

## Olive Harvest Report 2011 Friends of Madama and Burin, Zaytoun and IWPS

This is the third year Friends of Madama and Burin, working in conjunction with Zaytoun and IWPS return to the small villages of Burin, Madama and Asaira Al Qibliyeh to offer solidarity during the time of the Olive Harvest. These villages situated in the northern West Bank, are threatened by the close proximity of two highly volatile settlements, Yitzah and Bracha. Established in 1983, both are categorized by the UN and NGOs as ideological: believing it is their God-given right to take the land and displace the Palestinians. During the Harvest the Palestinian farmers are more vulnerable to attack by settlers, as the expanding settlements encroach on the olive groves. 'The root cause of the settler violence phenomenon is Israel's decades-long policy of facilitating the settling of its citizens inside occupied Palestine.'<sup>1</sup> (OCHA Nov 2011)

### The Harvest

The 2011 Olive Harvest which took place in October, was for us a mixture of exhaustion, exhilaration and frustration. We were 17 volunteers of different gender, age, background and experience, from England, Wales and Ireland. Some had been to the area before, for others it was a new experience. We met in Jerusalem travelled north towards Nablus stopping for lunch at the International Women's Peace Service headquarters to meet the team and be updated about their work in the area. The IWPS, who have had a presence in the West Bank since 2002, monitor and report on human rights abuses in the area. This year we were interrupted in our picking or told to leave the fields on a number of occasions. Settlers were in evidence but we did not have the physical attacks that we experienced last year.

Our first morning harvesting was calm and tranquil until a 'settler alert' call came from the village and suddenly the atmosphere changed. Five armed settlers were seen coming down the hill but when a number of young Palestinian men made their presence obvious, the settlers reconsidered and withdrew.

On another morning the Israeli army prevented us from accompanying a farmer to his groves saying they would protect the farmers from the Bracha settlers who were hovering on the edge of the grove and ordered us to leave. As the farmers harvested a settler started to photograph one of them, when asked to stop he would not do so, the farmer then placed his hand over the camera and was promptly arrested. He was released the following day after his mother paid bail of 700 shekels (about £120, an amount which few villagers would be able to pay), however, at times like this other people in the village will help. This money will not be refunded, neither is it the end of the story as this man will have to appear before a military court. We await the outcome.



Settlers from Bracha and Israeli soldier: children are often in evidence as they cannot be arrested even when they attack Palestinians

There is a high court ruling of 2007 that compels the Israeli authorities to protect Palestinians from settlers while harvesting. It is often ignored or overruled by 'security issues' and even when implemented this is done in an inconsistent and often adverse way. The army, not the farmers, designate the few days - which are never sufficient - when they will offer protection. When we arrive with the Palestinians to help in what is very labour intensive work, their first move is generally to order internationals to leave. When we argue the border police who accompany them threaten us with arrest and the army say they will stop the Palestinians harvesting if we

don't go. In these circumstances we have no option but to withdraw. The Israeli army and police are extremely reluctant to engage with settlers and often allow them to approach the Palestinian farmers. If there is danger of actual conflict it is the Palestinians who will be told to leave. An army DCO (district commanding officer) with a 'closed military zone' order has the absolute right to decide who is allowed in the designated area. The settler population is approaching half a million and 25% of the officer ranks in the army are themselves settlers. In addition the Israeli police officers serving on the West Bank are often from the settlement police stations making a conflict of interests inevitable.

There was one memorable day in our second week when the army did uphold the 2007 ruling. The Israeli commander, a Druze, stationed his men on the perimeter of the olive grove, keeping the settlers out and allowing the Palestinians to harvest. This was the first time any of us had heard of such a happening and it was the talk of the village.

### **Vandalism of Palestinian trees**

One of our major success stories on last year's harvest was accompanying a family to their groves near the settlement of Yitzhar, land that had not been tended or harvested for 10 years due to settler violence. This ancient grove which also produced figs and dates borders the Madama well which supplied water to the village, prior to it being vandalized by settlers. An Oxfam project to reopen the well in 2002 was halted when their workers were assaulted by settlers. This year we hoped to accompany the family to the same area to harvest, they thanked us but said it would not be necessary as settlers had destroyed the trees by burning them. This was not an isolated incident, the burnt and vandalized trees were obvious on the hills leading up to the settlements; groves which bore fruit last year now reduced to burnt stumps. OCHA figures estimate 10,000 trees have been destroyed this year alone and attacks on Palestinians and their property are up by 40% on last year.



