

Two Haaretz Reports on Settler Violence

These reports are included to provide background on settler behavior that is not often seen in the US media.

Fighting the W. Bank harvest of hatred
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In the olive groves: Zionist immigrants protect Palestinians from Zionist settlers

A large number of American Zionist immigrants, some of whom are religious, joined two separate olive pickings in West Bank Palestinian orchards last weekend. These harvests were organized by Israeli Jews to help protect the Palestinian farmers and their harvest from other Israeli Jews.

The results of the two harvests were remarkably different although only a night divided them. This was possibly because Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon, was just forming his soon-to-be heavily publicized campaign to end the 'olive war' by offering the Palestinians rare IDF protection.

Olives grow mainly in the upper half of the country and provide the main livelihood for many Palestinian families. An average family owns between 50-170 trees, each tree has 20-70 kilos of olives and 1 kilo usually sells for about 5 shekels inside the occupied territories.

The official harvesting period is from October 15th until November 15th this year. Many farmers had hoped to finish early before the start of Ramadan on November 6th, when the pickers would be fasting daily from sunrise to sunset. What no one expected was Jewish settlers beating them to it, stealing olives from the trees even before the harvest period opened, and in some cases, attacking the farmers.

One 24 year-old villager from Aqraba, Hani Beni Manieh, was killed and three others were wounded in one such attack on the 6th of October. Settlers say the circumstances of his death are unclear and police have not arrested anyone.

Nevertheless, the attacks on Palestinians continued throughout the harvest. Most were threatened and scared away from areas within range of settlers, deciding was too close for comfort. The army did mostly nothing, and the Palestinians have been scared away or prevented from going back to the fields.

Jews at hand

Arik Ascherman, a Reform Rabbi who immigrated from California in 1994 and directs an organization called Rabbis for Human Rights, organized a group to help with the harvest last Friday at Far'ata, a Palestinian village southwest of Nablus in area B (under Palestinian civil control and Israeli security).

Far'ata's olive orchards are in the vicinity of Havat Gilad, the illegal outpost which then Defense Minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, unsuccessfully attempted to dismantle on the 29th of October (with no connection to olives).

Armed residents of Havat Gilad had used threats and beatings to prevent the Palestinians from getting near the trees since the start of the harvest. Ascherman's group wanted to be a quasi-escort service in the wake of the danger from Havat Gilad, where a tank was parked permanently with soldiers at hand at all times.

The volunteer olive-pickers that showed up last Friday, a motley crew of a few native Israelis, more English-speaking immigrant Israelis, and some volunteers from the International Solidarity Movement, escorted the villagers to the orchards. The harvesting was previously coordinated with the Israeli army and police who control the area. They planned on working only till 1 P.M. so as to get home in time for Shabbat, since some of the group were observant.

Defending whom?

When they arrived the villagers found that most of the olives were already picked. Nevertheless, the volunteers and villagers began to pick the remainder when a small, armed group of people from Havat Gilad appeared and threatened the harvesters with rifles and barking dogs. The settlers claimed the land belongs to the Jews. A squabble broke out between the Jewish olive-protectors and the Jewish land claimers.

Police who showed up remained unresponsive even when one man, Daniel Gordis, was grabbed by one of the settlers after taking photographs. Then the army appeared with a tank, a number of jeeps and about 15 soldiers. An army officer promptly made the area a closed military zone and sent everyone home. Only two bags of olives had been picked in an area the villagers said normally yielded 80 sacks. The Palestinians asked if they could be left to finish. The army said no.

Broken promises

The Far'ata farmers were sent home and told to wait for permission to be arranged for them to return to the land. But, the following day, one of the villagers went with two Israelis and a foreigner to speak with the army, which is guarding Havat Gilad, to see if they could speed things up. The settlers stopped them and tried to beat up one, a Mr. Ibrahim.

The police and army came and asked Ibrahim and his guests to go home and in the future to speak with the police and army by phone. Ibrahim did so, and was told to wait another day or two.

Frustrated, the villagers returned to the orchards Tuesday with ten internationals and about 20 villagers. That morning Ibrahim heard the good news on Israeli radio in Arabic - Ya'alon had decided to act against the settlers and allow the Palestinians to finish their harvesting.

An article in Haaretz that day reported the army increasing its manpower to guard Palestinian olive harvesters. Nevertheless, the army stopped them along the way and said it was a closed military zone. They waited a half hour and tried again. The army returned with the police and the soldiers became aggressive, threatening to throw them in jail if they didn't scatter.

In addition, the army and police ordered the villagers to bring a professional land surveyor from Nablus and their deeds of ownership for the land on Friday. The surveyor charges almost 7,000 shekels, said Ibrahim. "We'll have to divide it between all of the families whose land is in question.

