



Olive Trees – More Than Just a Tree in Palestine

Olive trees carry more than an economic significance in the lives of Palestinians. They are not just like any another trees, they are symbolic of Palestinians' attachment to their land. Because the trees are draught-resistant and grow under poor soil conditions, they represent Palestinian resistance and resilience. The fact that olive trees live and bear fruit for thousands of years is parallel to Palestinian history and continuity on the land. Palestinians are proud of their olive trees; they take care of them with care and appreciation. Palestine has some of the world's oldest olive trees, dating back to 4,000 years. Some families have trees that have been passed down to them for generations and the olive harvest season in October bears a socio-cultural meaning where families come together to harvest olive trees bearing in mind that their forefathers and mothers had tended to the same trees several years ago.

In addition to their symbolic meaning, olives are a main source of income for around 80,000 Palestinian families. According to UN figures, around 48% of the agricultural land in the West Bank and Gaza is planted with olive trees. Olive trees account for 70% of fruit production in Palestine and contribute around 14% to the Palestinian economy. 93% of the olive harvest is used for olive oil production while the rest is used for olive soap, table olives and pickles. Much of the olive production is for local consumption with a small amount of olives being exported primarily to Jordan. With the growing interest in organic food and fair trade, Palestinian olives are now also reaching European and North American markets.

Challenges in maintaining olives

1. Permits

Palestinian farmers face several challenges in maintaining their olive trees before they are harvested. If the land where the olives are planted lies in Area C, 60% of the West Bank, which according to Oslo is under full Israeli control, the farmers need permits from Israeli authorities to access their land and to tend to their trees. The same regulation applies to those farmers whose lands are in the "seam zone" i.e the area between the Green Line and the Separation Wall.

In Gaza, the security "buffer-zone" extends well beyond 600 meters from the Gaza-Israel Green Line, taking up 30% of agricultural land. Further, farmers are not able to access the land 1.5 km into Gaza from the security line because of Israeli shelling, shooting and incursions. OCHA figures indicate that 7,300 dunums of land with olives along the fence have been destroyed

during Israeli military operations. Further, Palestinian farmers in Gaza are discouraged from replanting their olive trees for fear that they would be destroyed in Israeli sieges and for fear that they might be hit by “warning shots”.

But the permit system is in most cases rather arbitrary. There are no clear lists of requirements the Palestinian applicants must fulfill to get the permit. After having shown legal documents of ownership and passing the “security” check, the permit might be issued to only the person under whose name the land is registered with no one else from the family allowed to access the land. This becomes a problem because land ownership belongs to the whole family even if the land registration is under the name of one of the family members. In addition, limiting the number of people who can work the land also affects agricultural efficiency which in turn affects the olive produce and economic gains from it later on.

Further, when permits are issued, they are often issued for a short term and need to be renewed, each time with no guarantee that it will be renewed. According to UN sources, 42% of applications for permits to access olive groves behind the Wall in 2011 and 39% in 2010 were denied. If a family member is politically active and/or has been detained (during demonstrations for example) everyone in the family might be denied permits. Hence, the permit system is used to coerce Palestinians into forfeiting resistance to the Occupation.

When permits are issued especially to those whose lands are in the ‘seam zone’ or near settlements, the farmers have to pass through agricultural checkpoints to access their trees. These checkpoints are often opened at certain times a year and for a few hours a day, limiting Palestinian farmers from working as much as they see fit which later also determines their produce. In general, because uncultivated land is more likely to be confiscated by Israel as state land and because the permit system and the agricultural checkpoints regulate the kind and amount of fertilizers, tractors, vehicles and other materials, some farmers have been forced to revert to planting olive trees and relying on them for their income even if their land is conducive for other types of fruit. Since olive trees can survive even when not well taken care, they serve as a way of retaining land ownership and provide the main source of income for Palestinian farmers.

2. Settler attacks, economic costs and lack of mechanisms for legal redress

Another growing challenge facing Palestinian farmers is attacks by settlers. This year (2012), UNOCHA reported that 7,500 olive trees were destroyed between January and mid-October. Attacks by settlers have increased by 39% from the year 2010 to 2011 and by 315% from 2007 – 2011. And these attacks spike up during the olive harvest season in which Palestinian farmers become targets as they harvest their olives. While some of these attacks are committed under the name of “price tag” i.e. punishment of Palestinians for Israeli court ordered and enforced removal of outposts, most of the attacks including price tags emanate from structural hatred, racism towards Palestinians and Zionist ideological claims to the land. In the words of the head of the “settlers’ struggle headquarters” in Yitzhar settlement (as recorded by B’Tselem), attacks

on Palestinians is "a display of good citizenship that was intended to help the police enforce the planning and building laws in the area on Palestinians."¹

Overall, around 2.5 million trees, one-third of which are olive trees, are believed to have been uprooted since 1967. Estimating the average annual productivity of an olive tree to be 70 kilos and the price of olive seeds 1.103 USD/Kilo, Applied Research Institute Jerusalem estimates that the Palestinian economy has lost about 55,133,602 USD since 1967 to 2009.

3. Lack of complaint system

The majority of the complaints against such attacks are not seriously investigated by the police or the army. Only one out of the 162 complaints regarding settler attacks on Palestinian olive trees reported by Yesh Din, an Israeli NGO since 2005 has led to indictment of a suspect. Israeli human rights group B'Tselem and other groups have also reported that Israeli security forces are not deployed in advance to protect Palestinians in areas of threat and neither do they protect Palestinians when settlers attack. In fact, often times, Israeli soldiers put more restraint on Palestinians rather than settlers when confrontations arise.

Sources.

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¹ http://www.btselem.org/settler_violence