

Palestinian Olive Trees

An Environmental Tragedy or a Tragedy of the Conflict?



By Amira Gabarin

as a symbol of steadfastness and political resistance as olive trees that are thousands of years old link our people to their land in one of the greatest and most beautiful living examples of Palestinian identity and cultural heritage. Olive tree farming goes back almost 6,000 years in the MENA region, and of course, olive-based products are also a key ingredient in Palestinian cuisine.

This article includes the insight of two people who appreciate both the national importance of olive trees and the many obstacles that face those who grow and cultivate them. Dr. Husam Zomlot, is the Palestinian ambassador

to the United Kingdom and has previously served as the head of the PLO mission to the United States. Mohammed Ruzzi is the manager of the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA), a nongovernmental organization founded in Palestine in 2004 as a union for all Palestinian fair trade farmers and those interested in working in fair trade.

Historically, Palestine's Mediterranean climate with long, hot summers and cool but mild winters has been ideal for olive trees to grow and prosper. While the natural environment might imply

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live trees have a special place in the heart of every Palestinian. Not only do they provide an economic lifeline for the more than 80,000 families that grow them in the West Bank alone,¹ they also serve

“If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears.”

Mahmoud Darwish

that the conditions in Palestine are near perfect, various environmental challenges have had severe consequences for olive trees and the farmers, many of whom rely on them for their survival. Even though olive trees are resilient, climate change has had a negative impact. The *Olive Oil Times* reported in late 2020 that production dropped by nearly 70 percent in the current crop year, moving from 39,500 tons in 2018–2019 to 12,000 tons in 2019–2020. Global olive oil production was also predicted to be at its lowest level since 2016–2017. This is a regional and indeed global problem that affects other Mediterranean countries as well.

Mohammed agrees that lack of rain, caused by the warming of the Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea, is among the greatest environmental obstacles that Palestinian farmers face. While irrigation could help improve this, it requires water which

“Olive trees represent both our history and our future.”
Mohammed Ruzzi,
manager of PTEA.

farmers don't have. As we discuss what appears to be an environmental challenge, Mohammed reminds me that it has a political component: “It's difficult to find water in Palestine. We are not allowed to dig wells because Israel controls everything below the ground. If a farmer digs a well, the Israeli authorities will destroy it, forcing the farmer to pay for the destruction.” The occupation authority's restrictions on access to water, Mohammed explains, affect

■ Photo by Emile Ashrawi.





■ In the fields of Deir Ballout. Photo by Daoud Abdallah, courtesy of Palestinian Assembly for Photography and Exploration.

not only olive trees but all kinds of crops. Possible solutions have been advocated regionally. But whereas in Tunisia, farmers are advised to grow olive tree species that resist dry weather and focus their efforts mainly on the parts of the country where there is more rain, Palestinian farmers cannot follow such advice due to the tight confines to which they are restricted, particularly in Area C, where the majority of farmlands are located.

On a positive note, although olive trees have suffered in recent years due to climate change, some researchers and agronomists believe that climate change impacts them positively, predicting that an increase of the average yearly temperature by 1.8 degrees Celsius might increase olive production among 97 percent of the olive oil producers in the world.ⁱⁱ This study also argues that higher temperatures might alleviate the problem of fruit flies damaging oil production because these pests would thrive less in higher temperatures.

While the environmental challenges that result from global warming are shared by nations all over the world, most damaging and heartbreaking to Palestinian farmers and the Palestinian people collectively is the intentional uprooting and destruction of their olive trees. The destruction of ancient and precious olive trees is more than a symbolic blow. Described by journalists as a “war on the environment,” 2020 was the harshest year for farmers so far, as over 8,400 olive trees were uprooted or burned.ⁱⁱⁱ The first months of 2021 have shown no signs that this destructive trend might be slowing down, as Moataz Bisharat reported to Anadolu Agency on January 27, 2021: The military destroyed over 10,000 forest trees and around 300 olive trees in a nature reserve of over 98 acres in Ainun area in the city of Tubas.

It is important to clarify that the destruction of olive trees is not just an act of extremist settlers who attack all types of Palestinian property. While this happens on

a daily basis, the more shocking attacks are systematic, as the Israeli military and state frequently engage in orchestrated attacks. Dr. Zomlot states, “What the uprooting of olive trees in occupied Palestine represents is the attempt by Israel – the settlers and the occupying military that protects them – to rid themselves of the land’s indigenous population. They wish to defeat our struggle for freedom, statehood, and justice.” Between 2001 and 2012, the Israeli military and settlers have collectively destroyed at least half a million olive trees.^{iv}

Mohammed also mentioned a recent incident in Deir Ballut village near Salfit, where much of the land is located near settlements and the separation wall. “Last month, Israeli bulldozers uprooted more than 3,500 trees. No reason was given. If you asked the Israeli authorities, they would say that they were planted in Area C which is under full Israeli control. The Israeli authorities informed the farmers that they were planning to uproot the trees. The farmers appealed, but no legal decision has been made so far, and the army uprooted the trees anyway.”

An important dimension is the financial significance of the olive market and its importance in the Palestinian struggle to achieve economic sovereignty. As many farmers depend mainly on olive trees for income and financial security, the State of Palestine National Export Strategy reported that the olive sector employs over 15 percent of working women^v and is worth between US\$160 million and US\$191 million.^{vi}

Understanding the economic power that olive tree cultivation brings to the Palestinian people, Mohammed

“The uprooting of trees is not just a crime against the trees or the Palestinian people, it also harms the environment and undermines the natural habitats of our environs, setting back the global struggle against climate change.”