" Meanwhile, the army has reinvaded Nablus and Ibrahim is worried he won't be able to make his appointment with the Israeli security forces. The civil administration says this is a typical land dispute and this land - which is definitely in Area C, has never been properly measured in lots. "That is why land surveyor was called. The Palestinian should bring deeds, if he has them, showing proof of ownership."

The only thing not typical is that one side - the settlers from Havat Gilad - are claiming ownership without any papers even to prove it.

Trying again

The next morning another group of Israeli and some foreigners set out to help Palestinians pick olives. This time it was the orchards belonging to different families from the village of Salem, east of Nablus, somewhere between the settlements of Alon Moreh and Itamar. Since it was Saturday it was only secular Jews, led by Uri Avneri of Gush Shalom. Many of the people were not directly associated with Gush Shalom but took advantage of the ride to help get to the orchards and lend a hand. Close to 150 volunteers rode on three buses until they got stopped for over an hour at a checkpoint near the Huwarra village, just south of Nablus.

"I came here to see - to see the Israelis and what they are doing. I literally came here for the ride. I don't know if I'm going to pick olives," said Rosalee as she waited for the army officers to decide what to do. Rosalee, a painter and mother of three who immigrated from Brooklyn to Kibbutz Yahel, near Eilat, says she moved specifically to the Negev because she "did not want to live on other people's land." She had not been to the territories since the seventies.

Eventually someone from the organizers arrived with a loudspeaker. "Although this was coordinated with the army they insisted on seeing the site again before we go there. We hope the soldiers will protect us from the settlers. We are going to olive trees near a new illegal hilltop outpost. Be disciplined - do what the army tells you," he warned.

A leaflet tells participants what might happen and how to react:

1. Settlers using verbal violence - don't react, let the coordinating team take care of the situation.
2. Settlers using physical violence against Palestinians - try to be a bloc between them. If we take the blows, resist without violence.
3. Settlers opening fire - everyone including the Palestinians take cover.
4. The army declares the orchard a closed military zone - behave as for item 1.

Participants are asked to respect the Palestinians' observance of Ramadan and not to smoke, eat or drink near them. Some later ignored this request.

Rosalee came with her friend Stein who brought along Diamond, a friendly mutt. Stein, a recent American immigrant living in Ra'anana, has been on olive harvests with Palestinians four or five times. "Sometimes we have problems with settlers and sometimes we don't," he says.

The buses drive on the road to the Jewish settlement Itamar and then take a sharp turn right and travel north toward the settlement Alon Moreh. Then another right and everyone gets out. Six Palestinians, who were allowed by the army to show the group the way to their orchards, join the group and together everyone walks a half hour into the hills with an army jeep escort.

Word of the large visiting group travels fast and many more villagers, who own trees in the area and were unable to get to them, join the volunteers. A mother, Mrs. Shtaye, and daughter from the village point out weed-filled plots of land "which should be sown with lentils," she says, "but aren't because we could not reach the land throughout the intifada."

Confusion breaks out among the Palestinians, the Jewish volunteers and the 10 or so soldiers waiting at the site. The orchards belong to different families and each family wants some out-of-town helpers to come to their trees. But, the soldiers want the Jews to be in one spot and the Palestinians to go away. The Jewish pickers relent, but the Palestinians won't budge, some farmers have started picking as well. But, those villagers whose trees are in a different section try desperately to convince the officers to allow them to go to their trees.

Among the pickers, there are quite a few English speaking immigrants, many of whom came immediately after the '67 war. Ironically, that war was the reason they were standing last Saturday in a West Bank olive orchard picking olives. Yet, all agreed they did not expect things to turn out as they did.

Ellen Paz, an immigrant from the United States and her husband, Podi, are at one tree with an old Palestinian man wearing a galabieh. She was visiting Israel on her way home from a stint in Africa in 1967 and felt she had to stay. "After the war here people were so proud. It wasn't a matter of Occupation - kibbutzes were being attacked from across the border - I saw the war as making it livable here and perhaps a way to meet the people. It seemed to me the Arabs were happy to have the border open. If I had known it would come to this today, I might have had second thoughts."

Ellen is outraged at attacks by settlers on the Palestinian olive harvesters: "I am as unpolitical as you can get. Lately here in Israel, if you don't take a stand for the peace movement, we're going to be lost with the tenacity of the Gush Emunim [settler movement] - moving in here and not moving out, not realizing that this land doesn't belong to them."

Tamar Yaron agrees: "It is a gross injustice that these people can't pick their own produce, hampered - shot at - by people who took over this land. I have to do my part to rectify this injustice. It's the Zionist thing to do."

Most of the day passes before an officer allows Mrs. Shtaye, her daughter and a few volunteers to go to her trees, they return shortly. There is little left to pick. Most of the olives were stolen. A few other families who have been waiting patiently for permission, approach Jewish pickers and ask them to intervene on their part to get permission to go to their plots, which are on a hill opposite the outpost. But, to no avail.

