



Iqrit Community Association

Background

Iqrit, a small village of 450 Christian Palestinians, is located in the Galilee in Northern Israel. In 1948, the people of Iqrit were forced out or transferred from their village and have not been permitted to return to their homes despite a favourable Israeli Supreme Court ruling, governmental promises, and Israeli ministerial committee recommendations.

In November 1948, six months after the foundation of the State of Israel, the army ordered the people of Iqrit to leave their homes for a period of two weeks as a temporary measure due to military operations in the area. In coordination with the village priest, all the inhabitants of Iqrit were collectively transported on army trucks to a nearby village.



Iqrit in 1936

At that time, all inhabitants carried Israeli IDs and were legal citizens. Two weeks later, the Israeli authorities' promise was broken when Iqrit was proclaimed a closed military zone and the people of Iqrit were prohibited from returning to their homes.

In April 1949, the village representatives appealed to the Supreme Court of Justice, and on July 31, 1951, the court issued an historical ruling that granted the people of Iqrit the right to return to their village. The Israeli government not only ignored the court's decision, but also its army demolished the village on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1951; only the Church and the cemetery were spared. The people of Iqrit have been advocating for their right to rebuild Iqrit and return to live there. In 1993, during the Yitzhak Rabin government, a ministerial committee headed by the Minister of Justice recommended that the inhabitants of Iqrit be granted the right to return to their village. The subsequent Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided not to allow the return to Iqrit. Soon after, the high court of Justice rejected the villagers' appeal, but recommended that when political circumstances allow, the government should reconsider its position favourably. For the past 66 years, the Iqrit community has been united in a struggle for the right to return home and has engaged in one of the longest and most persistent non-violent popular and legal struggles for justice the region has known. Substantiating a model worthy of replication all over this conflict-ridden region, the people of Iqrit have made extraordinary progress towards reaching their goals.

The Iqrit Community Association was founded in order to lead the struggle of the people of Iqrit and to advocate for their right to return and rebuild their homes. Many challenges remain due to the new government policies and recent court decisions. Our urgent action items include:

1. **Government/Lobby Activities:** Following several years of intensive lobbying activities which brought us into contact with key political figures such as Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, who was at the time a Member of Knesset. Since his appointment to serve as president, Rivlin has publicly declared his support for Iqrit and has officially stated his intention to make a site visit. Sylvan Shalom, Ofer Shelech, and additional Knesset members affiliated with several parties, have expressed their support for the people of Iqrit's right of return. Recently, Ayman Odeh, the head of the United Arab List, promised to promote our right to return to Iqrit. We continue to face Lobbying challenges due to the political instability, and while governments fall apart, newly elected government officials must be educated about the Iqrit case. The recently elected Knesset has majority new members most of whom are not aware of Iqrit and its struggle.
2. **Infrastructural Change-Electricity:** Iqrit's long standing petition for access to the country's electricity grid was approved in a court ruling on April 23, 2015. However this achievement has not yet materialized due to bureaucratic barriers that are currently exhausting Iqrit's modest resources. Rather than being able to focus on advocacy for Iqrit's right of return, we are now facing various attempts to thwart our campaign for right of return. The government's current policy of attrition includes the threat to destroy Iqrit's cemetery and funeral obituary facility, where burial space cannot be guaranteed. Youth squatters living in Iqrit's church have been charged with illegal trespassing. Trees planted by campers were uprooted and youth counselors have been arrested.



3. Despite recent unfavorable election results, Iqrit remains on the agenda of the New Knesset where in its first session; two bills were introduced one on behalf of Meretz. Opposition leader Isaac Herzog has publically expressed interest in a tour of Iqrit in order to better understand the cause and may possibly promote the lobby campaign in the Knesset. Despite all of the challenges being faced, we continue to persevere on all fronts: arranging tours for ambassadors, diplomatic tours, and holding meetings with both national and international high officials.
4. Tours: The Iqrit case is on the agenda of 45 diplomats who toured the village; their visit generated close to 40 articles published in the international press. 50 women, members of the YWCA from all over the world participated in a justice tour last fall.
5. A relationship has been cultivated with Pope Francis (<http://www.dw.de/pope-makes-gesture-of-solidarity-in-west-bank/a-17661683>) since his visit in summer 2014, which has led to the selection of the Iqrit case as one of the five most important Palestinian issues to be taken under the wing of the Vatican for review and resolution. Consequently, an open channel with the Vatican, and ongoing relations with Vatican Ambassador to Israel Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto have been established.

Now facing greater challenges than before, the people of Iqrit are determined to overcome the attempts to exhaust our resources and defeat us. The people of Iqrit continue to run the annual summer camp, youth activities, and workshops for preserving our unique culture and heritage. Thus 67 years after its dispersal, Iqrit maintains an active and growing community life and spirit, where the Church and its beautiful natural landscape provide ideal meeting surroundings for the monthly Mass, annual summer camp, cultural festivals with arts and crafts and performing artists drawn together despite their dispersal all over northern Israel. The Iqrit cemetery is maintained, and is where all Iqritians are buried, currently the only means for achieving the right of return.

As one of the leading and exemplary cases of an unremitting struggle for the internally displaced Palestinians of Israel, Iqrit preserves and disseminates its story through a wide variety of educational and cultural avenues. Intergenerational ties between community members unite us in joint celebrations and activities, despite the geographical distances between their places of residence. The Iqrit story is a model presented at international conferences, and is an important and leading case of the internal displaced citizens' struggle for recognition.

Looking Ahead

- ✓ Gaining wide political support - more challenging now due to the current right wing government's priorities.
- ✓ Launching a public 'people to people' campaign that entails 'out of the box' strategies that are grounded deeply, locally and globally; lobbying for support in the Israeli public at large and in international audiences.

Our Planned Tour in the USA

The issue of displaced Palestinian citizens of Israel is a core aspect of the regional conflict, one whose solution has ramifications for any peace process. In order to reach understanding, stability, and a resolution of the local conflict, we urge the promotion of the Iqrit model. Our aim is to present our community, its struggle, and its strategies for achieving our mission. The tour will foster empathy, contact, and solidarity with Americans audiences, and we hope that this letter has captured your interest.

For further information and in order to coordinate a visit, please contact: Shadia Sbait, Iqrit Community Association shadia@iqrit.org Mobile: 972-508533163.