

Palestinian Olive Oil

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Olive trees have been grown and protected in Palestine for thousands of years, holding cultural, religious, political, and economic significance to Palestinian people. Olive trees have been symbols of resistance, joy, resilience and hope, and the Palestinian people often associate them as roots of Palestinian identity. They have also played an incredibly important role in the Palestinian economy, as over 100,000 Palestinian families rely on the production of olive oil for their success.¹ Olive oil as a commodity is a much sought after product for food as well as religious purposes, especially in the Middle East and Mediterranean. In Palestine, the cuisine is practically soaked in olive oil, and so just as the economy and production is important from the producer's end, Palestinians are also the main consumer of Palestinian olive oil. This commodity chain, specifically in the Palestinian industry, helps me to analyze settler colonialism, borders and barriers, and primitive accumulation, as the Israeli occupation, apartheid, and oppression over Palestine can be framed through this incredibly important commodity. This commodity can be visualized through an interactive google my-map:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1qD71tC6z5bsfPum5d5WdwLe8eTpWzXA&usp=sharing>.

Every year, Palestinian farmers and families will harvest their olives, usually through a delicate and tedious process. Olive season is during the fall, in October and November, and during this time, these olives are usually shaken from the trees and onto a tarp, a lengthy process that takes days to do, but a pride for farmers and families. From the harvesting, most of those olives are squeezed and processed to extract olive oil. A quote from Middle East Monitor states:

The olive oil industry alone makes up 20 percent of the Palestinian economy.²

¹ Jason Ruffin, "In Palestine, Protecting One of the World's Oldest Olive Trees Is a 24/7 Job," Atlas Obscura, last modified March 6, 2020, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/world-oldest-olive-trees#>.

² "Israel Settlers Steal Olives from Palestinian Farm," Middle East Monitor, last modified October 5, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181005-israel-settlers-steal-olives-from-palestinian-farm/>

These hundreds of families produce a very large amount of olive oil, considering the size of the country. According to Al Jazeera, 36,000 tonnes of olive oil were produced in 2019, with the leading areas being in Jenin and the surrounding area, Tulkarm, Gaza, Ramallah and the surrounding areas, and Nablus. The industry produces over 100 million dollars worth of olive oil.³

Historically, olive oil has been used in Palestine for many things. Sindyanna of Galilee Fair Trade, a non-profit organization that promotes peace between Palestinians and Israelis through commodities, writes on their website about the historical significance of olive oil:

“Its versatile uses ranged from lighting (feeding clay lamps as well as the Menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum, which illuminated the Temple) to preparing, cooking and baking food; from hygiene (olive oil soaps and beauty care) to healing and medicine; and from religious and sacrificial rituals to anointing kings and priests.”⁴

The majority of the dishes in Palestinian cuisine utilize olive oil. Because of this, the main consumer market of olive oil produced in Palestine is consumed by other Palestinians. Cuisine is an important part of Palestinian culture, as hospitality is often shown by cooking for and hosting family, friends, neighbors, and guests.

In addition to food, olive oil has also been used for religious purposes for centuries. The three abrahamic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, all rooted deeply in Palestine, have used olive oil in their religious practices. In Christianity, especially the Palestinian Eastern Orthodox church, it is used to anoint, to baptize, and for blessings and prayers. In all three of the holy books, the Bible, the Quran, and the Torah, the olive tree has significance as well.

³ Mohammed Haddad and Zena Al Tahhan, "Infographic: Palestine's Olive Industry," Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera, last modified October 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/14/infographic-palestines-olive-industry#>.

⁴ "Produced in the Holy Land," Sindyanna of Galilee | The Taste of Fair Trade, accessed November 24, 2022, <https://www.sindyanna.com/about-us/produced-in-the-holy-land/>.

Palestinian culture is often deeply connected to the religion and religious practices, as all three religions consider Palestinian landmarks as some of the holiest places in the world, such as Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and have nicknamed Palestine “The Holy Land.”

