

Position Paper:

Violations of Natural Environmental Heritage and the Challenges Faced by Palestinian Farmers in Batter and Al-Walaja

November 2024



This paper has been prepared as part of the "Juthori" project, implemented in partnership and supported by the "Dan Church Aid."

**The content of this paper is the responsibility of PalVision and does not necessarily reflect the views of the donor.*



INTRODUCTION

The natural and cultural landscapes of Palestine represent a vital element of the region's history, identity, and economy. For centuries, farming communities have shaped and sustained these landscapes, making agriculture not only a livelihood but also a custodian of natural heritage. However, these communities face numerous challenges, ranging from the pressures of Israeli occupation to climate change and internal governance issues. This paper explores the multifaceted violations against farmers in Battir and Al-Walaja villages. It also highlights the violations against the environment, focusing on how such actions jeopardize natural heritage and offering recommendations to enhance resilience.



NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AND AGRICULTURAL REALITY

Overview of Heritage

Palestinian agricultural practices, particularly in areas such as the Jordan Valley, Hebron hills, and the northern West Bank, are deeply intertwined with the region's cultural and environmental heritage. The landscapes here are shaped by terraced fields, ancient olive groves, and traditional water management systems, many of which are considered World Heritage like Battir irrigation system¹. These systems reflect centuries-old methods of sustaining agriculture in dry climates.

Current Reality and Challenges

Despite their historical importance, Palestinian farmers today face an increasingly difficult reality. They are caught between Israeli settlement expansion, Israeli settlers' violent attacks on farmers, restrictions on land access, and local governance issues that hamper their ability to farm productively. This includes limited access to resources like water, which has become scarcer due to the control exercised by Israeli authorities over vital water sources in the West Bank.

Additionally, climate change is intensifying the situation. Increased temperatures, prolonged droughts, and unpredictable rainfall patterns are eroding soil quality and reducing crop yields. Palestinian farmers are finding it harder to maintain traditional crops such as olives, wheat, and barley, which are highly dependent on seasonal rainfall.

"Changing rainfall patterns due to climate change pose great risk to the OPT's agricultural productivity, as an appropriate balance of water, heat, and sunlight is imperative for efficient crop growth. About 85% of Palestinian agriculture is watered by rain, and approximately half of the water extracted from groundwater wells is used for agriculture. Increased droughts and desertification will thus directly affect the productivity of crops and livestock, while shorter growing seasons and increased water requirements will lead to higher food prices."²

FORMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Land Confiscation by Israeli occupation

One of the most visible forms of violation is the confiscation of land by the Israeli occupation, often justified under the guise of military necessity or settler expansion.

Israel often invokes "military necessity" to justify land seizures. This justification is used to build barriers, checkpoints, or military outposts on private Palestinian land. For example, since the beginning of the war in Gaza in October 2023, Israeli authorities have issued 13 military orders to establish buffer zones around several Palestinian villages, isolating communities and seizing agricultural lands under the pretense of security needs.

In many cases, these military zones are adjacent to existing settlements, suggesting that the intention may not be purely defensive. Lands appropriated for such purposes often remain under prolonged Israeli control, even after their initial military use becomes obsolete.

According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 850,000 Palestinian-owned trees, including olive trees, have been uprooted since 1967 by Israeli occupation; 10,000 of them were uprooted in the first half of 2024 only³. The threat of further land confiscation continues, particularly in Area C of the West Bank, where Israel maintains full control over zoning and building. This year olive harvest was described as the most dangerous season ever according to UN expert⁴.

1 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/>

2 <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/climate-change-the-occupation-and-a-vulnerable-palestine/>

3 https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/gdsapp2015d1_en.pdf

4 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n2430/212//pdf/n2421230.pdf>



“What was once a joyous season filled with traditional songs and family gatherings around wood-fired meals has turned into a time of terror. The olive harvest, a cultural and economic lifeline, is now overshadowed by fears of violence, theft, and destruction.”⁵

“In the village of Battir, where 70% of the land is classified as Area C, citizens have faced unprecedented restrictions on their ability to access their land for olive harvesting. For the first time this season, farmers were compelled to submit requests for permits in order to reach their olive groves. The areas of Al-Qusayr, Al-Khamar, and Al-Wad Al-Gharbi have been particularly vulnerable to settler violence and land appropriation. Approximately 8,000 dunams of agricultural land, belonging to 150 local farmers, have been off-limits, with Palestinian farmers being forcibly removed under the pretext of security threats to Israeli settlers, all while being protected by Israeli occupying forces. In the Al-Khamar area, farmers have also endured the theft of their olive crops by settlers, in addition to physical assaults, further exacerbating the hardship they face in preserving their livelihoods”⁶.

