

Settler Violence = State Violence

# Israel used the Gaza war to impose extreme restrictions on the annual West Bank olive harvest

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**The annual olive harvest in the West Bank is a key element of the Palestinian economy and a crucial source of income for tens of thousands of families. The World Bank and the Palestine Trade Center estimate that in good years, it injects almost 200 million dollars into the Palestinian economy. However, every year, Israel extensively restricts Palestinians' ability to carry out the harvest, using official and unofficial means. In 2023, while the war in the Gaza Strip was underway, these restrictions reached new heights, leaving about 50% of Palestinian farmers unable to harvest their trees, according to estimates of the Palestinian Farmers' Union.**

The main official measure Israel uses is the "coordination" system, conceived as the military's response to settler violence against Palestinian harvesters. Instead of dealing directly with assaults by settlers, the military places the onus on Palestinians, demanding they coordinate access to their land in advance - ostensibly so soldiers can be sent to protect them. In practice, this system limits the harvest or prevents it altogether. Harvesting all the olives takes weeks, but the military enables farmers access to their trees for several days only. This means they are unable to harvest the entire crop or prepare the land for winter crops. At the same time, this system does not stop settler violence. Soldiers often do not show up despite prior "coordination" with the military; when they do, they do not prevent or stop the violence, often even joining in.

In recent years, the Civil Administration allocated every community three days a year to harvest olives. This year, immediately after the war in Gaza broke out, even these few days were canceled. Several alternative dates were set, but bowing to pressure from settlers, the military canceled some of these as well, for example near the settlements of Elkana, Sha'arei Tikva and Etz Efrayim.

The head of the Burin village council, Ibrahim 'Umran, told B'Tselem that about 12,000 dunams (1,200 hectares) of village farmland, which covers two-thirds of all the village's land, lie within Area C. On about 1,000 dunams (100 hectares) of these are olive groves with 16,000 trees. Residents were allocated two days to harvest their olives, on 25 and 26 October 2023, and both were canceled once the war broke out. 'Umran says about 70% of village residents rely on income from the harvest and lost tens of thousands of shekels meant to support them throughout the year. As the expected income was slated for expenses such as rent, home construction, university tuition and the like, the restrictions this year have impacted them directly.<sup>1</sup>

"Coordination" is also required for farmland that remains cut off on the other side of the Separation Barrier. The head of the 'Akkabah village regional council, Taysir 'Amarneh, told B'Tselem that local residents own about 2,500 dunams (250 hectares) of farmland west of the barrier, which they used

to access daily through a gate in the fence. When the war broke out, the gate was closed. Residents were allocated three “coordination” days in late November, only after negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian DCOs. This did not give residents enough time to harvest olives for private use, let alone complete the harvest, severely hurting their livelihoods.<sup>2</sup>

Unofficially, harvesters are obstructed by settlers’ violent assaults. These attacks are permitted and backed by the military, with soldiers often taking part. For years, settler violence against Palestinians has peaked during the harvest season, yet Israeli authorities consistently refrain from taking preventive action as a matter of policy. This year, with the war in Gaza underway, the military has enlisted many settlers for regional operations in the West Bank. The settlers have used this power to block roads leading to Palestinian land and to set up roadblocks on agricultural roads, denying Palestinians access to olive groves near settlements.

Settler attacks on harvesters have increased in both intensity and frequency since the war began. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations (OCHA), from the beginning of the war to mid-January, more than 440 incidents of settler violence took place - with scores of these assaults directed at olive harvesters. These incidents included settlers physically assaulting harvesters, uprooting large olive groves, vandalizing groves by breaking branches, sawing off trunks and torching trees, and stealing olives. Many of the attacks were carried out in the presence of Israeli forces. Settlers also threatened to harm harvesters on social media.

