

Reflections: The Olive Tree and the Palestinian Struggle against Settler-Colonialism

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This essay presents a visual account of the Israeli settler-colonial encroachment into Palestinian land. Based on my experience, and adopting a settler-colonial theoretical framework focused on studies of genocide and the tradition of documentary photography, I provide a participant-based analysis and visual documentation of Israel's destruction of Palestinian land and uprooting of its ancient olive trees as manifested in the Palestinian district of Bethlehem. The photographs in this essay are linked to a project titled *Walking Under Occupation* (2005-ongoing), which I began when I visited Palestine in 2005, after being denied my right of return by the Israel occupying power for over twenty years.¹ I returned to my home and family as a visitor with an Israeli permit. When I entered the country through the Israeli-controlled border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank, I was shocked by the destruction I witnessed in my country in comparison with how it had been before I left in 1980. The suffocation of Palestinian lives, the destruction of the landscape, and the proliferation of illegal settlement colonies, military bases, and surveillance structures have transformed the country into colonized zones that combine European settler colonialism with contemporary methods and technologies of control and oppression. I spent a month walking across Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps, and through the battered landscape. The simple act of walking in a colonized land is unlike walking in any other place. It reveals the trauma that the land and its people endure. Just some of the manifestations that *Walking* revealed in 2015-2017 included segregated roads, firing zones, concrete walls, barbed wire, segregation signs, permanent and temporary checkpoints, watchtowers, and construction cranes and bulldozers razing the hills for quarry stones or constructing illegal Jewish-only colonies. These scars on the land that mark the country's inhabitants, topography, and history suffocate everyday life. Walking trails through olive groves in the Palestinian hills of Bethlehem or Jerusalem are disappearing, replaced by colonies, "buffer zones," "firing zones," "seam zones," or "settlers' leisure zones". Thousand-year old Palestinian olive trees are "beheaded", burned,

¹ After I left Palestine to pursue my studies at Damascus University in 1980, I was denied return by Israel after finishing my degree. According to the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), between 1967 and 1994, Israel stripped over 100,000 residents of Gaza and some 140,000 residents of the West Bank of their residency rights, many of them students or young professionals working abroad who were barred from ever returning. PASSIA, "Israeli Occupation."

See the report of The Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA):

http://passia.org/media/filer_public/97/62/9762ddc5-ad9a-4fdc-a65d-29884aa6d96c/factsheet_israeli_occupation.pdf

uprooted, stolen, sold, or transplanted into Jewish colonies by Israel's forces and armed settlers.



A view of destruction: olive-planted hills in Bethlehem region, November 2015

Growing up in the Land of Olives

I was born and grew up in the Jenin area of northern Palestine, in the midst of olive groves and orange orchards. My family comes from the town of Qabatia near the city of Jenin, where houses are interspersed among old olive trees. Between Jenin and Qabatia we used to have a *bustan* (farm). There, on the *bustan* where we used to spend every summer, my understanding of and relationship to the land, its soil, plants, and herbs, developed.

After Israel's 1967 invasion of the West Bank and Gaza, the borders of Palestine were sealed entirely, and its surviving inhabitants were disconnected from the outside world. It was the beginning of a long imprisonment in our own space. Israel began a systematic destruction of the economy, starting with the agricultural sector, by gradually controlling the water sources and dominating the local market, flooding it with cheap products. The effect on farmers and their lands was devastating. Many abandoned their farms and became workers in Israel. My family had no choice but to cut down our orange orchards. The



Thousand-year-old olive trees in my family's orchard in Jenin area, 2015

occupying power of Israel, however, found olive production not so easy to control due to olive trees' reliance on rainwater, the low cost of tending the trees, and the ability to store the oil for long periods, unlike other agricultural products. Over the years, my father planted hundreds of olive trees with his hands, and cared for hundreds of others passed on to us by our ancestors. Some of these trees are estimated to be more than a thousand years old. These ancient trees look like living monuments in their magnitude. They are silent witnesses to the tragic events in Palestine.

For Palestinians, olive trees signify connection to and rootedness in the land. They signify life's continuity beyond human mortality. Olive trees' ability to survive the harshest weather conditions, including drought and poor soil, and their ability to grow in the mountains and *wadis* (valleys), indicate their resilience. Palestinians regard olive trees as their children, care for them with love until they mature and become independent, but never abandon them. When olive trees reach 80 or 90-years-old, the length of an average human life, their growth slows greatly, but their fruit is not affected by the passing of time.