When I ask why, the young liaison army officer says that it is too late. However, he gives the villagers his cellular phone number and promises that if they call that night he will arrange for them to return with military protection. But, to me he says: "The army is the defense force for the Jewish people."

Yaron is taking a break. Born in Canada, Yaron immigrated to Israel in 1970 and today lives in Kibbutz Zore'a. "I made aliya (immigration) because of Zionism." Her husband Itamar cuts in: "Bullshit! You made aliya because you fell in love with an Israeli guy."

Like Paz, Yaron never thought that conquering the West Bank and Gaza Strip "would be at the expense of another people." She says: "What I understand today about our history is not identical to the stories I was brought up on." She pulls out a cigarette as she continues: "Today, I don't see this as a conflict between Jews and Arabs - this is a conflict between those who want all of the land and those who want to live together in a just peace. A just peace could be either two states or one state. Most of my life here I thought that two states is the solution, but in the last two years I think one state for all. It would be a home for Jews and Palestinians. Palestinian refugees could return and Jews could emigrate."

The sun is setting, a tractor has shown up and all the olives of all the lucky families are thrown aboard and everyone makes their way back, which at this point is about 50

Palestinians together with over 100 Jewish volunteers and a few foreigners. There is a sense of satisfaction in the air. Besides losing half the day due to waiting for the army, there were no skirmishes with settlers and no closed military zones.

Pat Carmeli, is pleased. "I'm glad I came here today. It's therapeutic just reaching up and picking olives at least I'm doing something," said the New Yorker who converted to Judaism when she married her Israeli husband. They moved here in 1992 and have four children. "It's terrible living here in this period. I don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's good to be with people you can respect and admire."

The army somewhat changed its perspective throughout the day. It seemed at first, that the soldiers were guarding the olive-picking volunteers from the Palestinians, but as the day wore on, it became clear that work and not war is the ethic. They only insisted that the villagers not pick on the side of the hill facing the hilltop outpost. The soldiers didn't bother to escort the Jews back to the road.

Hana Stein, makes her way back slowly among all the people and unlike many others, is not wearing the Gush Shalom sticker. "I don't identify with Gush Shalom and I feel uncomfortable with the number of [non-Jewish] foreigners here," says the South African immigrant who arrived in 1968. "I came [to the harvest] totally as a Zionist and as an Israeli, because I think the occupation damages Israel and its moral fiber. I picked the olives as a humanitarian matter and as a Jewish matter. It is wrong to rob people of their livelihood."

It's dusk. At the road, one army jeep is waiting and another one is passing by. The tractor with olives and all the Palestinian women cannot return to the village, say the officers in the unmoving jeep. Quickly, almost without being told, the volunteers sit down in front of both jeeps and block the road. The soldiers are annoyed but powerless.

The Palestinians look on, somewhat astonished by the fiasco between the two groups of Jews. Eventually, the officers agree to let the tractor go back to Salem. Everyone cheers except the soldiers who look even more annoyed.

And then they part. Everyone shakes hands cheerfully, exchanges shukrans and todas. If this weren't taking place in the hills deep in the West Bank, one would think that these Jews and Arabs were neighbors in some California suburb who just finished mowing the lawn together.

The sun is down and the fast is up. The Arabs remain until the Jews to get on the bus, then rush off to have their meal.

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It's the pits

Humiliated farmers, angry landowners, human rights activists and army personnel: A confrontation in an olive grove

Amira Hass

Four frightened farmers emerged from the old Renault that screeched to a halt in the center of the path. "The settlers didn't let us get to our grove," they told their fellow villagers of Akrabeh, who were picking olives along the sides of the path. It was Monday afternoon, four days after the majority of the residents of the neighboring village of Yanun deserted their homes, unable to bear the harassment of the settlers any longer. The car's passengers turned down the proposal to join two television crews, one foreign and one Israeli, and return to the site where, they said, "an armed settler in an off-road vehicle and another three" people had threatened them with their rifles and taken their car key- returning it only after ordering them to leave.

The reporters continued driving on the path, which winds its way toward Nablus between fields and hills planted with olive and almond trees. In the middle of the path was an off-road vehicle with an Israeli license plate (number 01-478-69), and astride it was a young bearded Israeli wearing a khaki hat and with a rifle slung over his shoulder. In the field next to the path, another young man sat on a tractor (Israeli license plate 57-000-37) that was hitched to a plow. Two young men, both wearing large skullcaps and one of them armed with a rifle, walked alongside this vehicle. "No photographs," one of the drivers snapped. "I say no pictures. This is my private land and you will not photograph my house." He refused to say whether it was he who had blocked the Akrabeh residents from getting to their olive grove. "I don't answer you. I don't talk to you," he said. "This field is mine all my life - no, for 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 years. Since Hashem [God] created the world." He and his armed friend produced wireless radios and began talking into them.