Moreover, in Al-Walajah village which is a small village in area C in the West Bank in Bethlehem Governorate surrounded by mainly two Israeli settlements Har Gilo and Gilo, as reported by Ms. Rabaa Al-At-rash, an employee of Al-Walajah Village Council, farmers have been unable to harvest their olive crops since the beginning of the Olive Harvest late October and up until the preparation period of this position paper. This was due to restrictions imposed by Israeli occupation forces, despite having submitted permit requests for access, particularly for the lands in the Cremisan and Wadi Ahmad areas, which are owned by at least 25 farmers.

Environmental Violations

The Levant region, which includes countries like Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions. The geographical features and climate dynamics of this area exacerbate its exposure to warming temperatures, droughts, and reduced precipitation.

This part of the world, often referred to as a climate hotspot, is experiencing some of the most rapid and severe warming globally. Studies show that while the Levant and broader Middle East emit far fewer greenhouse gases compared to industrialized nations, the region is facing rising temperatures, extreme droughts, and shrinking water resources. For instance, temperatures could rise by 3 to 4 degrees Celsius over the coming century, while rainfall might decrease by 10-60%, creating more arid conditions across the region. This warming trend is compounded by the fact that the surrounding Mediterranean Sea warms more slowly, further disrupting weather patterns and contributing to droughts and extreme weather events in the Levant.⁷

Beyond political factors, environmental degradation caused by pollution, prolonged drought periods, industrial settlement waste and sanitation, and the construction of separation wall has devastated natural ecosystems. The construction of roads and settlements in the West Bank often comes at the cost of rich agricultural lands, leading to soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and the disruption of natural water flows.

Another violation caused by settlers; there have been incidents where Israeli settlers have released wild boars near Palestinian farmlands, adding to the harassment farmers face in the West Bank. These animals, intentionally released or allowed to roam near Palestinian areas, damage crops and threaten farmers' safety, making agricultural activities increasingly challenging.

Abu Musa who is farmer from Battir told us “Sometimes, I’ve had to change my crops more than twice in a single month because of wild boars released by settlers.”

5 <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50534366/1203//AlAhram-Weekly/World/More-settler-attacks-on-the-West-Bank.aspx>

6 Interview with Mr. Mohamad Harbook, Battir Municipality's Engineer on October 30th, 2024

7 <https://news.mit.edu/2020/why-mediterranean-climate-change-hotspot-0617>



ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

Internal Challenges from the Palestinian Authority

Internally, farmers face challenges related to mismanagement, limited agricultural support, and lack of good governance within the Palestinian Authority. Programs meant to support farmers often suffer from inefficiencies, and many farmers are left without access to needed subsidies or infrastructure. It's worth mentioning that about 85% of the Ministry budget serves the employee's salaries, and the ministry's budget itself represents only 1.1% of the PA public budget⁸. Additionally, bureaucratic red tape can delay essential processes, such as land registration and access to farming equipment.

National and Local Institutions

Several official Palestinian bodies, including the Ministry of Agriculture and the Palestinian Environmental Quality Authority, are supposed to play a role in addressing these challenges. However, their efforts are frequently undermined by political instability, limited funding, and the overarching control Israel exercises over natural resources. Local municipalities and councils, while well-positioned to provide direct support to farmers, often lack the resources and technical expertise to develop long-term sustainability programs, but yet they are the most valuable key for impact.

International Bodies

International bodies like UNESCO have declared certain areas in Palestine as world heritage sites\important attractions for world heritage protection. However, enforcement of international norms has been weak, and global actors have largely been unable to mitigate the daily violations of international law that affect both farmers and the natural environment. Additionally, international human rights organizations continue to highlight the humanitarian impact of these violations but have faced political roadblocks in securing actionable change.

