

*Walmart sells Hanukkah candles
that fund anti-Arab
discrimination in Israel*

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New York, December 9 (RHC)-- Each year, in preparation for Hanukkah, many Jews across the United States purchase candles to light their menorahs. For those in areas where Walmart has squeezed out competitors, the limited options of Hanukkah candles to choose from will include Rite Lite, which the superstore stocks from New York to California and sells online. These candles are advertised as benefiting the Jewish National Fund, whose work is described as including "water resource management, tree planting and the preservation of Israel's green spaces," according to the candles' packaging.

But the Jewish National Fund (JNF) is not some benevolent environmental steward. It is in fact the largest private landowner in Israel, and it has been systematically discriminating against Arabs in its

dealings for decades, according to both the Israeli attorney general and human rights organizations.

JNF was founded in 1901 as a Zionist organization, collecting donations from around the world to purchase land for a Jewish state in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire. Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, JNF became a quasi-governmental organization, with formerly Palestinian lands annexed by the Israeli government transferred to JNF to manage. Between purchases and annexations, JNF reported that it owned \$2 billion worth of land in 2014, per *The Forward*. According to the Yale School of the Environment, JNF holds 13 percent of all Israeli territory, making it the single largest private landowner in the country.

Under Israeli law, JNF lands cannot be sold, only leased via the Israel Land Administration (ILA), a state body, in terms ranging from 49 to 98 years, as explained in a report to the United Nations by the Habitat International Coalition and the Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel. Furthermore, from at least 1960 to 2005, regulations restricted bidding on leases for JNF lands exclusively to “Jewish nationals,” systematically excluding Arab Israelis, who also identify as Palestinian citizens of Israel and make up 20 percent of the population. According to a transcript from Adalah’s challenge to this discriminatory practice in Israel’s Supreme Court in 2004, JNF argued:

As a landowner, the JNF is not a public body which acts on behalf of all the citizens of the state. Its loyalty is to the Jewish people and its responsibility is to it alone. As the owner of JNF land, the JNF does not have to act with equality towards all citizens of the state.

As the report to the UN explains, Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz found that JNF’s leasing practices were indeed discriminatory and bidding had to be opened to non-Jewish Israeli citizens. However, Mazuz also ruled that any time a non-Jewish bidder wins a lease, the state will “compensate” JNF with an equal amount of public land.

Jewish National Fund’s tree-planting initiative, featured prominently on the Rite Lite Hanukkah candles, is motivated by Zionism, not environmentalism. “The ILA is technically required to allow Palestinian citizens of Israel to participate in land bids even if the land is owned by the JNF,” explains Miriam Azem of Adalah. “However, if Palestinians acquire land through this process, the state guarantees that the JNF will be ‘compensated’ with other parcels of land granted by the state.”

In other words, state transfers of land to JNF continue as JNF defends its “right” to discriminate.

Even JNF’s tree-planting initiative, featured prominently on the Rite Lite Hanukkah candles, is motivated by Zionism, not environmentalism. Of the 250 million trees JNF boasts of planting, 4 million make up the Yatir Forest, an entirely planted woodland in the desert region referred to by Arabs as the Naqab and by Israelis as the Negev. While JNF touts the environmental benefits of the Yatir as revitalizing soil, preventing flooding and fighting climate change through carbon capture, critics cited in the aforementioned article from the Yale School of the Environment say the project has obliterated an ecosystem for rare species and may in fact be accelerating climate change by retaining more heat than the desert previously reflected back into space.

More concerning to Adalah is JNF’s use of tree-planting, or “afforestation,” as pretense for the displacement of Bedouin communities, Arab tribes who are indigenous to the area. According to Adalah, JNF’s forestry workers are accompanied by militarized police armed with rubber bullets and tear gas to use against Bedouin protesters, who understand that tree-planting is a means of turning their lands into public forests — where they are then barred from trespassing.

“In 2022, Adalah issued a letter against the afforestation work, including that carried out by the JNF in January 2022 in the Naqab (Negev) in the south of Israel, on the lands of the Al-Atrash Bedouin tribe near the village of Sa’wa,” says Azem. “The afforestation work was conducted under a heavily militarized police operation and sparked widespread protests.”

As +972 Magazine reports, Yatir itself was once a Bedouin village, until its residents were forcibly displaced to make room for JNF's trees. JNF's forestry workers are accompanied by militarized police armed with rubber bullets and tear gas to use against Bedouin protesters.

JNF's Zionist activities are not confined to Israel's internationally recognized borders either, as Haaretz reports. While JNF has for years used subsidiaries to operate unofficially in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which along with Gaza constitute the occupied Palestinian territories, the organization decided to openly start supporting the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank in 2021.

"Adalah sent a letter concerning the Jewish National Fund's activities in the West Bank in connection to the then-proposed decision by the JNF to purchase land in the West Bank in 2021," says Azem. "The JNF had previously operated in the West Bank through its subsidiary, the Himnota Company."

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"The 2021 letter," Azem continues, "addressed to the JNF's chairman and board of directors, the Israeli army commander in the West Bank, and the attorney general, argued that the JNF's land purchase in the occupied Palestinian territories contradicted international humanitarian law norms. Adalah further argued that entrusting land management to the JNF, an entity seeking to alter the status quo of the occupied Palestinian territories without benefiting the Palestinian population, constituted a violation of Article 43 of the Hague Regulations. Adalah explicitly demanded that the military commander refrain from granting any permits for the JNF's activities in the West Bank."

Since then, JNF has allocated millions of dollars to purchase land "intended for Jewish settlement" in what is internationally recognized as Palestinian territory. The aforementioned commentator at Haaretz, as well as The Forward, says such decisions by JNF's Israeli headquarters have estranged it from its American counterpart, but the latter still makes grants to the former and advertises the same work to donors, including land management, tree-planting, and construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Although it is unclear how many of Walmart's 3,500 superstores in the U.S. stock the Rite Lite Hanukkah candles benefiting JNF, a search via the retailer's website yields locations near New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the U.S. cities with the largest Jewish populations. Rite Lite, the Brooklyn-based manufacturer of the candles, advertises itself as providing products to "thousands of retail locations throughout the U.S. and around the world" on its website.

Besides Walmart, online retailers include Target, Amazon and JNF itself.

Perhaps tellingly, the candles bought from JNF come in a tin depicting Israel, including all of East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

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