Olive oil is also used in beauty products, an example being the production of olive oil soap in Nablus, a business and product that has been maintained and made according to recipes dating back to ancient Babylon. Today, it is actually prescribed for skin conditions like eczema and psoriasis, since it is incredibly healthy and safe for all skin types.⁵ This soap has a long process from attaining the olive oil, to laying out the soap on a large surface where it is left to dry for days. After the first drying process, it is cut and stacked in a temperate room to dry for a number of months.⁶ In addition to the olive oil industry on its own, this product adds a large economic value to the equation, and supports families in Nablus.

For Palestinian people, olive trees are a symbol of hope, and many people consider them a part of their cultural and religious identity. The trees themselves withstand harsh weather conditions, and can grow with very little water, which to many Palestinians reflect their own resistance to the grim situation that they are forced to live under in the Israeli occupation. Olive trees and branches also symbolize hope and peace. It not only represents the modern struggle, but is has been a fundamental aspect of Palestinian history. Everything from a religious viewpoint, where prophets and holy figures have prayed and rested beneath olive trees in Palestine, to the history and use of olive products such as olive wood, the tree has a special place in Palestinian history. In Al Walaja, a small town outside of Bethlehem in the West Bank, the oldest olive tree in Palestine, and (many think) the world, still stands. It is protected by the Abu Ali family, who's farm it is on, and has been on for centuries. To farmer Salah Abu Ali, it is his

⁵ Palestinian Soap Cooperative, accessed November 24, 2022, <https://palestiniansoap.com/>.

⁶ Palestinian Soap Cooperative.

home, and he protects it with his life, and according to Japanese, Italian and Palestinian scientists, it has been carbon dated back to about 4,000 to 5,500 years old.⁷

For Salah Abu Ali and the inhabitants of Al Walaja, along with many other towns in Palestine, maintaining the olive groves has been far more difficult than one would expect due to settler colonialism and the Israeli Occupation. Israel is a fairly new country, dating back to 1948, a time labeled “Al Nakba,” which translates from Arabic to “the catastrophe.” Israel was built off of a deal between Zionist leaders and Great Britain to hand over the Palestinian land for a Jewish state.⁸ During this year, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced, became refugees, and lost their farms and homes. Israeli settlements in particular are collections of high end housing that has been built on designated Palestinian land, and many of them are built on or near Palestinian farms. This is an occurrence that happens frequently. In an article by To Be There, it states:

“...the Israeli authorities, including the Israeli government, military and the Israeli settler colonialists, have destroyed over 800,000 since the Israeli occupation of 1967.”⁹

The correlation between the destruction and violence against olive trees and olive farmers, and the growth in illegal Israeli settlements is shocking, and during harvesting season, these numbers are even higher, as settlers often attack farmers more when the season is ripe. Additionally, the settlements are almost always built on hills, strategically causing their sewage to run into Palestinian farms, groves, and neighborhoods, attacking Palestinian infrastructures, undermining the economy and olive oil industry tremendously, which Rosana Thompson, a human rights

⁷ Ruffin

⁸ Mohammed Haddad, "Nakba Day: What Happened in Palestine in 1948?," Breaking News, World News and Video from Al Jazeera, last modified May 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/15/nakba-mapping-palestinian-villages-destroyed-by-israel-in-1948>.

⁹ "Olive Harvest in Palestine -," Home -, last modified November 20, 2022, <https://tobe-there.com/olive-harvest-in-palestine/>.

worker and Palestinian-American mother explained, recalling one of her many trips to Palestine.¹⁰ An example of settler violence is Tent of Nations, a farm outside of Bethlehem. Tent of Nations allows people to adopt trees, trying to protect the land and trees that are there, but it is on contested land outside of Bethlehem, right next to an Israeli settlement, similar to Al Walaja's struggle. It is a place that Israel claims as "contested territory," but is actually still Palestinian land. Rosana Thompson stated:

"We had to walk down a dirt road, past the Israeli settlement, and through a barbed wire fence that was the entrance to the farm."¹¹