Olive tree cultivation originated in the Mediterranean region alongside the first human settlements between 11,000 and 7,000 BC.² It is believed that the oldest olive tree in the world is located in Al Walaji village in Bethlehem district. In May 2017, I visited the old tree, named Al-Badawi (the Nomad), which, according to Palestinian and Japanese experts, is over 4000-years-old. Al-Badawi looks like a whole family of trees combined into one; the layers of its trunk reflect centuries of continual growth. The experience of looking, walking around, and sitting under Al-Badawi is unique and incomparable to any other experience. Al-Badawi is a living, precious monument.



Al-Badawi olive tree, Al Walaji, Bethlehem district, April 2017

² Ioannis Nikolaos Therios, *Olives* (UK: CABI, 2009), pp. 1–7.

Manifestation of Israel's Settler-Colonial Genocide

*[T]he tree is the source of the problem. It's not just an incidental thing like [it is] in the Bible. Here, the tree is not only a symbol of the Arab's occupation of the land, but it is also the central means through which they carry out this occupation. [...] It's not like the tree is the enemy's property, in which case the Bible tells you not to uproot it because it has nothing to do with the fight. Here it has everything to do with it. The tree is the enemy soldier. Like children, their trees look so naïve, as if they can't harm anyone. But like [their] children, several years later they turn into a ticking bomb.*³

(An interview with the Israeli settler chief inspector David Kishik, 2006. Emphasis mine)

The olive tree as a source of livelihood and signifier of the rootedness and perseverance of the Palestinians in their homeland was targeted by the colonial Zionist-European project in Palestine from the very beginning. Uprooting trees served (and continues to serve) the mandate of the Jewish state and Jewish National Fund and their representation of Palestine as uninhabited desert. In 1948, the newly established state of Israel took steps to “legalize” the land seizures and destruction after uprooting 800,000 Palestinians from their homes and lands. Immediately following the Nakba, Israel razed over 530 Palestinian villages, towns, and urban areas, uprooted millions of olive trees, and planted pine forests over their ruins. Discriminatory laws issued by the new state denied expelled Palestinians their right to return while welcoming Jews regardless of their nationality.⁴ The infamous Fallow Lands Regulations (1948) enabled the state to forcibly seize the lands of Palestinians expelled during the Nakba by declaring their lands “closed zones” and barring Palestinian landowners from reaching these lands, which were then deemed fallow. The state then “legally” seized the land and reallocated it to its agencies. Hundreds of thousands of *donums* (a *donum* equals 1000 square meters) of Palestinian land were transferred to Jewish settlers. The Absentee Property Law of 1948, based on the framework of the Fallow Lands Law, was used to secure the permanent reallocation of Palestinian lands to unrestricted Jewish-Israeli ownership.⁵ Explicitly colonial, this law authorized Israel to confiscate the land of “the present absentees,” those Palestinians who were not present in their normal place of residence between November 29, 1947 and September 1, 1948.

3 Irus Braverman, “Uprooting Identities: The Regulation of Olive Trees in the Occupied West Bank,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 32.2 (2009), pp. 237.

4 Nur Masalha, “The Palestinian Nakba: Zionism, ‘transfer’ and the 1948 exodus,” *Global Dialogue* 4.3 (2002): pp. 89.

5 Ibid. pp. 90.

The designation “present absentees” referred to internally displaced persons. Some of these “present absentees” were living in tents within view of their villages, but were denied the right to return, along with hundreds-of-thousands of others who fled to Gaza, the West Bank, and the surrounding Arab countries (two thirds of the Gaza population are Nakba refugees).⁶

Land seizing and uprooting of olive trees has intensified since the 1967 second Nakba. The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ) estimates that 2.5 million trees have been uprooted since 1967, one third of which were olive trees and the remainder consisting of other types of fruit trees, including around 34,000 palm trees.⁷ This slaughter of olive trees intensified between 2007 and 2011 when attacks by armed settlers increased 315 per cent.⁸ Between 2010 and 2015, settlers vandalized over 50,000 olive trees and saplings.⁹ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in January 2015 settlers “uprooted or vandalized around 5,600 trees across the West Bank.”¹⁰ This number constituted “60 per cent of all trees uprooted or vandalized in the whole of 2014.”¹¹ Settlers from illegal settlements and outposts in the West Bank torch trees, break or cut down the branches of old trees, uproot newly planted trees, and “poison the trees by drilling their trunks.”¹² The Israeli legal system is complicit in this violence. Out of “260 complaints regarding vandalism of Palestinian-owned trees filed in the past ten years, only six indictments have been served, with a zero conviction rate.”¹³ In Gaza, the security “buffer-zone” that extends 600 meters beyond the 1967 Green Line encompasses up to 30 per cent of agricultural

6 Nur Masalha, “The Palestinian Nakba,” pp. 90-91.

7 The Palestinian Ministry of National Economy in Cooperation with the Applied Research Institute—Jerusalem (ARIJ), “The Economic Costs of the Israeli Occupation for the Occupied Palestinian Territory,” pp. 31.

