

# Excavating Palestine: Documenting Occupation Landscapes in the Village of Jayyous

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There is a legendary figure in Arabic folklore, Hatim Al-Tai who was mentioned in Hadiths of Mohammed as a celebrated 6<sup>th</sup>-century poet and an enlightened tribal king, but who is revered in Arab culture above all for the generosity he extended to his people and all others. When invoked today, the phrase “more generous than Hatim” refers to those who act toward others with benevolence, magnanimity, and hospitality. Although such attributes are commonplace throughout the Arab world, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that of all the various “Arab Peoples” mentioned in Albert Hourani’s celebrated work (1991), Palestinians might very well be the group closest in spirit to the altruistic and venerated figure of Hatim.

At the same time, if the generosity of Al-Tai is a metaphor of the Palestinian character, there is a way in which this character trait among Palestinians has played a critical role in my own fieldwork in the region. For many researchers, “participant observation” remains one of the enduring foundations of ethnographic fieldwork in which the ethnographer “participates” in varying degrees in the social environment being studied.<sup>1</sup> In practice, such research requires a certain level of magnanimity on the part of the people being studied in accepting the participation of the ethnographer as an observer of the daily life routines in the community. In my experience with fieldwork in the region, Palestinians have gifted me with untold levels of generosity by providing me with the access necessary to witness first-hand precisely what I was seeking to document in my research — the everyday imagery of Palestinian landscapes under Israeli occupation. This openness is what enabled me, as an outsider, to participate as an observer of Palestinian life under occupation that I was seeking to research and document.

In order to illustrate something of this experience, this essay will focus on a village community where I have spent a great deal of time during the last ten years, and a particular research practice that I have enlisted as part of the fieldwork I have done in this village. The village is Jayyous, an agricultural community located in the northwest part of the West Bank in the Qalqilya Governorate, roughly 10 kilometers east of Qalqilya. The practice in question is photography.<sup>2</sup>

The following is a personal story about my experience doing field-work and photography in Jayyous, but one that seeks to illuminate broader themes about power and landscape, and the character of a people seeking dignity and justice in very unforgiving circumstances.

### Jayyous as Research Site

Situated on a hilltop roughly 250 meters above sea level, Jayyous is an agricultural village with ancient roots, at least as old as the Roman period, with a couple of small Roman ruins in the town today and even a couple of olive trees that residents insist date from Roman times. The modern town, however, emerged in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (ARIJ, 2013). According to Ottoman records, by 1596, Jayyus had a population of 30 families, six of them non-Moslem, with the overwhelming bulk of its tax assessments paid to the Ottoman Treasury for olive cultivation (Hutteroth / Abdulfattah, 1977: 140). Condor and Kitchner's celebrated *Survey of Western Palestine* (1882), prepared for the British Palestine Exploration Fund, describes "Jiyus" as a "moderate-sized stone village on a ridge with olives to the southeast" and "an ancient site having rock-cut tombs and ancient wells" (Condor / Kitchner, 1882: 165). By the end of the British Mandate, Jayyous had 830 residents, all of them Moslem, with a land area of 12,565 dunums (Hadawi, 1970: 75). Currently, Jayyous has a population close to 4,000, its land base still dominated by agriculture. Because the village has access to groundwater from several underground wells, it is able to sustain a variety of crops requiring irrigation, such as field vegetables and citrus. Nevertheless, the most prominent crop by far remains the olive, with olive orchards now stretching to the west of the village. Virtually all of the families in Jayyous have olive trees.

I came to Jayyous in December 2004 as an economic geographer to explore the feasibility of changing my research agenda from a focus on the territorial dimensions of profit-making and capitalist development, to a signature issue in cultural geography — the interplay of landscape and power. I thought there could be no better environment to explore this connection than the Palestinian / Israeli conflict. In that year, what most interested me about this conflict-ridden area as a geographer, economic or otherwise, was the Wall being built by the state of Israel on the Palestinian landscape as an instrument of control, confinement, and disciplinary force. What struck me as an intensely cruel irony about this piece of landscape architecture, used as an instrument of confinement, was its deployment by a state claiming a lineage from victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. Built not on the border between the state of Israel and the West Bank but mostly across the so-called Green Line on Palestinian land, the Wall figured into an advisory opinion of the International Court

of Justice in July of 2004 which ruled the Barrier to be in violation of International law and recommended that compensation be paid to Palestinians who had suffered adverse impacts stemming from the Wall's construction.

