

## **SOVEREIGNTY OVER NATURAL RESOURCES - TREES**

### **Destruction of olive trees**

Since 1967, over 800,000 Palestinian olive trees have been destroyed by Israeli state authorities and settlers.<sup>1</sup> This has led to an estimated \$12.3 million annual lost income for the 80,000-100,000 Palestinian families who rely economically on the olive harvest.<sup>2</sup> The industry accounts for about 70% of fruit production and 14% of the economy.

Palestinian farmers working their fields have faced incidents of crop theft, harassment and physical attack from Israeli settlers.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, trees themselves are damaged through uprooting, being sprayed with dangerous chemicals and being burned.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, these attacks are concentrated most heavily in October and November, in order to disrupt the harvest season as much as possible.<sup>4</sup> Settlers are seldom punished for their actions. From 2005-2013, Israeli NGO Yesh Din found that of 211 reported incidents of trees that were cut down, set ablaze, stolen, or otherwise vandalized in the West Bank, only four have led to police indictments.<sup>5</sup>

### **Restriction of access to olive trees**

Olive production is also hampered by Israeli bureaucratic restrictions. Palestinians are denied permits to access their olive groves that are located behind the West Bank Barrier for 'security reasons'.<sup>6</sup> When permits are granted, access is restricted to a limited time during the annual harvest. This prevents ploughing, pruning and fertilising, which reduces crop yield.

### **Cultural significance of olive trees**

These restrictions are designed not only to curtail economic prosperity, but also to inflict a psychological blow due to the cultural importance of olive trees for Palestinians. Because the trees are drought-resistant and grow under poor soil conditions, they represent Palestinian resistance and resilience. Olive trees live and bear fruit for thousands of years which shows continuity. It is a symbolic of Palestinians rootedness and attachment to Palestinian land, in an age of displacement.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of olive trees in Palestinian culture are clear through their representation in Palestinian art, poetry, literature and jewellery. Historically, olives have also been used as an insecticide, a source of fuel in oil lamps and a treatment for dry hair, nails and skin. Olive pits have been used to make prayer beads by Muslim and Christian Palestinians.

### **2023 olive harvesting season**

An OCHA report was released in February 2024 that found that more than 96,000 dunums (23,722 acres) of olive-cultivated lands across the West Bank remained unharvested following the 2023 season, due to Israeli restrictions on Palestinian access. This meant that more than 1,200 metric tons of olive oil were lost, resulting

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Gottlieb, L. (2016) [Trees as weapon, trees as life](#). Jewish Voice for Peace.

<sup>2</sup> OCHA. (2012) [Olive Harvest Factsheet](#). Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> OCHA (2008) [Olive Harvest in the West Bank And Gaza](#). Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (12<sup>th</sup> October 2021) [2021 Olive harvest season in the West Bank amidst a triple challenge](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim, N. (2019) [Olive Groves in the West Bank Have Become a Battleground. That's Why Volunteers Come From Around the World to Help at Harvest Time](#). Time Magazine.

<sup>6</sup> OCHA. (2012) [Olive Harvest Factsheet](#). Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

<sup>7</sup> MIFTAH (2012) [Fact Sheet: Olive Trees – More Than Just a Tree in Palestine](#). The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy.

in a direct financial setback of US\$10 million. The impact was particularly harsh in the northern governorates of Tulkarm, Qalqiliya and Nablus.

The impact was particularly significant in areas isolated by the West Bank barrier. This is often the case, but it was even more pronounced in the 2023 season. From 2010-2022, olive yield was 60% lower in the area isolated by the barrier, but in 2023, it was 93% lower.<sup>8</sup> According to families interviewed in Turmusa'yya, an increased number of Israeli forces were positioned near settlements. They further restricted Palestinian farmers' movements, meaning that they could not access their olive groves. This demonstrates the impact the war in Gaza has also had on the occupied West Bank.

### **Green colonialism: Planting of pine trees**

The Jewish National Fund (JNF) has planted 240 million trees<sup>9</sup> since 1901, most of which are pine trees.<sup>10</sup> This 'reforestation' policy has been praised by some Western countries, but such praise fails to take historical context into account. Many of these forests are built on the ruins of Palestinian villages. For example, the largest JNF forest in the Galilee, the Biry Forest, took the place of six villages, one of which was 'Ayn Zaytun, Spring of Olives, a farming village which homed 1,000 people.<sup>11</sup>

These forests are tactically used as a tool to erase Palestinian homes and memories and assert territorial claim over lands. A JNF spokesperson told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that the tree planting began as an effort to "demonstrate ownership" over non-urban Jewish-owned land that could not be farmed.<sup>12</sup> This is a practice known as 'green colonialism'.<sup>13</sup> It serves to justify the seizure of land by seeking to artificially strengthen Israeli ties to the land. It also prevents the return of Palestinian refugees and tries to dehistoricise and Europeanise the land.

### **Environmental damage from planting pine trees**

The JNF's 'reforestation' policy is also damaging to the environment. Israeli planted forests have even been termed 'pine deserts', by environmentalists, due to the 'biological paucity' they have caused.<sup>14</sup> Due to their fast-growing nature, they spread quickly and undermine biodiversity. This is dangerous as they are particularly vulnerable to wildfires, as shown by the 2010 Mount Camel wildfire.

Non-Native pine trees also require significant water, which causes droughts, acidifies the land and makes the ground inedible for animals, which inhibits Palestinian shepherds from grazing their flocks on the land. This facilitates Israel's occupation by driving Palestinians from their lands and 'greenwashing its apartheid image'.<sup>15</sup>

### **'Make the desert bloom' racist trope**

A classic tactic of settler-colonialism that is used by Israeli settlers is to portray pre-Nakba Palestine not only as an empty land, but as *terra nullius*, nobody's land. Racist narratives of erasure refer to pre-Nakba Palestine as an arid and desolate land, with little vegetation and people. This racist narrative of erasure of Palestinian people is epitomised by the Zionist phrase "bringing a people with no land to a land with no people".<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the erasure of vegetation is epitomised by the erroneous phrase that 'Israel made the desert bloom'.

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<sup>8</sup> OCHA. (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2024) [Olive Harvest 2023: hindered access afflicts Palestinian farmers in the West Bank](#).

<sup>9</sup> JNF UK. (unkn.) [Plant trees in Israel](#).

<sup>10</sup> Masalha, N. (2012). [The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising history, narrating the subaltern, reclaiming memory](#). Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> Amit, T. (9<sup>th</sup> August 2023) [The Story of Palestine's Colonization, and Resistance is Embodied in the Trees](#). Truthout.

<sup>12</sup> Liphshiz, C. (14<sup>th</sup> January 2022) [How planting a tree in Israel became controversial](#). The Jerusalem Post

<sup>13</sup> Sasa, G. (2022) [Oppressive pines: Uprooting israeli green colonialism and implanting Palestinian A'wna](#). Race and Climate Change. 43(2).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Shapira, A. (1999). [Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948](#). Stanford University Press.