<http://www.mne.gov.ps/pdf/EconomiccostsofoccupationforPalestine.pdf>

8 The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, MIFTAH, “Olive Trees, More than Just a Tree in Palestine,” July 13, 2017, <http://www.miftah.org/Display.cfm?DocId=25491&CategoryId=4>

9 Ibid.

10 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “West Bank: Largest Number of trees Recorded Vandalized by Israeli settlers in a Single Incident since 2005,” January 31, 2015, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/west-bank-largest-number-trees-recorded-vandalized-israeli-settlers-single-incident-2005>

11 Ibid.

12 Yesh Din, Data sheet, October 2015, http://files.yesh-din.org/userfiles/Datasheet_English_Oct%202015.pdf

13 Ibid.

land. UNOCHA figures indicate that 7,300 donums of land with olive trees located along the Israeli wall at the borders with Gaza have been destroyed during Israeli military operations.¹⁴

Seizing the Cremisan Valley and Lynching Ancient Olive Trees in Bethlehem Region in 2015

The Bethlehem governorate is located in the central West Bank, about 10 km south of Jerusalem. It consists of three historic cities, (Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour), another nine municipalities, three Nakba refugee camps (Dheisheh, Aida, and Al-Azzeh), and 38 rural and urban towns and villages. The total population of the Bethlehem governorate in 2016 according to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics was 221,000. It covers an area of 660 km², of which Israel controls 87 per cent. Bethlehem region faced Israeli colonization immediately after the 1967 occupation when the notorious settlement of Gosh Azion was established only four months after the invasion.

On August 17, 2015, I was a witness to Israel's practice of land theft and destruction. In the morning of August 23, 2015, the residents of the predominantly Christian town of Beit Jala in the district of Bethlehem, home to 15,000 people, woke up to the sound of bulldozers uprooting ancient olive trees in their agricultural and recreational land, the Cremisan Valley.

Israeli soldiers with armed vehicles and bulldozers began marking and numbering the trees, cutting branches (ironically, the olive branch is a symbol of peace), and bulldozing trunks. The purpose was to create a buffer zone and construct a section of the Apartheid Wall. The Valley has been a target of annexation for many years. Blueprints for Israel's Apartheid Wall show the Cremisan Valley on the Israeli side. The targeted land (which constitutes 3000 donums), is privately owned by 58 Palestinian families from Beit Jala as well as by the Salesian Sisters' Convent and School and the Salesian Monastery and Cellars. These landowners have challenged Israel's plan to confiscate their land in the high court of the occupation state. The court proceedings reveal the actual aim of the confiscation: to connect the Gilo colony, built on over 2,700 donums of Bethlehem land, with the Har Gilo colony, also built illegally in 1968 on confiscated land.

A few months earlier, in April 2015, the Israeli high court ordered the state to reroute the separation wall to ensure the "connectivity" of Bethlehem's community with the convent

¹⁴ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/betlhm.htm



Israeli bulldozers uprooting Beit Jala's ancient olive trees, August 2015

and monastery.¹⁵ Despite the ruling, state bulldozers invaded and began destroying the site and uprooting tens of ancient olive trees. While Israeli bulldozers, soldiers armed with machine guns, tear gas grenades, and sound bombs, military vehicles equipped with tear gas launchers, stood on one side, enraged protesters, including the landowners, clergymen, community leaders stood on the other. First, the settlers cut off branches, then, after tying the trunks to a bulldozer, they uprooted the trees.

Witnessing the lynching of ancient olive trees was painful and shocking. Extermination of the colonized people is extending here in front of my eyes into the slaughter of their culture and the trees that sustain human life itself. My use of the terms 'lynching' and 'slaughter' to describe the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees is deliberate in order to suggest that genocidal acts also include other living things. My experience urges us to rethink our perception of the rights of nature, including of fruit trees, and the need to create agency for these living monuments.