The head of the ‘Awarta village council, Sa’ed ‘Awwad, told B’Tselem the village has about 2,000 dunams (200 hectares) of land, located near the settlement of Itamar, that the military does not allow residents to access without prior “coordination”. This year, residents were allocated only one day for harvesting, starting at 8:00 A.M. On the scheduled day, ‘Awwad was informed the start time had been pushed back two hours. When the residents arrived at their land, they found about 20 settlers harvesting their olive trees with several soldiers standing guard. They tried unsuccessfully to put an end to the theft and eventually left at around 4:00 P.M., while the settlers were still picking their olives and vandalizing the trees.<sup>3</sup>

This year, as in previous years, the police have not investigated these violent incidents. In the most severe incident in the 2023 harvest, on 27 October, a soldier from the settlement of Rehelim on military leave killed Belal Salah, 40, a resident of a-Sawiyah, while he was harvesting his family’s olive trees. The soldier, who was suspected of reckless homicide and illegal use of a firearm, was released after a short time in detention and returned to his unit.

This Israeli policy has caused immediate financial harm to tens of thousands of Palestinian families. For instance, the olive press in the village of al-Mughayir, which also serves the villages of Kafr Malik, Turmusaya, Abu Falah and Duma, produced only 20% of the average annual output this year - 60 tons of olive oil instead of 300 tons. The olive press at al-Mazra’ah al-Qibliyah produced only 500 kilograms of olive oil this year, instead of 150 tons.

The 2023 harvest was especially important this year as the Palestinian economy is already struggling due to the war in Gaza - particularly because of the prohibition on laborers entering Israel and the Palestinian Authority’s suspension of public sector salaries.

The systemic obstruction of the olive harvest this year, augmented by organized settler violence against harvesters and their property, is not unique to this time of war. It is part of Israel’s longstanding violent policy, which aims to cement the apartheid regime in the West Bank and allow continued expansion of settlements. Bezalel Smotrich, who serves as Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Defense, and MK Tzvi Sukkot, Chair of the Knesset Subcommittee on Judea and Samaria Affairs, have already said “sterile security spaces” should be created near

settlements, where Palestinians would be denied entry altogether. This would clear the way for the state to take over this land and use it for its own purposes.

### **Testimonies:**

**'Abdallah Na'asan from the village of al-Mughayir told B'Tselem field researcher Iyad Hadad:**

*Abdallah Na'asan. Photo by Iyad Hadad B'Tselem*



My family has more than 900 dunams of land with more than 8,000 olive trees on both sides of the Allon Route, which was always freely accessible all year round, and some near the outpost of Adei Ad, which you had to get “coordination” to access. We’d get between five and seven days of “coordination” each year. This year, after the war in Gaza started, Israel canceled everything. The army closed off all the entrances and agricultural roads, eight roads in total, with rocks and piles of dirt.

We managed to sneak into our land a few times, but didn’t always evade the settlers’ aggression. They usually have a drone in the air and see anyone who tries to get close to the land. When they see us, they chase us or call the army, and then our equipment or vehicles are confiscated. So far, the army has confiscated two of our tractors.

We put up a real fight through a village resident who works at the Palestinian DCO, and managed to get three days of “coordination” in early December to harvest the olives off the Allon Route. When we got there, we found all our fruit on the ground, which meant we couldn’t use it to produce edible oil or anything else because of the high acidity. Even if we wanted to make soap out of it, it would be very expensive and not profitable. That’s how we lost this season.

In previous seasons, we produced about 40,000 kg a year from our land. Each kg sold in the market for NIS 30 ( USD 8). We would sell in the village or on the Palestinian market, and would also export some to the United States. All that gave us a nice income. But this year, we made nothing. We didn’t even manage to pick olives for our own use, which means we’ll have to buy some to make up for the shortfall. On the other hand, we racked up a lot of costs cultivating the olives, buying fertilizers and pesticides and plowing - a total of about 300,000 NIS ( USD 81,750). On top of that, we have labor costs. Every year, more than 30 laborers work for us during the harvest season. They also lost their income this year and were hurt. They support at least 150 people. We have 10 other laborers who work for us year round, and they were also hurt.