She then explained that the people there lived in caves, which they created because they were told the land was not theirs and therefore could not build on that land, although the farm has the legal deeds to the land from the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate, Jordanian Rule, and Israeli Occupation. It is legally their land, and has been for centuries. This farm has been working endlessly to build up and cultivate their trees, but right when they begin to grow, Israelis destroy their land. This has been through fire, bulldozing, and other forms of attack. A snippet from the Tent of Nation's blog in May, 2021 writes:

"While we were on our way to the farm after picking up some farming tools from Bethlehem for ploughing, we received a phone call that left us with no words. The neighboring farmers informed us that our farm was set on fire... It was appalling to witness the rapid spread of the fire to more fields damaging thousands of olive, almond, and grape trees."¹²

Tent of Nations and Al Walaja are both located just outside of Bethlehem, and are two of many examples of how settler colonialism and borders negatively affect the industry, the people,

¹⁰ Rosana K. Thompson, Personal Interview, Chicago, IL, November 25, 2022.

¹¹ Thompson.

¹² "(no title)," Tent of Nations, last modified May 12, 2021, <https://www.tentofnations.org/blog/>.

and the land. Borders and Barriers have made this hurdle worse, and over the past few years, the struggle has increased. After the 6 day war in 1967, the Green line was proposed. The Green Line was a line drawn on a map that showed where Israel would annex territories of Palestine, and proposed the Israeli and Palestinian boundaries for a ceasefire to be put in place. It has become a blurry line as Israel has slowly been taking more and more land, and building illegal settlements in Palestinian areas. Additionally, as the apartheid wall was built in 2000, this line and territory has shifted with further annexation. After the wall was built, confining Palestinian land behind checkpoints, many farmers were forced to part with their land and general freedom of movement. The travel period between Bethlehem to Jerusalem changed from a roughly 15 to 20 minute drive, to hours of waiting in line at the checkpoint, being interrogated, and sometimes beaten, simply to cross from one town to the next. In territories such as Al Walaja, the people of the village fought in a court case to shift the barrier that Israel had planned to place, which would have put a barbed wire electric fence between the villagers and the Al Bawadi tree, severing the sacred connection between these people and their ancient tree.¹³ The people did win the case, however, much of their land was still taken. Ruffin writes:

“Despite the court victory, dozens of homes have been bulldozed to make way for the Jerusalem Municipality. Al Walaja still sits isolated, hemmed in on nearly all sides by Israel’s separation wall and no longer able to access uncultivated farmland or many of the village’s once-famed springs.”¹⁴

Israel has enforced a permit system to Palestinian people in order to enter and work on their own land. These permits have to be approved before access is granted to land that legally belongs to the people. Israel has been denying Palestinians access to their farms more and more over the

¹³ Ruffin.

¹⁴ Ruffin.

years by declaring streets and areas "Israeli land," creating physical barriers between Palestinians and their olive trees. These permits are specifically evident in Ni'lin. The town of Ni'lin is a small town in the Ramallah area in the West Bank. This town has been separated from their olive groves due denied access, a violation on Israel's part of the Green Line treaty, which (roughly) designates the boundaries between Palestinian territory and Israeli territory.

As the towns, villages, and farms attempt to maintain their businesses due to settler violence, borders, treaty violations, permit denial, and barriers, they also face the hindrance of lack of resources. As Israeli's colonial settlements and governmental structure has invited Israeli privilege and comfort into a place of priority, Palestinian resources have been stripped, causing the olive oil industry to be attacked. Not to mention throwing the two countries into increasing environmental risk. This process can be illustrated through the term primitive accumulation, with two prime examples being the accumulation and theft of water and olive trees.

In recent years, especially with global warming and climate change, Palestine and Israel have experienced heavy drought. Palestinian wells have been stolen from them by the Israeli government and the Israeli Offense Force, commonly known as the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Farmers or well owners have been brutally beaten and arrested until they hand over their wells to Israel. The Pulitzer center writes:

“Since few proposed Palestinian water resource systems have received permits from the Israeli authorities, the number of Palestinian wells in the West Bank has declined from 774 in 1967 to 328 in 2005. Many farmers must rely on un-permitted wells to irrigate their crops.”¹⁵

¹⁵ "Palestine's Budding Fair Trade Olive Oil Industry," Pulitzer Center, last modified September 19, 2013, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/palestines-budding-fair-trade-olive-oil-industry>.

