

Impoverishing Palestinian Farmers

By Gary Fields

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JAYYOUS, West Bank — Upon assuming office earlier this year, President Barack Obama insisted that as part of the peace process in the Middle East the Israeli government would have to cease construction of settlements in the Palestinian West Bank. Such pressure on the Israeli leadership, delivered with unusual forthrightness, seemed to signal a departure from past practice.

What is puzzling, however, is that the president, now the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has allowed his call for cessation to go unheeded. Instead of “change” — the supposed hallmark of the new administration — the status quo has quietly prevailed.

For most Americans, Israeli settlements in the West Bank are poorly understood. Invariably depicted in the media as innocent neighborhoods or towns, settlements seem strangely detached from a conflict usually given over to graphically violent images and representations. Israeli settlements on the Palestinian landscape, however, belie a type of violence central to the conflict but concealed from view.

In order to understand settlements as obstacles to peace, it is useful to examine the origins and operations of these institutions through the experiences of a persona little known to Americans: the Palestinian farmer. One such farmer is Shareef Omar in this Palestinian town.

Having spent most of his 66 years tending olives, citrus, mangoes and almonds, Omar is a master of his craft. He knows that midday in August is no time to be irrigating his citrus groves. “Too much water is wasted through evaporation in the day,” he tells me. Although he would prefer to water at night, Omar has no choice in the matter. Israel does not allow him to be on his land after 5:00 pm. He is considered a “security risk” to settlers in nearby Zufim, a settlement built on land taken from Omar and other farmers from the village.

Until the late 1980s, despite the Israeli occupation, Omar worked his 50 acres relatively unimpeded. In 1988, however, an Israeli military order was issued to confiscate 450 acres of land belonging to farmers from Jayyous for construction of Zufim. Of that land, 15 acres belonged to Omar.

Instead of accepting the confiscation, however, Omar persuaded others in Jayyous to resist the order in the Israeli courts. Although Omar managed to win back his 15 acres, others in Jayyous were not as fortunate, losing their land to the Zufim settlement on which construction began in 1993. The settlement would continue to be the source of enormous difficulties for Omar and other farmers from Jayyous.



Shareef Omar in his land. *Photo by Gary Fields*

In 2003, Israel constructed what Palestinians refer to as a “wall” in Jayyous. As in most of the West Bank, Israeli authorities did not site the wall on the internationally recognized border between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Instead, Israel built the barrier six kilometers east of the boundary on the land of farmers from Jayyous, effectively annexing the Palestinian land lying between the border and the wall.

In placing the wall in this location, Israeli authorities not only created a physical barrier between the settlement of Zufim and the town of Jayyous, they placed roughly 2,000 acres, or 85 percent of the town’s farmland, on the Zufim side of the barrier. At the same time, Israel forced farmers whose land was now on the Zufim side of the wall to obtain permits to pass through a gate to cultivate their own fields. Like most farmers from Jayyous, Omar found his land beyond the wall and was thus obliged to obtain a permit from Israeli authorities to access his own farm.

Through this system of permits, Israel has impoverished the Palestinian farmer.

Omar obtained a three-month permit in May 2008, but since that time he has confronted ongoing uncertainty, with periods of renewal interspersed with denials always without explanation. Currently, he is uncertain whether the permit that enabled him to farm his land in September will be renewed so that he can harvest olives and clementine oranges in the upcoming months.

What is certain, however, is that the settlement of Zufim is poised to make the lives of farmers in Jayyous even more difficult. Zufim wants to build an additional 500 units of housing, again on land owned by farmers from Jayyous, including that of Omar.

Much like in 1988, Omar is not one to passively accept his fate. He speaks of the need for farmers to resist these injustices and is a lead organizer of protests at the gate of the wall against the expansion of Zufim and the permit system that is victimizing farmers in the village. Such protests are part of a widespread campaign of peaceful resistance against the wall throughout Palestine that Israel invariably suppresses with brutal force.

When he ponders the future, he is reticent and subdued. “You realize that I am just a simple farmer,” he says, “but this much I do know: If settlements continue to grow, there may not be a country of Palestine left to discuss a peaceful end to the conflict much less implement it.”

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