Stolen Harvest

Fact Sheet: The Occupation and Palestinian Olive Trees

Olives and olive oil are fundamental to Palestinian history, economy, subsistence, and culture. Olive trees symbolize Palestinian steadfastness and are deeply valued for their ability to thrive and send down deep roots in land where water is hard to come by. Many olive trees are thousands of years old and yet continue to produce olives. A worldwide symbol of peace, olive trees themselves have come under vicious attack by Israeli soldiers and settlers.

Olives: Palestinian Livelihood

- Olives and olive oil have historically formed the main basis for Palestinian livelihoods. Today 48 percent of agricultural land (mostly in the West Bank) is planted with olive trees.

- Olive sales and olive oil production form 14 percent of agricultural income supporting 80,000 Palestinian families.

- The olive harvest is considered one of the most important events in the lives of rural Palestinians. During this season Palestinian families customarily live amongst the olive trees. The month is marked by numerous traditions and festivities and demonstrates the long-standing and profound connection of Palestinians to their land and to their olive groves.

- To build the Separation Wall and infrastructure for Israeli-only settlements, bulldozers have plowed down more than 800,000 olive trees. That’s the equivalent of bulldozing all of Central Park 33 times.

- The Wall routinely separates farmers from their olive trees. Farmers must seek permits from Israeli Authorities to work their own land and harvest their olives. 42 percent of applications to access land are denied. Even accepted permits are often delayed until the season is over, or granted for extremely short periods making the harvest – let alone the ongoing cultivation and care – exhausting or impossible.

“I am the owner of this land. It’s my life. It’s my children’s future. It’s my people’s future. Although we have witnessed the destruction of our development projects and initiatives, we have tried to rebuild. They uproot olive trees and we re-plant them. We plant 10 olive trees against each olive tree they uproot.”

-- Samah Darwish director of Grassroots, Policies and Advocacy Department at the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) in Palestine.

Grassroots International works in partnership with social movements to create a just and sustainable world by advancing the human rights to land, water, and food through global grantmaking, building solidarity across organizations and movements, and advocacy in the US.
When the Wall and the permit system make it impossible for farmers to access their land, the State of Israel claims and expropriates the “unused land” based on a British colonial era law of eminent domain.

Attacks on olive trees happen daily. Israeli settlers often burn olive trees during harvest time as payback or the “price tag” for Israeli court-ordered removal of settlement outposts. Many times, attacks are simply acts of hatred. In some instances, olive trees are carefully removed at the root with experts present to be re-planted in Israeli settlements.

In 2012 the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the occupied Palestinian territory (UNOCHA) reported that 7,500 olive trees were destroyed by Israeli settlers between January and mid-October. Attacks on Palestinian olive trees by Israeli settlers increased by 53 percent from 2010 to 2011.

Caterpillar: Profiting From the Destruction of Palestinian Land, Homes, and Olive Trees

Caterpillar is a U.S. firm that manufactures and provides bulldozers and civil engineering tools. It sells bulldozers to the Israeli army that are weaponized and used in the systematic demolition of homes and civilian infrastructure as well as agricultural land and olive trees.

Caterpillar sales are part of the U.S. military aid package to Israel.

Caterpillar has been called on by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Presbyterian Church, War on Want, and others to take measures to ensure its machinery is not used to commit human rights abuses.

According to Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the “extensive destruction and appropriation of property carried out unlawfully and wantonly” is war crime.

What You Can Do:

Sign a petition to push TIAA-CREF to divest from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation.

Donate to Grassroots International, to accompany our Palestinian partners in their struggle for rights to land, water, and food sovereignty.

Spread the word with your networks, friends and family.

Join our e-advocacy list to receive e-mails with actions you can take.