Olive groves under Yitzhar settlement burnt in late summer 2011

Many groves are not tended due to their close proximity to the settlements. Settlers cite security issues: the day we were ordered off the land the incident was described on the Bracha web site as 'an attack by Palestinians and International terrorists'. Meanwhile the settlers have freedom to roam the hillsides causing fear and destruction.

The stories told by Palestinians we meet bring the human tragedy home. A young policeman built his house on the outskirts of Burin near the Bracha settlement. Early one morning a few months back he was on the flat roof of his house when he was shot by a settler. A man in his own house, gunned down with impunity. The bullet wounds to his stomach, back and leg have healed but and a bullet in his forearm has damaged the nerves leaving him with minimal movement in his hand. The assailant was identified by the victim and two witnesses and was actually arrested, but no action was taken and he was subsequently released. There is no redress or compensation for his victim. Despite his disability he did what he could on the harvest, the family all joining in. The evening meal we shared at his home was typical of the warmth and hospitality we received from many Palestinians who opened their homes to us. On these occasions you understand the meaning of 'living for the moment' We spent wonderful days accompanying farmers and their families then exhausted and

dusty, joining them to share the evening meal. One young man, whose family has had the tragedy of two sons (one 18 and one only 13) shot by settlers, became a proud first-time-father during our visit and we were able to share in their joy. On our last night in the village a large party was thrown for us with music and dancing.



The daughter of our host in borrowed hat

### **Lack of law enforcement and lack of security**

A recent Yesh Din report notes that the 'Israeli authorities ... support an environment of impunity and facilitate continued law breaking.' Over the past 6 years only one out of 127 monitored cases under police investigation has yielded an indictment against those suspected of involvement in vandalizing Palestinian-owned trees.<sup>ii</sup>

The inequalities of the justice system are thrown into sharp relief on the West Bank. The settler armed with a gun is considered to be defending himself while the Palestinian with a stone in his hand is considered a potential murderer – and they are punished accordingly. Settlers despite a litany of assaults, and even killings, are seldom if ever punished while Palestinians receive life imprisonment. There were several occasions on this trip where the Israeli army used their military control orders to decide who would be allowed on the land.

In October the issue of Palestine's bid for statehood was big news in Europe but most Palestinians, while supportive of the bid realised that, for them, little would change on the ground. There did seem to be more flags flying in Madama and we added ours to the number! The other news item was the prisoner exchange; Gilad Shalit for 1,027 Palestinians prisoners. This happened on the day we had an outing to Hebron and our bus drivers were glued to their radio sets. On the streets of Hebron, people were celebrating and tents were raised for the welcome ceremonies. The excitement was palpable although under the terms of the release, not all 1,027 were free to return home, many have been exiled abroad. Military law which allows indefinite imprisonment without trial and without knowing the charges, is used with impunity in the Occupied Territories. Addameer, the prisoner support agency, estimates that up to 40% of Palestinian men have been detained under Israeli military orders.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Education**

We have an ongoing relationship with both the Girls' and Boys' Schools in the village of Madama. Our fundraising efforts have added two new rooms to the Boys' school and new equipment for the Girls' School. We visited both to talk to the teachers and discuss needs and problems. Education under occupation is an ongoing struggle. The presence of heavily armed soldiers, night raids, arrests and curfews create an environment of extreme insecurity and there is a high rate of traumatised children. We were told that there was a limited amount of counselling available for students. Despite the presence and behaviour of the army, it is the armed and lawless settlers who provoke the greatest fear.

The school has no class photos so, to the amusement of the children we lined them up took group photos and had them developed and framed in Nablus. They are now hanging in the schoolrooms. We had brought other gifts with us: a laptop and printer, a camera and books. These items as well as our ongoing funding during the year (our funds are channelled through FONSA, a registered charity) help in a some way to make life easier for

the teachers. In one of the villages, school buildings are so inadequate that the school day is conducted in two shifts which is, apparently, not uncommon in Palestine today. Despite high unemployment, 90% of students go on to attend university. The enthusiasm of the teachers and the students, despite overcrowding, lack of funding and growing despair, is impressive and inspiring.