Jayyous, I had read from an article in *The Nation*, had suffered immeasurably from the Barrier and seemed to offer an ideal environment to study the conflict from the perspective of landscape and power (Bloom, 2004). Moreover, the village, through a very active Land Defense Committee under the charismatic leadership of Shareef Omar, had mounted the first organized protests in Palestine against the barrier, emulated later in other Palestinian localities affected by the Wall. Protest was nothing new to Jayyous. I learned that the village's Land Defense Committee had mounted a vigorous campaign during the late 1980s when an Israeli settlement group sought to seize some of the village's lands that had been designated as "state land" by the Israeli Civil Administration in order to build the settlement of Zufim. From this resistance campaign, some villagers from Jayyous were able to salvage their lands but others were less fortunate and did lose land when the settlement was eventually built in 1988. This encounter with land confiscation from the nearby settlement of Zufim, and the more recent predicament of Jayyous with the Wall, made the village a microcosm of the situation in the Palestinian West Bank.

### **Jayyous and the Wall**

Prior to my visit, I contacted the author of *The Nation* article and asked if he could refer me to the hydrologist mentioned in his piece, Abdul-Latif. I reached Abdul-Latif and explained that I was interested in visiting Jayyous as a researcher and wanted to tell the story of the village in the context of the conflict on the land in terms of two basic aims. In the first place, I wanted to see how the Wall was affecting Palestinian farmers by interviewing them about their experiences with the barrier. Second, I explained that I wanted to use my camera in an effort to collect visual evidence of what I might hear from the villagers and see through my own observations. Abdul-Latif assured me that I would be able to accomplish both aims handily in Jayyous – and he would help me.

For my initial visit to the village in December, 2004, I was planning a stay of one week. Little did I know at the time that the seven days would be some of the most eventful moments I have ever spent anywhere. In order to stay in the Jayyous, it is necessary to arrange accommodations with villagers, since there are no hotels or guest-houses. I arrived in the village around 6:00 on a cold and blustery

evening, and was led by a couple of young boys to the home of Abdul-Latif who had graciously set aside a room in his house for me, and over a wonderful dinner of “*makluba*,” assured me that in seven days I could become well-acquainted with the village. As we were eating, I noticed immediately how nice the house was. I was also aware that there was no heat. “This is our life,” he explained. After dinner we went to the home of his Uncle almost next door who happened to be the very same Shareef heading up the Land Defense Committee. “If you want to understand what we are confronting here,” Abdul-Latif told me, “you will have to get up early and go with the farmers to the lands on the other side of the Wall.” Shareef, a man in his late 50s, insisted that I come to his house the next morning and we would go together. “Normally, the gate opens at 6:30 or so,” he said, “so you should come to the house at 6:00.” When we departed from Shareef’s house after much tea, coffee and sweets and returned to the home of Abdul-Latif at about 10:00, the house was dark. “The electricity is off between 10:00 at night and 5:00 in the morning,” he explained nonchalantly. With a flashlight, he showed me to my bed in the living room, which was piled high with blankets. “I’ll wake you at 5:30,” Abdul-Latif told me, and bade me good night. I was gratified by the care the family had taken to make certain that I was warm during the night — but I could not help but think whether it would be warm enough to take a shower in the morning, or whether there would even be water for a shower.

In 2004, the heavily militarized Israeli response to the Second Intifada was still very much a fact of daily life throughout Palestine. Electricity and running water were always short supply. More visibly, however, what the Israeli occupation authorities had created in the West Bank as part of their regime of control over Palestinian life was a geography of partitioned and impassible spaces that severely restricted the movement of Palestinians from one place to another. Hundreds of checkpoints throughout the West Bank, on roads and even along foot-paths, provided a ubiquitous element on the landscape by which Israeli authorities fractured territorial space and curtailed the circulation of Palestinians across distance. By far the most imposing element of this deliberately-fragmented environment, however, was the Wall, which is what I wanted to see in Jayyous.