In short order, activists of the Ta'ayush Arab Jewish Partnership group, Rabbis for Human Rights, foreign nationals in the Solidarity movement, and a few of the grove owners in the area arrived. They stopped their convoy of cars opposite the off-road vehicle and its armed driver. The activists and the farmers began to speak about the right of the tillers of the land to harvest their crops. The driver of the off-road vehicle listened and then told the Palestinians: "You are dead people." In the meantime, another off-road vehicle (Israeli license plate 12-452-76) and another few Israelis wearing skullcaps arrived in the field. An Israel Defense Forces jeep also pulled up, parking across the width of the path, and an officer with the rank of captain emerged from it. He huddled with the driver of the off-road vehicle, and spoke with representatives of the Ta'ayush group and of the Palestinian fellahin, who complained that they were unable to get to their olive groves. "Why is he plowing my land and you say nothing to him, but you do not let me harvest olives?" one of the Akrabeh group - the father of a youngster who was

wounded by gunfire on October 6 - said bitterly. On October 6, a few young people had gone to their grove to pick olives. A group of armed Israeli civilians showed up and, from a distance, opened fire; one of the Palestinians, Hani Beni Maniyeh, 24, was killed. The police are investigating allegations that Israelis murdered him.

Awaiting the verdict

The field that was being worked by the Israeli tractor is owned by the Bushnak family, from Nablus. It has leased the field for decades to residents of Akrabeh and Yanun. In the past two years, the farmers say, Israelis have prevented them from planting wheat in this plot, as they have traditionally done.

The origins of the Bushnak families that live in Palestine are in Bosnia. They were Muslim soldiers who were brought here to reinforce the Turkish army at the end of the 19th century and settled in various places in the country, including Yanun. Although they were not originally from one family, they adopted a common surname that attests to their extraction. When they moved to Nablus from Yanun, they leased their land to the residents of Akrabeh, who gradually began to leave their village and settle in the wadi, the plateau and the hill of Yanun. Payment for leasing the land could be made in the form of wheat, olive oil or cash. About three-quarters of Yanun's 16,000 dunams (4,000 acres) of land is leased.

"We have a law that a leaser is forbidden to remove the tiller of the land," says a Yanun resident, who on Monday was one of those awaiting the verdict as to whether they would be able to harvest the olive crop. The army captain explained to Haaretz: "There are places where they can harvest the crop and places where they cannot. Those are army orders - not demands of settlers - in order to prevent them from approaching a settlement and perpetrating a terrorist attack."

The settlement of Itamar is northwest of Akrabeh and Yanun. Over the years, its residents expanded their homes onto hilltops in the area. A few mobile homes on each of these hills, along with observation towers and water reservoirs, surround Yanun from the east, the north and the west. The groves of Akrabeh and Yanun abut on the settlement's ever-expanding boundaries.

The captain related that his soldiers had told the olive harvesters that they were prohibited from working the groves "on the left" (that is, the many hundreds of trees on the north side of the path). Those "on the right" can be harvested. "We are letting them harvest in most places," the captain continued, explaining the policy. "That is also in the army's interest. There is a great deal of humanity here. You can ask. They are even guarded." And what about the Israelis on the off-road vehicle and the tractor, who blocked the Palestinians from getting to the right of the path? "That is a different matter, a matter for the police," the captain said.

In the meantime, another jeep arrived, bringing a major, who wanted to talk to the Palestinians and their supporters. Rabbi Arik Ascherman, from Rabbis for Human Rights, was sent to negotiate with him. He returned with a proposal: "If we work on the south

side, they will separate between us and the settlers," he said. "Their duty is to protect us if we work on this side." And one more condition: The "boundary" demarcated by the off-road vehicle can be crossed only on foot.

`Softened version'

The villagers decided to take advantage of the presence of the Ta'ayush group and harvest their crops, even though they thought the terms were humiliating and discriminatory. The closure is causing economic bankruptcy and these days, every liter of oil that can be extracted from the olives is worth its weight in gold. "The only reason the army is letting us work is that you are here," someone remarked. "If you weren't here, the army would tell us to call the police and in the end, it does what the settlers want." "You were witnesses to a softened version of what we have been going through for the past five years," Abd al-Latif Bani Jaber, the head of the Yanun village council, said afterward. He sat at the entrance of one of the homes whose owners left, walked past the abandoned houses on the deserted streets with the Ta'ayush activists - who had come to stay over - and related the history of the abandonment of the small village, which consists of three groups of buildings on the plain and the Yanun hill. "In the past few months, some of the residents left the village and moved to Akrabeh. They couldn't take the fear anymore. We were 150 residents, which gradually decreased to 100, then 87. Last Friday, only eight families were still here." The occupants of the homes closest to the hills and the mobile homes were the first to leave.