolished the village. All that remains today is the church and the cemetery.

While residents of Iqrit have continuously visited their land, in 2012 a group of young people decided to stay in the village, and live their lives as regular villagers. Rather than speaking of return, the residents of Iqrit took their fate into their own hands and implemented it.

One of them is Jeries Khiatt, a 28-year-old who is one of the displaced members of the village. Like many of the young returnees, he divides his time between Iqrit and his place of work (in his case, Haifa). After the lecture has ended, he sits under a tree with a beer and looks out at Iqrit's lands. He views the current situation as only a partial return to the land. "It is strange that they still allow us to bury our dead in the cemetery," he comments. "Return is allowed, but only after death."

"Most of the people who decided to return were around twenty years old," he explains, referring to the younger generation who are working toward a full return to the village. "The younger generation decided to stay in the church. They didn't want to wait until

In a small village in the Western Galilee area of present-day Israel, the right of return is becoming a daily reality. A resident of the village discusses everyday life in a displaced village, and the message it sends out to Palestinians and the rest of the world.

they died to return. The answer for us was to be here all the time. There are times when there are lots of people here, and there are times when there are fewer."

And how many of the younger generation are in Iqrit all the time? "Generally over the last three years, there have been around fifteen of us who stay here, and don't leave the land," Jeries says. "We sleep here, live here. We do it in shifts. Of course, there are more people who come on Fridays, and during the summer. During a normal week there are not many of us, our goal is that all the youth of Iqrit will do what we do. Many people participate in what we do in some way though. A lot of people come, but not all sleep here."

The youth who live in the village spend their daily efforts maintaining the church structure, and tending to a small garden by the side of the church. The daily emphasis is on cultivation and maintenance, both of the village structures and the community.

Jeris is quick to explain that, although not all the Iqrit residents are able to be there every day, the village is of utmost importance to everyone. “Iqrit is a part of *Iqritawi* life, no matter where they live. We teach our children to love the land, of course. We are building hope here. The hope of return. We want to return here.”

What has been the Israeli state’s reaction to Iqrit’s return project? Two weeks earlier, the Israeli Land Authority came to the village and confiscated all of its furniture and belongings.

“This is always an issue for us. The Land Authority and the police come because they know we are here. So when they came this time, this wasn’t something new for us. Sometimes they come in big numbers, and other times there are only three or four of them and they come to take account of the situation here. The Israeli institutions are not comfortable with us being here. We are here in all political situations, and that gives hope to all the people from this land, including those in refugee camps. We give them hope that one day they will come and live here.”

Jeris believes that this message has scared the Israeli state, and their intimidation tactics are designed to discourage Iqrit residents from reclaiming their village. “Of course they are afraid. They are not afraid of

A sign for Iqrit’s church.



A communal space, built by the Iqrit youth.

us as individuals, but the message is important. That is what makes them scared. We are here, and we talk about return. I think this is relevant to people all over the world, and not just for Palestine. But in terms of Palestine specifically, Iqrit shows that there is hope.”

The planting of this hope is something of an everyday practice in Iqrit; every day that the people are here on the land, the hope of return grows. Jeris finds it hard to say what he hopes for the future of Iqrit, realising that a full return is not yet pragmatic. “Our goal is to keep the hope. This is our place. We believe that we will return and live here. I don’t just want this for me, as an *Iqritawi*. I hope all the children of Palestine hear this message. The

issue of Palestine, and what happened in Palestine is, unfortunately, difficult. I want the feeling of hope to stay, and to be planted in the next generation, and for people to keep talking about return, as this is a big issue.”

Like all the other youth living in Iqrit, Jeris’s daily life is geared towards ensuring the right of return. He is clear, though, that his vision and that of the other village youth, stretches far beyond Iqrit: “We want people not just to talk about return, but to actually return. And not just to Iqrit, but to all of the places.”

*Alia Al Ghussain is a British-Palestinian with a passion for human rights and social justice. She has master’s degree in Human Rights from the University of Sussex, and currently resides in Haifa.*

*Article photos by Alia Al Gussain.*

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