The construction of the Wall, known by Palestinians simply as the “*Jadar*,” began in the north in late 2002 in the village of Zububa near Jenin and by July, 2003 had progressed southward to Jayyous. In the north the barrier was actually a fence reinforced with coils of razor wire on each side, but to Palestinians, it was still the *Jadar*. When construction reached Jayyous, the barrier cut through a swath of land six kilometers long and 80-100 meters wide belonging to farmers from the

village. The construction process alone on this 6-km stretch of land uprooted and destroyed over 4,000 olive and citrus trees belonging to Jayyous farmers. More significantly, about 8,000 dunums or roughly 75% of all the village lands were located on the western side of the Wall (Figure 1). In order to reach their lands, farmers from Jayyous had to pass through a gate in the Wall located about two kilometers from the western edge of the village. Villagers seeking to pass through the gate and farm their lands on the far side of the Wall had to obtain a permit from the local Israeli District Command Office (DCO) in the Israeli settlement of Qedumim. I learned that the DCO had turned down permits for over 50% of the families in Jayyous. Denied permits, these families had to rely on the benevolence of others in the village to keep their lands from becoming fallow. Villagers with permits also helped with the harvest on lands of families denied entry into their land.

Arriving the next morning at the home of Shareef – a shower proved out of the question — I was treated to tea and clementine oranges and promised a proper Palestinian breakfast after we passed through the gate. “I have a shed in my land,” Shareef explained to me over tea. “When the Israelis made us get permits to go to our land, I found that humiliating and decided to live in my shed,” he told me. “One evening soldiers came to our land and found a number of us who were not sleeping in the village. They made us get out of our own land and return to the village claiming that we were a security risk to the settlers in Zufim. I had to wait six months before they gave me a permit.” And then Shareef said something that he would repeat often to me — and probably to many others. “I am just a simple farmer,” he said. “I just want to farm my land.” In that moment, however, I had a hard time believing that this man, who spoke to me in excellent English, was a simple farmer. He asked me if I knew the work of Karl Marx, and told me that in his younger days he was attracted to the ideas of socialism. He loved poetry and recited for me some of his own verse in Arabic and English. I had an immediate admiration for him and reveled in my good fortune in meeting such an unusual human being. We finished our tea and went outside to Shareef’s tractor parked in front of the house. He urged me to ride in the trailer hitched to the back but I decided it would be easier for me to walk alongside him on foot. I asked him about taking photographs and he said it was fine, but did caution me to avoid taking photos of women from the front.

We set out for the gate and as we descended along the pathway to the Wall, we were joined by other villagers emerging from some of the town’s narrow alleys to form a single procession heading toward the West. The early morning was cold but clear. After just a few minutes on the path, I saw in the distance for the first time the Wall in Jayyous that I had only

read about in articles. The olive-dominated landscape contrasted dramatically with the sharply linear line of the fence cutting through the environment. As I walked toward the barrier, I took my first photos of the villagers in front of me and the Wall in the distance (Figure 2).

At the gate, a quiet assembly of farmers was forming, waiting to cross to their land (Figure 3). The closed gate loomed silently against the sky of the early dawn, a potent reminder of the unequal power spread across this landscape. I wondered what was going to happen when the Israeli soldiers eventually came to open the gate and was nervous about what the soldiers might do if I were taking photographs of the scene, and whether they would allow me to pass through the gate. As we were waiting, I asked Shareef about photography with the soldiers and whether I was likely to have trouble passing. "Look at the soldiers and assess them in terms of their mood," he said. He also told me that my passport would probably work with the guardians of the gate.

After roughly twenty minutes, the morning stillness was punctuated by the sound of a jeep which sped up to the gate seemingly out of nowhere, and three soldiers quickly climbed out, all of them armed with rifles. One unlocked the gate with a key and swung it open, another took a position atop the jeep, and a third unveiled a notebook which he placed on the hood of the jeep, a pen in hand for recording the processing of people. All of these movements seemed very well rehearsed, quick and precise. At the same time, the farmers began to line up and it occurred to me that this was a highly scripted performance, in which the actors from both sides assumed roles familiar to each. I watched this activity with fascination but also with anxiety, fearful of what these soldiers might do if I started to photograph them in this act of power and domination. I looked at them as Shareef recommended and decided to take my chances. Fortunately, the soldiers appeared unperturbed by my camera, seemingly interested only in what they were there to do – control and regiment the bodies of these farmers.

