



# GROUND TO DUST

**The audacity to keep on farming in the face of settler enmity is a testament to Palestinians’ love of their land, and irreplaceable need for it, writes ANNIE NELIGAN.**

“You help us keep the whole chain going: soil, farmers, land, community”, says Zaynab Shalabi, of the Palestine Farmers Association addressing customers of Zaytoun<sup>1</sup> who buy their oil, their dates and any exportable produce. And it is that chain that the Israeli occupiers of the West Bank are so focussed on breaking, attacking one link after the other in the hope that all will fail.

In this account I am going to focus on Israel’s efforts to break one community, the village of Burin, near Nablus in the West Bank, in the years before the current escalation of violence. I was with the Olive Harvest Trust group of volunteers who each October went out for a couple of weeks to support farmers in harvesting their olives.

We were a “protective presence”, hoping to deter the thugs from the illegal Israeli settlements that have taken over three of the hill tops overlooking Burin from coming down to attack the Palestinian farming families at their work. We helped to hasten the harvest, now crowded into the few days for which the farmers were given permits by the occupying army to pick their own olives from their own land. The meeting with that land, and with the Palestinians relationship with it, was one of the strongest of many rich experiences of the visits I made between 2011 and 2018.

Day one, and we were straight out into the fields. A healthy olive grove is a beautiful place to spend the days. The gracious trees with their silvery trunks, smooth, low branched were easy to climb. We worked along the evenly-spaced avenues, lifting and spreading the tarps, calm, methodical, to the musical thump of the olives, shaking the tumbled olives into sacks before moving to the next tree. That work has been done on that land for hundreds of generations; olives that have provided a staple food and a stable income for so long.

But by the end of that day, we were already beginning to see that such orchards are just a remnant of a sturdy but delicately balanced farm ecology, now savagely threatened by the Occupation of the West Bank since 1967 and the steady colonisation by illegal settlers who have been arriving since the early 1970s.

Above the silvery green of the groves around the village we could see layers of stone-built terraces lining the hillsides, which were once, we heard, rich with grain, beans, and peas, but now dusty and barren. The complex system of

irrigation channels is now worthless, the stream beds dry, their headwaters sucked up from the aquifer by the hill top settlements. Some days we ventured to the higher olive groves, now overgrown with thistles, their trees unpruned, the ground unmanured as the farmers and their stock have been unable to access the orchards except for these few precious days each October. We saw the charred terraces of groves that had been fired at night, often by settlers sending blazing tyres rolling down the hillside; and the butchered stumps of trees, sending up a few shoots of new growth, after having been slashed down by settlers one night last year.

We saw how much farming has had to retreat into the village. Sheep and goats are kept in small compounds, food for them foraged on dangerous trips out. Here is a dairy cow poking her head over a shady wall next to the blacksmith’s. Hens poke around everywhere. Donkeys are tethered under the trees. Stock are no longer the muck spreaders of tradition, so the olive groves are starving.

One afternoon, drinking sage tea on a friend’s balcony, I saw the danger for myself. We were idly watching a couple of farmers following their flock of sheep up the hillside opposite. Up too far for the liking of the settlers who were bounding down the hill towards them, leaping over the terrace walls so laboriously constructed long ago. IDF soldiers who had been watching from some trees nearby came out to join the settlers and started firing tear gas at the sheep, canisters bouncing down the hillside amongst the terrified animals who the farmers were trying to shepherd back down the hill towards what in those days was the safety of the village. They would come past the stone monument, next to a dry spring, where a couple of lads from the village had recently been shot dead while out having a stroll, a picnic and a smoke.

By the time of my last visit in 2018, farmers, both men and women, were turning over patches of land in the village to growing salad and vegetables, great creamy cauliflowers, to supplement their diet and income. Women were growing sage, thyme and akoub around their houses, herbs that they used to gather on the open country of the hillsides. Hills where young men went hunting or drove their donkeys to collect water from the springs above the village, are now, eight years later, deliberately wrecked by settlers (Oxfam repaired the main spring, four or five times, but gave up in the face of the repeated vandalism from above).