Dr. Husam Zomlot

asserts that the PFTA has a positive impact on farmers by encouraging sustainability, fair prices, and the existence of Palestine unions. The PFTA works with over 1,200 farmers as direct beneficiaries in over 50 West Bank villages. “Our role includes helping farmers produce high quality products with added value, which includes fair trade and organic certification.” They export to over 19 countries internationally. PFTA engages to ensure that farmers obtain better prices for their products if they are of the finest quality and produced under fair trade conditions. This benefits all farmers by driving up the market price. Mohammed reminds me that in 2005, the market price for olive oil was 8 shekels per liter and the fair trade price was 16 shekels, whereas now, the minimum fair trade price is between 25 and 30 shekels.

PFTA’s work benefits not only the producers of olive-based products but also the environment. Through the Trees For Life program, created in 2006, it has distributed free



■ Palestinian farmers inspect the damage done to their olive trees that were cut down by Israeli settlers. Issam Rimawi/Anadolu Agency.

of charge thousands of almond and olive trees in Palestine. The program targets people from all walks of life, including young couples, poor families, and women. “Anyone interested can apply. In the last planting season, more than 230,000 olive and almond trees were planted in the West Bank, and thousands of farmers benefited from our program that was funded by fair trade partners and supported by international solidarity efforts,” Mohammed explains.

Protecting olive trees and the environment in Palestine is also a form of resistance. The PFTA works with Zaytoun, a nonprofit social enterprise founded to support Palestinian farmers who plant new olive trees daily in the places where trees have been uprooted. “Planting the trees is risky,” Mohammed admits, “but we need to plant and link the farmers with their lands. It’s important that farmers go to their land every day and show the Israelis that we own this land. Ownership of land is the soul of the conflict

between Palestinians and Israelis.” Mohammed also urges farmers to keep careful records, including notes on what grows, when it was planted, who planted it, and so on. Agreeing with Mohammed on the importance of replanting trees, Dr. Zomlot also stresses the importance of “international scrutiny and accountability, given the role of the Israeli military in protecting these settlers.”

Olive oil from Palestine is considered among the highest quality olive oil worldwide.^{vi} As global warming threatens olive trees everywhere, it is likely that this oil will become even more precious in the coming years. Moreover, the assault on olive trees is an assault on history as some of the destroyed trees are thousands of years old. Historians should be as outraged about their destruction as they are when Daesh destroys ancient churches or libraries in Iraq.

The protection not only of olive trees but of all Palestinian property and, most importantly, of people is intrinsically connected to peace

and the end of the illegal Israeli occupation. Palestine must face the environmental challenges of global warming as it tries to navigate the military occupation. Given that Netanyahu continues to lead Israel, it is difficult to see how change could come from the inside. Dr. Zomlot stresses, “We are constantly reminding the international community of its responsibility to hold Israel accountable, raising the issue of settler violence with governments and parliaments worldwide with specific demands for protection and accountability, and appealing to the International Criminal Court for justice.” Consumers can help this along by supporting Palestinian fair trade products and continuing to support the BDS movement. To protect the environment, we must also support those who are trying to protect it.

Protecting Palestine’s natural environment is a historical, religious, environmental, and human

“If environmental questions were not about politics, then governments all over the world would have taken much stronger action much earlier. In Palestine, the occupation masks a multitude of sins, one of which is that resources are diverted from efforts to secure the proper care and protection of the environment in a manner that would benefit our heritage and treasures and preserve the natural environment.”

Dr. Zomlot

■ Stolen harvest, photo courtesy of Grassroots International.



Palestinian farmers protest after Israeli security forces uprooted olive trees reportedly located within Area C in the occupied West Bank village of Deir Ballut.



rights issue. While the creation of trade unions is a step towards functioning statehood, the PFTA and the Palestinian unions are also essential in our resistance to Israeli aggression, enabling us to voice our needs and represent our citizens. Asked for his advice to farmers, Dr. Zomlot replied, “Remain steadfast and have faith. We have survived wars and the attempt to wipe us out. We will survive this. Whenever we can, we work together to ensure that

farmers and all citizens can enjoy their land and its fruits in freedom and peace.”

Amira Gabarin is a 23-year-old journalist based in London. She writes for a range of publications, including The Telegraph and CBS News. She is passionate about charity work and international affairs.



Photo by Firas Jarrar, Palestinian Assembly for Photography and Exploration.

ⁱ “Olive harvest marked by access and protection concerns,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), December 2017, available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/olive-harvest-marked-access-and-protection-concerns#:~:text=The%20annual%20olive%20harvest%20is,and%20cultural%20event%20for%20Palestinians.&text=Between%2080%2C000%20and%20100%2C000%20families,per%20cent%20of%20working%20women>.

ⁱⁱ Bob Yirka, “Study suggests global warming may be a boon to Mediterranean Basin olive growers,” *phys.org*, 2014, available at <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-global-boon-mediterranean-basin-olive.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Ramzy Baroud, “War on nature: How Zionist colonialism has destroyed the environment in Palestine,” *Middle East Monitor*, 2019, available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190211-war-on-nature-how-zionist-colonialism-has-destroyed-the-environment-in-palestine/>.

^{iv} Harriet Sherwood, “Israel urged to protect West Bank olive trees after settler attacks,” *Guardian*, October 13, 2012, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/15/israel-olive-trees-settler-attacks>.

^v “Olive harvest season: expected record yield compromised due to access restrictions and settler violence,” Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs OCHA, November 2019, available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/olive-harvest-season-expected-record-yield-compromised-due-access-restrictions-and-settler>.

^{vi} “Infestation expected to affect olive harvest in the West Bank,” OCHA, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, September 11, 2018, available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/infestation-expected-affect-olive-harvest-west-bank>.

^{vii} Eleanor Ross, “Six of the best non-European olive oils,” *Guardian*, February 9, 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2016/feb/09/six-non-european-olive-oils-to-beat-the-price-crisis>.