

THREE STORIES FROM PALESTINE

These stories were chosen to give you a sense of the context in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and of the impact of violence on the olive harvest itself. Compiled in the summer of 2024, these stories are part of the Growing Justice olive harvest focus, prepared for the 2024 olive harvest season by Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and Living Skies Regional Council of the United Church of Canada.

[Click here to access all resources and an introduction.](#)

STORY 1:

The olive harvest is vital to the Palestinian agricultural economy and cultural heritage, and an important time of the year in Palestinian society. Nearly half of the cultivated land in the West Bank and Gaza and around 100,000 families in Palestine are estimated to rely on olive trees for their livelihoods. But to Palestinians, olive trees are much more than just a source of income; they are powerful symbols of resilience, permanence, and resistance. Olive trees are integral to the Palestinian identity. They are holy.

Our first story comes from the West Bank, which has been occupied by Israel since the Six-Day War in 1967.

Daoud Nassar, a Palestinian Christian farmer near Bethlehem:

My grandfather bought this land in 1916. He wanted this space to build a better place for his children and so he registered the land under the Ottomans and later with British under the Mandate. Our farm is on a hilltop, which is now surrounded by 5 huge Israeli settlements. In 1991 Israel declared our land state land, likely with a view to creating another settlement, and for the last 30 years we have been defending our farm from violence and expropriation through the legal system, right up to the supreme court. We also constantly face difficulties with the settlers who cut our trees – 250 olive trees on one occasion - damage our water tanks, and physically threaten us with guns. This year, the war in Gaza has emboldened the settlers and they've started to build roads on our property. Until a hearing on Oct 8, we won't know whether the Supreme Court recognizes our rights over the settlers'.

Access to our property has been limited since 2001 and when the Wall is finished in the Bethlehem area, we'll be disconnected from Bethlehem just 6 miles away. We have no access, no electricity. But we always try to transform our anger, our pain and invest it in a constructive way, a way that will build something, not destroy. So we installed a sun power system. We started collecting rainwater, and since we are not allowed to build on the ground, we started renovating caves. It's all about showing other people that things are possible.

Also in 2001 our family transformed our 42 acre farm into an international meeting place, now called the Tent of Nations. We host various programs, work camps, church groups and youth camps, and volunteers help with various farm projects such as tree planting and the olive harvest. We believe in bringing people of all cultures and nations together and building bridges of understanding and friendship.

Despite all the challenges we face from the state and the settlers, we refuse to be enemies, which is an active, not a passive way of nonviolent resistance. We refuse to leave. This is our home. And we believe that all people are created in the image of God. Wherever we are we are called to be peacemakers. [<https://www.thelawandtheprophetfilm.com/videos> & <https://tentofnations.com/>]

STORY 2

NARRATOR: The 2nd story comes from Gaza. Unlike the situation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israel withdrew its military and dismantled its settlements in 2005, but the state controls all access by air, sea and land, effectively making Gaza an 'open air prison.' Nothing and no one enters or leaves Gaza without Israel's permission. This is not the first war in Gaza. Since 2007, there have been 4 more, plus various skirmishes. In every instance, Palestinian casualties are far higher than Israel's.

Farmers in Gaza: Olive Trees the Israel/Hamas war's collateral damage.

Samaher Abu Jameh, a mother of two has worked as a farmer with her parents since childhood in the town of Abasan al-Kabira in southern Gaza, close to the border with Israel. "My land has olive trees and greenhouses planted with tomatoes, and livestock," she says. But since the Israeli offensive started a year ago, she can no longer tend to those trees or tomatoes: The 40-year-old was displaced with her family and is living in a United Nations-run school in the centre of Khan Younis due to near-continuous Israeli bombing since October 7. She's angry. "I have no idea what state (my farm) is in. I just want to reach my land to see what has become of it."

With the war, farmers have been forced away from their land and homes, and the ever-present risks that they already faced because of their proximity to the border with Israel have multiplied dramatically. Samaher says that some farmers tried to go back to their lands but were targeted by Israeli warplanes. "We are experiencing great suffering as farmers because these wars cost us greatly. We barely had time to catch our breath from the 2021 war before this started."

In times of war in Gaza, the Israeli military cause additional challenges by targeting or bombing farmland or spraying it with pesticides, thereby killing the crops and rendering the soil unsuitable for farming. "Our hearts burn over our lands," Nisreen Abu Daqqa from Khuza'a says. "We wait all year long for the olive season, which is the most beautiful season, but the Israelis have deliberately burned our trees using their missiles and tank shells."