Each villager had to approach the soldier with the notebook after the soldier motioned to them to come forward and present their documents (Figure 4). Usually the signal was a wag of the finger or a slight tilt of the head. Watching this process, I could easily understand why Shareef had wanted to avoid being subjected to it. Now, as the head of the Land Defense Committee, Shareef waited until all the others had passed before surrendering his own documents to the soldier. I went just before Shareef, my nerves on edge as I gave the soldier my passport. He asked me what I was doing there. I said that I was studying Palestinian farming. He said nothing, returned my passport and motioned me with a tilt of his head to walk to the other side. Shareef followed as the final aria in the drama. The entire process lasted about 30 minutes. The soldiers then closed and

locked the gate, effectively barricading the farmers on the western side of the Wall. The process would be repeated in the late afternoon as the farmers prepared to return to the village, but for now the villagers started fanning out to their various lands. I had indeed witnessed one of the signature rituals in the life of farmers from Jayyous.

### **The Field Landscape**

It was a kilometer or so from the gate to Shareef's shed and once we reached it, Shareef asked me if a breakfast of *Shaqshuka* would fulfill me. Although I was not familiar with *Shaqshuqa*, I told him that I was certain it would be satisfying. He asked me if I could help by cutting up some tomatoes and peppers while he cut up the onions. "Mint or maramia for the tea," he asked. I decided on sage, another novelty. Shareef then took out a large plastic bottle originally holding cola but filled with a beautiful green-tinted olive oil which he added to a large pot, and we simmered the tomatoes, onions, and peppers together for the next 30 minutes. As we waited, Shareef put out some sheep cheese with some olives and bread and a bowl with olive oil. When the sauce had reached the proper consistency, he added close to a dozen eggs and let them cook in the sauce. Every so often a villager would drop by and speak with Shareef. Some stayed to have tea. When the dish was cooked, a couple of these farmers ate with us. My memory of this first encounter with *shakshuka* was a dish that was one of the most delicious I have ever had. In watching Shareef with the other villagers who stopped in for tea and *shakshuka*, one of my initial "participant observations" of the cultural landscape in Jayyous gave me the impression of a highly social environment thoroughly imbued in relations of reciprocity among the farmers from the village. It was also clear to me that Shareef was truly a leader of the community, respected by the other villagers. One of my other enduring impressions focused on the pacing of life on this agrarian landscape. Life here presented a set of rhythms much slower than I was accustomed to.

Shareef was one of the larger landholders in Jayyous and like most of the other farmers, had land scattered in different plots throughout the village lands. This phenomenon, I learned later from Abdul-Latif, was a feature of Palestinian agrarian landholding from the Ottoman period associated with *musha* land tenure, a village-based system of cooperative landholding in which shares in village land rotated among villagers. "Now, Shareef explained to me, "everyone in Jayyous owns their own land but the holdings are often located in different areas," and he informed me that on this day we were going to his land with clementine oranges – and that I could try my hand at helping with the picking. I watched as he picked some wild flowers near the shed and

ascended to the seat on his tractor — flowers in hand — to make the short trip to his citrus groves. This time I rode in the trailer hitched to the back, a vista to a landscape little known and under-appreciated opening up before me.

As we made our way to Shareef's citrus trees, I was able to see farmers in a variety of different agricultural activities. The olive harvest was in its final phase and I saw numerous families picking the fruit, some on ladders up in the trees, others seated on the ground on plastic tarps separating the olives from branches. When we came upon Shareef's densely packed clementine grove, there were other farmers in the vicinity picking citrus as well. Shareef explained to me that he had roughly 30 trees in the grove that needed to be picked and that I could start picking in a certain area. I asked him how he knew where the boundaries of his land started and ended. He replied that all of the farmers knew their land and their trees. "The trees are like my children," he said.