¹⁵ According to the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), since June 1967 the Israeli occupation authorities have expropriated some 79 per cent of West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs) territory. PASSIA, "Report on Land Confiscation," http://www.passia.org/media/filer_public/7c/00/7c005e51-840d-4eaf-a910-23e5d8c01793/settlements-wall.pdf

Interview with Issa Alshatleh, August 20, 2015.

I was torn apart both by the desperation of the landowners, who were prevented from protecting their trees by armed soldiers, and the helplessness of the trees themselves. The Nakba had been brought into the present. As I watched the destruction of the land and massacre of the olive trees, I spoke with some of the landowners.



Israeli bulldozers uproot olive trees after cutting their branches, August, 2015

The uprooting of these trees “began without warning or notification,” said landowner Issa Alshatleh:

Our neighbours notified us early this morning that Israeli bulldozers are uprooting our olive trees. We were outraged and rushed to the land but were denied access to it. Israeli soldiers told us that our land has been declared a ‘closed zone.’ This land is a source of livelihood for my family and my brothers’ families; they are depriving our six families of the olive trees our ancestors have planted. It is criminal.¹⁶

¹⁶ Interview with Issa Alshatleh, August 20, 2015.



Protesters tearing down a gate installed by the occupying forces to designate their land as a “closed zone.”

After the destruction began in the Cremisan Valley on August 17, 2015, the landowners in Beit Jala appealed to the occupation high court for a second time. In January 2016, the court rejected the landowners’ appeal and ruled for the continued building of the Apartheid Wall on their land. The court’s ruling states: “a buffer zone is needed to protect Israel’s citizens.”¹⁷ In this case, the “buffer zone” consists of a 30 to 100-metre-wide trench alongside an eight-metre-high concrete wall. Landowners were promised two openings in the Wall: a gate for people from the school and monastery to access their land, and a second one for farmers to access their olive and fruit orchards.

The decision of the Israeli high court, an institution that is part of the settler-colonial system, which refers to settlers living in colonies built on confiscated West Bank land as “Israel’s citizens,” violates international law on many levels, including the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), which states: “an occupier may not forcibly deport protected persons,

¹⁷ B’Tselem, “Barrier to Separate Beit Jala Residents from their Lands, Laying Groundwork for Annexing Settlement,” November 12, 2105 (updated February 10, 2016) http://www.btselem.org/separation_barrier/20151112_beit_jala_separation_barrier



Olive trees branches cut and trashed just before the harvest season, Beit Jala, September 2015

or deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into occupied territory” (Art. 49). It also violates the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling of July 2004 that affirmed that the Wall “is contrary to international law,” and, “Israel accordingly has the obligation to cease forthwith the works of construction of the Wall being built by it in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem.”¹⁸

By confiscating 3000 donums of the Cremisan Valley, mostly planted with olive and fruit trees, Israel not only deprives the residents of Bethlehem of their farmland, livelihood, and last remaining recreational site, but also entirely isolates Bethlehem from its sister city, Jerusalem. The section of the Wall that passes through the Valley, completed in 2017, makes landowners foreigners to their own land farms. They need “permits” from the occupying power to access their land through military gates guarded by soldiers who control when they open and close. They also need a permit to visit relatives on the other side of the Wall. Palestinians throughout the West Bank whose land between the Wall and the 1967 Green Line has been annexed can only approach those lands through gates. Currently, “there are 85 agricultural gates along the length of the [Wall]. Of these, only

¹⁸ The United Nations Humanitarian Bulletin Monthly Report, September 2015, pp. 6. https://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_the_humanitarian_monitor_2014_10_02_english.pdf.

nine open daily and the majority (63) only open for a few weeks during the annual olive harvest.”¹⁹ Not unlike the siege of Gaza, some West Bank communities, like the city of Qalqilya, are entirely walled in and gated, and their residents depend on the occupying authority’s permits to enter or exit their city or reach their farms.²⁰ Permits are not easy to obtain. According to UN sources, 42 percent of applications for permits to access olive groves behind the separation wall were denied in 2011 and 39 percent in 2010. If a family member is politically active and/or has been detained or imprisoned during a protest, for example, everyone in that family might be denied permits.



A gate built through the Apartheid Wall in Beit Jala, March, 2017

My conclusion is a question: if uprooting hundreds-of-thousands of olive and fruit trees, seizing land, shattering communities, and inflicting blockades on millions in open-air prisons does not constitute genocide, then what is genocide?

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “The Humanitarian Impact on Palestinians of Israeli Settlements and other infrastructure in the West Bank,” 2007.