## **Fear and suspicion**

In these small villages of around 2,000 inhabitants our presence is very obvious and sometimes, to our chagrin, we are mistaken for settlers. This is not as unlikely as it may seem – we are obviously not Palestinians, and we are definitely Western. It does also highlight the suspicion and breakdown in trust that comes with living under occupation. Permits are needed for everything and even when a Palestinian is legally entitled to a permit Israeli officials often delay issuing it, asking first for the supplicant to inform on others in the village. Talk is guarded and we, too, need to be careful in what we say.

Lack of security and the arbitrary delays at checkpoints add to the heightened fear. People are never sure if will get to work, to the hospital, to school or to college. Parents worry about their children. Hundreds of children are arrested each year, most accused of throwing stones and many convicted after signing statements in Hebrew, a language they do not understand.<sup>iv</sup> Under military law, Palestinians can be detained under 'administrative detention' when they can be imprisoned indefinitely without trial or even knowing the charges. If a man is arrested and then is fortunate to be released quickly, there may be concerns that he is a collaborator.

## **The Leaving**

As we travel to Jerusalem and onwards to Europe, we feel embarrassed by the freedom to travel that we enjoy when for those on the West Bank even the cherished desire to pray at Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem is cruelly restricted. This past Ramadan only married women over 45 and men over 50 were allowed to apply for permits. Only those over 65 do not need a permit.

A few of us visited the settlement of Ariel on our way to the airport at the end of our stay. Ariel, population 19,000, has both lifestyle (settlers who come for the financial incentives) and religious settlers. It is almost 50% Russian and street signs are in Russian and Hebrew. While it is very different from the ideological settlement the militarisation of Israeli society is still obvious. An army tank spread over three spaces at the shopping centre car park and we noted a high proportion of uniformed soldiers although the settlement has never been attacked by the small impoverished villages on whose land the settlement was built. While most soldiers appeared to be off duty, all carried automatic weapons as did some of the civilians. Most disconcerting were the giggling adolescents toying with their weapons while eyeing each other up.

Each year as we leave we take the same message from the villagers. They ask us to tell the outside world about their situation and their desire for peace and freedom. "In Europe and in America, people think of us as terrorists and warmongers. We want them to come to our village and to meet us. They will see that we are a well educated people who care about our families, homes, land, health and education. We are no different from anyone else. Please tell your people and your Governments the truth about us.' The truth is our Governments know, but lack the desire to act. We always say we will pass on their message and we do. Since returning we have written articles, met with our elected representatives, addressed groups and organizations.

We realise the olive harvest is not an easy experience as we bid emotional farewells to the group we started our journey with just a few weeks previously. Our journey together has been brief but intense. We cared and shared, looked out for each others safety, we depended on each other and laughed together (hysterically at times), bonds were formed and friendships established. Prior to our trip we had been told to expect basic living conditions, high temperatures, exhaustion, emotional distress, and the possibility of settler violence and army intransigence, but nothing could have quite prepared us. Let us end this account of our three weeks in a small Palestinian village during the olive harvest with the hope that the occupation of Palestine will end and that the people of these villages will one day be in control of their own destiny.

**A Poem:** written by one the volunteers, it sums up what it is like to live in the shadow of a settlement.

To be woken by the smell of smoke smouldering in your nostrils  
and guess, correctly, that twelve more of your almond trees  
have been torched in the night

To look up,  
on your way to an early morning coffee, and see a prefab,  
newly thrown up along the ridge,  
another link in the chain of settlements that promises to choke you

To see your newly washed, neatly striped daughter off to school  
and know that yesterday one of her friends found a cold brassy cylinder of a bullet  
in the playground

To coax your daughters and sons through school, to university,  
to lovingly support their dreams of opportunity, of freedom in a foreign land  
- while dreading the sapping of Burin's staying power that each departure means

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha\\_opt\\_settler\\_violence\\_FactSheet\\_October\\_2011\\_english.pdf](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_settler_violence_FactSheet_October_2011_english.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://yesh-din.org/infoitem.asp?infocatid=162>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.addameer.org/files/Reports/addameer-report-presumed-guiltynove2009.pdf>

<http://www.addameer.org/einside.php?id=9>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.dci-palestine.org/>

All photographs were taken during October 2011 and are our witness

[www.zaytoun.org](http://www.zaytoun.org)

[www.iwps.info](http://www.iwps.info)



Palestinian girl in Madama heading off to the harvest