I started to pick the small orange fruit but I was both slow and awkward. Shareef was rapidly filling boxes with the "*kelementinas*" before I had even one box (Figure 5). Even worse, I was unable to pick the fruit without tearing the top part of the skin attached to the tree. Finally, we both conceded that I was doing more harm than good and Shareef agreed that it would be better if I simply observed the harvest rather participated directly. Shareef suggested that I walk around with Saleh, a farmer from the village responsible for hands-on management of water allocations to individual farmers from the village irrigation system. Elected to this position by the farmers in the village, Saleh knew the village lands and each farmer's holdings intimately and talked to me at length about the problems of water and agriculture in the village. He told me how Jayyous was perched above an extremely rich underground aquifer system and despite six wells, the town needed to drill more wells in order to sustain its water-intensive agriculture such as citrus. "If we drill a well without permission and the Israelis discover it," he told me, "they will come and demolish it." I asked him what it was like for the village to get a permit to drill a well. Saleh told me that the village had applied many times for such a permit. "Every time we have applied to the DCO for a permit to drill a well, the permit has been rejected."

I walked around with Saleh watching farmers pick citrus and went to some of the olive groves and observed them as well. Wherever we ventured, farmers invited us to have tea with them, which seemed to be ubiquitous in the fields; blackened kettles placed on propane elements or over wood fires, accompanied by fruits, bread and cheeses, everything generated from the local soil. Time passed quickly and by 3:30, activity in the fields was waning as farmers were getting ready to go to the gate to return to the village. The end of the work day in the land behind the Wall



was marked by a procession of people similar to the one in the morning only in the opposite direction toward the village, with farmers on foot, in carts or tractors funneling toward the gate. It was Thursday so the weekend was upon us. There would be no work on Friday or Saturday – but much visiting and a lot of good food. I was invited by Shareef to Saturday dinner which was a feast to remember.

### **Weeping Olive Trees**

Work in the fields began once again on Sunday morning and now that I knew the routine at the gate, it was less intimidating. Some of my second day in the land was the same but there were always new people to see and different kinds of agrarian practices to observe. Saleh took me to his own greenhouses where he was growing winter tomatoes and cucumbers. Another activity that I had not seen previously was the planting of “*zatar*” a type of oregano used by Palestinians with bread and olive oil. It was late in the day, however, close to the time of returning, when something very different occurred in the land that will be seared into my memory for the rest of my life.

A farmer and a young gentleman from Germany named Chris, who was part of an organization in Palestine known as the Christian Peacekeepers that observed and reported on Israeli violations of Palestinian civil rights, came to Shareef’s shed close to 4:00 just as we were about to return to the village. As we walked back to the gate, they informed Shareef that they had seen a bulldozer starting to uproot olive trees in a remote area of the village lands. Although Palestinians over the years have become accustomed to this routine of cultural and economic violence perpetrated by the state of Israel against Palestinian farmers, it is still a shock when it occurs. Based on the description of the location, Shareef said he had an idea whose land this probably was.

When we returned to the village, Shareef decided to call a meeting of the Land Defense Committee to discuss what to do the following day. Several individuals came to the house that evening along with the farmer who, according to Shareef, was the likely landowner and victim of this unspeakable crime. Poring over maps of the area, and making phone calls to his contact at the Israeli DCO office, Shareef and the others began to devise a plan of action for the following day and had arranged to meet with the DCO officer the next morning.

By 2004, the settlers of Zufim had been eyeing a plot of land to the north and east of the settlement for expansion. Where they wanted to expand was on land owned by villagers from Jayyous. Brazenly, these settlers had approached farmers from the village to sell them land. Every time, the villagers refused these “offers.” Such situations are common in the

West Bank as settlers try to appropriate and occupy ever-greater territorial areas of the Palestinian landscape. Quite often, when these settlers are unsuccessful in their efforts to acquire land, they resort to other means.

Shareef and the others had determined that the land in question probably belonged to a farmer by the name of Tawfiq. Tawfiq's family owned hundreds of olive trees in the area where the bulldozing had apparently occurred. The next day, after passing through the gate, Shareef and several others from the Land Defense Committee arranged to meet with the DCO officer immediately in the area near the gate. I was quite surprised when Shareef suggested that I go with Tawfiq to see what had happened to his land. I accompanied this very gentle-looking man to an area of the village land a fair distance from the gate. After a 45-minute walk, we reached his land and saw perhaps a couple hundred trees lying on their sides, reddish-brown soil clinging to their roots now exposed to the early morning sunlight. What I heard subsequently was that the settlement of Zufim had hired contractors to uproot the trees that the settlers claimed had been sold to them, a very common ruse used by settlers in such situations. Tawfiq was in shock — and so was I. I had never witnessed anything like this and I was not prepared for what I was about to see. I watched a man go to his knees, hug the trees, and cry.