After October 7, settlers destroyed our trees and lands. We saw the settlers from the shepherding farms spread out in the eastern part of the village setting their flocks to graze in our groves. The sheep ate the leaves and branches and destroyed them. That make the trees dry up and die, and it can two to three years for the trees to recover. We found out that bulldozers belonging to the settlers were used to rake our land near the Adei Ad outpost, where we have about 400 trees. When we went to file a complaint with the Binyamin police, a Jewish interrogator asked my uncle how we managed to take photos of the settlers, as if we were guilty.

We also have an olive press which we started in the village in 2010. We work with farmers from al-Mughayir and the surrounding villages, such as Kafr Malik, Turmusaya, Abu Falah and Duma. The olive press' operating cycle was always synced with the harvest season for 50 days, averaging 10 hours of work a day. It produced six tons of oil a day. We produced about 300 tons of oil in a season. This year, the olive press barely worked. We only managed to produce 60 tons of oil, which is about 20% of the normal annual output.

**Wasim Ladadwah from al-Mazra'ah al-Qibliyah told B'Tselem field researcher Iyad Hadad:**

*Wasim Ladadwah. Photo by Iyad Hadad B'Tselem*



There are about 100 people in my extended family and we own about 450 dunams of land, half of them olive groves. Unfortunately, our groves are close to the settlements of Nahaliel, Kerem Re'im, Talmon and Haresha. During the current harvest season, we couldn't harvest the trees because soldiers and settlers - some in army uniforms - wouldn't let us get to them.

On 11 October 2023, residents of the town, including my family, tried to access the olive groves close to the town. These lands are hundreds of meters away from the settlements, and no coordination was ever required to access them. But when we got closer, soldiers and settlers attacked us. There were about 30 of us, with women and children, and they threatened us with weapons and scared everyone. They destroyed some of the ladders and work tools we brought with us. Some of the farmers tried again to sneak into their groves, but those attempts failed too, because the army and the settlers are spread out day and night on the hilltops. The soldiers watch around the clock to follow farmers who try to get closer to their groves, including with drones. They shoot to scare them.

Our loss is enormous. Each harvest season, we would produce about 250 cans of olive oil, each weighing 15 kg. In total, we would produce 3,750 kg of olive oil. Each kg costs NIS 40 ( USD 10) on average. We lost it all, and that's just our family. Everyone in the village lost a lot of money. I know this because I am a member of several committees in the village and an agricultural activist.

The town has 14,200 dunams of land, 7,500 of them on the western side of town, which is surrounded by the settlements I mentioned earlier. That's where our olive groves are. You could say that this year, more than 90% of the town's olive oil production was stolen from us. The olive press in town usually produces about 10,000 cans of oil each harvest season, which is 150,000 kg of olive oil. This year, it produced only 500 kg of oil because the olives could not be harvested. We didn't even produce enough for our own use this year, so we'll have to buy that too, if we can even find oil on the market. After all, what happened to our town happened to all the towns and villages in the West Bank.

Take me, for example. My family would produce 20 cans of oil each harvest. We'd consume four cans, which is 60 kilograms, and I would sell the rest. It was a significant income for us. This season, I was left with only three bottles, which are five kilograms. Some farmers were banking on the harvest season to finance the wedding of a son, or the construction of a house, or university studies. Other farmers, who are poor, waited for the harvest season because the income from it is their only source of livelihood, and they barely survive on that.

The consequences of this crime also affect the olive trees themselves. Fruit left hanging on the trees rots and draws insects that damage the tree. This causes diseases that can dry out the tree, killing it. Leaving the fruit also greatly reduces the yield the following season, sometimes by half.

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## **P.S.**

• B'Tselem. 14 February 2024. :

[https://www.btselem.org/settler\\_violence/20240214\\_israel\\_used\\_gaza\\_war\\_to\\_impose\\_extreme\\_restrictions\\_on\\_the\\_annual\\_west\\_bank\\_olive\\_harvest](https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence/20240214_israel_used_gaza_war_to_impose_extreme_restrictions_on_the_annual_west_bank_olive_harvest)