FARMER RESILIENCE AND CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Enhancing Farmer Resilience

To build resilience, it is crucial that the Palestinian Authority and other national institutions create policies that ensure access to land, water, and resources, as well as encourage sustainable farming practices. International donors can support by funding water conservation projects, research into climate-resistant crops, and farmer training programs. Protecting farmers' rights to their land will also require stronger legal advocacy to resist unlawful confiscations.

Adaptation to Climate Change

Farmers have already begun to explore various adaptive techniques to mitigate the effects of climate change. These include using drought-resistant crops, modernizing irrigation systems, and engaging in permaculture practices that reduce reliance on water-intensive crops. However, without sufficient institutional support, these efforts are often small in scale and insufficient to counter the growing environmental pressures.

"We can't rely on the same methods our grandparents used," says Ahmad, a Palestinian farmer from Al-Walaja. "The seasons are changing, rain is scarce, and the heat comes early. I've started planting drought-resistant crops and using drip irrigation to save water. We've also shifted the planting season forward to avoid heatwaves in the late summer. It's a struggle every year, but we have to adapt, not just for us, but for the next generation. Our land is our life, and we will not give up."

8 http://www.miftah.org/Publications/Books/CitizenBudget2023_Ministry_of_Agriculture_En.pdf



METHODOLOGY

The findings of this paper are based on a mixed-method approach involving both qualitative and quantitative data. A series of interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local farmers, environmental activists, representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, and international legal experts. In addition to the interviews, secondary data was collected from reports by OCHA, international NGOs, and climate studies relevant to Palestine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy Recommendations

- Enhance legal protections: Work with international legal bodies to ensure that farmers' rights to land and water are respected under international law.
- Strengthen institutional support: Allocate more resources to local agricultural councils to support sustainable farming methods and adaptation to climate change.
- Promote eco-friendly farming: Encourage the transition to vertical farming and the use of technology to reduce water use and increase efficiency.

Collaboration and Advocacy

It is essential to foster collaboration between local Palestinian institutions, international NGOs, and environmental groups such as NGOs, movements ... etc. A concerted effort is needed to advocate for the protection of natural heritage and farmers' rights at both national and international levels.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing violations of natural heritage and the challenges faced by Palestinian farmers demand urgent action. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-level approach that includes strengthening local governance, enforcing international legal frameworks, and promoting sustainable farming practices through capacity building for farmers and offering advanced agricultural technology equipment that can help coup some of the effects of environmental change. By building resilience, farmers can continue to protect and preserve the natural landscapes that are so crucial to both their livelihoods and Palestinian cultural heritage.



REFERENCES

1. OCHA report on agricultural heritage.
2. Amnesty International report on water access in Palestine.
3. Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture annual report, 2023.
4. UN climate change impact report.
5. UN OCHA report on olive trees and land confiscation.
6. Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, 2024.
7. Local NGO report on internal governance challenges, 2023.
8. World Bank report on environmental degradation.
9. Palestinian Environmental Quality Authority report, 2023.
10. UNESCO, Palestinian World Heritage Sites report.
11. Human Rights Watch report on international legal enforcement.
12. FAO climate resilience farming report.
13. International donor project report on water management.
14. Primary interviews conducted with stakeholders.
15. Palestinian climate change NGO report, 2024.
16. Impact of Occupation and Environmental Challenges on Palestine, ARIJ

Interviews:

1. Mr. Mohamad Harbook, Battir Municipality `s Engineer on November 14th, 2024
2. Mrs. Rabaa Al-Atrash - Al-Walajah Village Council on November 14th, 2024





Al-Shayah Street 183, Al-Shayah, Jerusalem

Tel: 02-6285080 | info@palvision.ps | www.palvision.ps

 [palestinian.vision](https://www.facebook.com/palestinian.vision) |  [PalestinianVision](https://www.youtube.com/PalestinianVision) |  [pal_vision](https://www.instagram.com/pal_vision)

 [palvision2014](https://twitter.com/palvision2014) |  [pal-vision](https://www.snapchat.com/add/pal-vision)