Another grief for Gaza families, is that as the war rages on they've increasingly had to cut down their beloved trees for fuel. "Instead of [harvesting] olives, we are cutting any tree we can find to survive," said a resident of Rafah, "We build a fire and announce to everyone in the family that we have a fire, so anyone who has food they want to cook should bring it. That's our daily routine." Despite all the challenges and financial losses caused by the war, farmers refuse to give up. As one farmer explained, "after each round of destruction, I return to prepare the land for cultivation again."

[<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/6/our-hearts-burn-gazas-olive-farmers-say-israel-war-destroys-harvest> and *Olive Oil Times*]

STORY 3

NARRATOR: The third story comes from the Centre for Jewish Non-Violence, which was created in 2015 after the Israeli army uprooted hundreds of trees on the Tent of Nations. When Daoud Nassar was asked how Jews around the world could support his family, he replied: *Come replant the trees with us in a show of solidarity, to demonstrate that the Israeli Army's bulldozers don't represent your Jewish values.* Nine months later, twenty-five Jews from the US, Canada and Europe spent a week replanting trees on the farm and CJNV was born. The organization brings Jewish activists from around

the world to Israel/Palestine to join in Palestinian-led nonviolent civil resistance to occupation, apartheid, and displacement.

OPTION 1: 'The Important Work of Co-resistance,' Centre for Jewish Non-Violence (CJNV):

During our first solidarity shift last month, Ariel and other international activists with CJNV were out shepherding with a 15-year-old boy in Susiya. They were confronted by an aggressive group of settler-soldiers who confiscated their passports, phones, and cameras. They zip-tied and blindfolded the Palestinian boy and kidnapped him. They took him, all the passports, phones, and cameras, and drove away into the night. Later that night, the 15-year-old boy was left by the side of the road and, after a few days, we were able to retrieve everyone's phones, passports, and cameras.

Every time I hear a story like this I feel a pit of worry in my stomach and an anger I can feel bubbling up in my chest. My breathing stops, and then I breathe in a huge gasp for air and let it out so loudly my partner hears me from the other room and asks "What happened? Is everything ok?"

Incidents like this happen all too regularly in Masafer Yatta and all across the West Bank, and we are experiencing them more and more often. But, our presence here matters. For every violent incident that happens, there are many nights where parents and their children *can* get a full night's rest because no settlers came to harass or attack them, in part because of the presence of solidarity activists like Ariel who I am so grateful for that are doing this important co-resistance work when it's needed most. [<https://cjnv.org/> & CJNV facebook]

OPTION 2: 'The Resilience of the Grape Vine,' Ariel from the Centre for Jewish Non-Violence (CJNV)

In Umm Darit, we are sitting in a circle of couches in a family's outdoor living room. We are sitting in a home that was rebuilt after a demolition by the Israeli army. After the threats of violence and death that were ubiquitous after October 7th (and before), this family left for the relative safety of Yatta (the nearest city), but they managed to return. Their rebuilding of this house (not the first, or second, time) was "illegal" according to Israel — no permits are granted here for Palestinian building, and so practically every house faces demolition orders that can be enacted at any time.

Picture that — though neighboring Israeli settlements are considered illegal by agreed upon international law, somehow here in this unjust place, the Israeli state works with settlers to destroy Palestinian homes and then it is the Palestinians who are breaking the law by rebuilding on their own land. This is the twisted logic of colonial land theft.

Another activist tells me that the tarps that we are sitting under, providing us shade in this harsh sun, were not necessary before the home demolition. He points to one thin grape vine in the middle of the space, struggling but leafing out and stretching to the sun. This grape vine, he shares, used to cover this whole outdoor area, providing shade, grapes, grape leaves and other sustenance for the whole family.

When the settlers came for the demolition, they cut down the vine, trying to hack away at it, destroy it at its roots, and rip it from the earth. The grape vine, though, is still here, stretching towards the sky, growing despite the settlers' best efforts. It will grow and again provide shade and harvest for this family. And the house is still here, rebuilt, providing shelter. And the family is still here too. Returned to the place they are planted. Providing hope, contributing to the story of a people whose roots will continue to resprout again and again. [<https://cjnv.org/> & CJNV facebook]