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In June 2006, in response to a petition filed with the Israeli High Court of Justice by the village of Jayyous along with other nearby villages, the Court admitted that the placement of the Wall and the permit regime associated with it had denied Palestinians their rights. The Court ordered the Israeli military to revise the route of the Barrier running across the lands of Jayyous so that the farmers could access their land. For eight years, the Israeli military ignored the ruling. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014 I happened to be in the village when farmers awoke to find the barrier fence dismantled from its location but moved much closer to Zufim, opening most of the land that for years had been tightly controlled, and for many without permits, completely inaccessible. Spontaneous celebrations broke out as villagers came to the path of the fence and began to walk back and forth across the line of the now-abandoned structure. As the day wore on, residents of the town gathered in the land for picnics and other kinds of play. What remained of the structure was a thin 6-inch slab of concrete used as a base for anchoring the fencing, and the paved road that had been made for the patrols of Israeli jeeps. Both elements were now akin to scars on a wounded but steadfast and resilient landscape. Later that night in the village as the jovial mood persisted, I saw Tawfiq whom I had not seen in years. His life was difficult, he admitted to me. The destruction of his trees was a painful shock.

He was no longer a farmer.

### **Final Word**

I came to Jayyous in 2004 motivated by the desire to tell a story about a place and a group of people whose fate in being dispossessed has been largely ignored. With grace and generosity, villagers in Jayyous gave voice to this injustice, revealing to me what is often misunderstood about the conflict in Israel / Palestine. This is a conflict over land. In this conflict, a group of people with territorial ambitions has seized control of land and property belonging to another group in a pattern not at all unlike previous instances of colonization marked by domination and the exercise of power on landscapes.

In 1993, Samuel Huntington, in a seminal if not controversial essay, warned of a new type of conflict emerging in the post-communist world marked by “cultural” variations between different groups of people. While Huntington’s thesis of clashing civilizations has been much criticized and even maligned, there are ways in which elements of it have crept into everyday discourse about conflict around the world. Indeed, the Israeli / Palestinian conflict is often depicted in the foreboding imagery of Huntington’s haunting metaphor. In the end, such language about culture and civilization diverts attention away from the land conflict that lies at the core of what separates the state of Israel and the people of Palestine. Over the course of the past ten years in my own research in Jayyous and throughout West Bank and Gaza, I never encountered anything that would give comfort to purveyors of the thesis about clashing civilizations. Instead, my fieldwork in the region always pointed to the spirit of Hatim al-Tai as the primary cultural influence on the Palestinian character that enabled me to share something of the life on the Palestinian landscape — and to be able to tell about it.

### **Notes**

- 1 There is a vast literature on this subject, but on Palestine, see especially Bishara (2013), Davis (2011), Kanaaneh (2002), Khalili, (2002) N, Nashif (2008), Peteet (2005), and Slymovic (1998).
- 2 Ever since the pioneering essay of Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), along with the compelling critique of photography by Susan Sontag (1977), photographic images have emerged as more complex artifacts than simple reproductions of visual reality. Much like other texts, photographs are selective representations and thus frame arguments about the world (Schwartz, 1989; Pink, 2001). On these issues, see especially Nasser (2013) and Slymovic (2009; 2012).

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FIGURE 1

The Wall cutting through the lands of Jayyous with 80% of the village land on the far (western) side (*Photo by author*).



FIGURE 2

Villagers from Jayyous walking from the town to the Gate to pass to their land (*Photo by author*).



FIGURE 3

Villagers from Jayyous waiting at the Gate in the Wall to pass to their land (*Photo by author*).



FIGURE 4

Villagers from Jayyous (below and top of next page) surrendering documents to pass to their land (*Photos by author*).





FIGURE 5  
Shareef picking mandarins (*Photo by author*).



FIGURE 6

Saturday dinner of *m'sakhan* at the home of Shareef (*Photo by author*).



FIGURE 7

Some of the uprooted olive trees belonging to Tawfiq. (*Photo by author*).