Israel takes an exorbitant amount of the water supply per year, diverting it mostly towards settlement use. Israel, although not lawfully in charge of the West Bank, has stolen West Bankers' water access and sells it back to them at a premium, in the form of tanks attached to their roofs. A Poica, Eye on Palestine article states:

“According to the existing statistic at LRC the Israeli colonists' share of the West Bank water is at least six times bigger than the Palestinian share. In summer, it even gets worse because of the overuse of water on part of colonists for swimming and irrigation purposes inside the colonies.”¹⁶

In order for farmers to maintain their olive groves, produce olive oil itself, and keep their homes alive, water is essential. Al Bawadi in particular, because of its age, requires more water, as do other ancient olive trees in Palestine.¹⁷ Additionally, the process of making olive oil requires a three step purification process, where gallons of water are needed. Olive trees have persevered as desert trees that can survive with little water, but in order to produce olive oil, sustain farms and cultivate land, water is a necessity.

Another example of primitive accumulation is the theft of olive trees. As barriers and walls have been built, separating Palestinians from their farms, Israel has taken advantage of the blurry lines and contested areas to have more access to farms, and settlers have repeatedly been found illegally harvesting olives from farms that are still owned by Palestinians, with no consequence from the Israeli government. In march of 2020, Israel shut down Bethlehem and the surrounding areas to contain COVID-19, but during the lockdown, the Israeli Military uprooted

¹⁶ "Olive Tree Stealing and Re-plantation Continues by Israeli Colonists Under Official Protection," POICA – Palestinian Observatory of Israeli Colonization Activities, last modified July 25, 2007, <https://poica.org/2007/07/olive-tree-stealing-and-re-plantation-continues-by-israeli-colonists-under-official-protection/#>.

¹⁷ Ruffin.

400 olive trees, which were on Palestinian owned land.¹⁸ This is one occurrence of many, and since 1967, about 800,000 olive trees have been uprooted from designated Palestinian land by Israeli settlers, military, and government.¹⁹ These trees are replanted in Israeli territories, mainly near Galilee, and used to make “Israeli” olive oil.

To conclude, Palestine’s olive oil industry is essential to Palestinian success, as it supports thousands of families, and is a basis for food, culture, and religion. As the commodity itself supports many, the olive tree on its own holds sacred value to Palestine, rooting Palestinian identity and standing as a sign of hope, history, and resistance. Over the years, and especially after the six day war in 1967, Israel has shifted the barriers put in place at the proposal of the Green Line, breaking treaties and further annexing Palestinian land. This annexation has separated farmers and villages from their olive groves, forcing them to apply for permits from the Israeli Government to access their own land, water, and trees. Oftentimes, and growing over the years, more and more permits have been denied to Palestinians, the town of Ni3lin as a prime example. Illegal settlements have stunted the industry, both by exerting violence on farms and farmers, and by acquiring most of the water needed by Palestinians, and using it for settler comfort. Borders and barriers have blocked Palestinians from their land, and primitive accumulation has stolen resources needed for success. This issue is ongoing, and is undermining the Palestinian economy, which relies on olive oil, and change can be made. Farms such as the Tent of Nations offer volunteer work, and tree adoption to help protect and cultivate these beautiful, ancient, and meaningful trees, along with the olive oil industry itself. Palestine deserves global attention, as Israel violates international law daily. The people of Palestine are

¹⁸ Nancy Hawker, "Palestine: Olive Trees Don't Catch Coronavirus," OpenDemocracy, last modified March 18, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/palestine-olive-trees-dont-catch-coronavirus/>.

¹⁹ Middle East Monitor.

inspiring, as their strength and hope is unwavering, just like the olive tree, and the vibrance of their culture shines, even through the Israeli Occupation and Apartheid.

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