The fine balance of water management, of soil enrichment, of stock grazing and cultivation was visibly out of kilter. And with it of course the community structures which are woven into it. The festive family olive harvest, where families would be joined by young people home for these precious weeks,

the celebratory picnics amongst the hard work, the sharing of help between families had become instead a time of tension: hurrying to get the picked olives back and into the press before a raiding party came down from the settlements to steal them; fear of the IDF arriving to challenge their permits. The humiliation as children watched their respected parents, taking time off from teaching, bus driving, being turned off their own land by heavily armed teenagers, not even in their own language. The children wanting to play as they used to, running around the orchard, swinging from trees, are now hushed by their elders for fear their shrieks and whistles will provoke the settlers.

Since then, conditions have become much harder for the people of Burin, as for everyone living in the West Bank, and since 7 October 2023 they have got even worse. The settlers have attacked with ever more boldness, ever more impunity – and ever more weapons: guns distributed to them for free by the IDF. Their nearest town, Hawara, was burned out by settlers, unrestrained by the army. There are seven steel barriers blocking every entrance/exit of the village. Settlers can get in, Palestinians have to argue their way out. The boys’ secondary school has had to close down its agricultural wing and move right into the village, leaving behind their only hope of a football pitch. The school playgrounds can’t be used — again, for fear of provocation. Students at the nearby university in Nablus are unable to get there most days, and often unable to get back if they do.

Polytunnels painstakingly put up to concentrate vegetable growing in the village centre have produced good crops – which have gone to waste this last year because the army stopped the farmers going to them during the crucial harvest days. Hundreds of dunums<sup>2</sup> of land have been lost to the construction of roads connecting the hill top settlements with illegally settled towns such as Ariel, roads which are bordered by militarised protection strips, by olive orchards destroyed to ensure “security”. Hundreds of Burin’s olive trees have been burned down and the houses on the periphery of the village, once such a source of pride, have had to be abandoned. Our presence is no longer protective but seen by settlers as a provocation and we are only welcome as visitors, not workers.

Burin’s surroundings are in Area C, where the military occupation have full jurisdiction – if you can apply such a word to a reign of harassment, surveillance and arbitrary arrest. Many of us thought that the relentless undermining of the Palestinian farming economy was part of an Israeli plan to coerce the rural population into the cities of Area A, such as nearby Nablus, ostensibly under Palestinian control. Palestinians would be safely corralled in there while settlers were free to extend their vineyards, resurrect the olive groves, set up military bases, whatever.



Amar Omtan

*Doha Assous, a force for resistance and resilience in Burin, mourns her grandmother’s butchered olive trees.*

Now it is clear that the master plan is total annexation. The assault on the farming ecosystem, on farming families’ relations with their land, is a formidable attack on the underbelly of Palestinian life. And there is no let up.

On the 1st December 2025 the Palestinian Local Seed Bank premises in Ramallah and Hebron were raided by the Israeli military, with eight male agricultural workers who were on the premises abducted and vital equipment for the preservation of Palestinian food security and food sovereignty destroyed. The Seed Bank, established in 2010, preserves 79 local plant varieties including traditional Palestinian vegetables, herbs, medicinal plants, field crops and wild native shrubs. It says that such seeds are important for food sovereignty, and help farmers adapt to climate change<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, we can find ways to support the determination of Palestinians to stay on their land, to live with their land. For the thousands of trees destroyed, hundreds of trees are being planted each spring. You can keep up the supply of saplings distributed by the Palestinian Fair Trade Association (PFTA) by buying at <https://zaytoun.uk/plant-a-tree/>

You can also refuse to buy Israeli farm produce and explain why you are doing so. The Co-op has already decided to stop dealing with all Israeli suppliers and smaller chains have followed suit where there have been strong local protests. Look for Palestinian produced alternatives: as Taysir Arbasi, liaison worker for Zaytoun in Palestine says, buying Palestinian farm products “is a contribution to our steadfastness, enabling us to maintain what we have. Agriculture is the fundamental thing we need to keep: we inherited it and want to pass it on”.

*Annie Neligan is a member of Three Peaks for Palestine, a solidarity group based in the Yorkshire Dales.*

1. Zaytoun is a not-for-profit co-operative set up to support marginalized farming communities in Palestine
2. A dunum is a tenth of a hectare.
3. <https://www.gmfreeze.org/2025/12/04/israeli-military-raids-palestinian-seed-bank/>