



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(1) 2024: 149-170

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i1p149

Published 15 March, 2024

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# As Wide as the Roots of the Olive Tree: Indigenous Communities of Masafer Yatta and their Eco-Resistance

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**ABSTRACT:** In Palestine, the eradication of the Indigenous population extends beyond physical displacement and destruction; it entails ecological transformations. Analogous to other settler-colonial contexts, nature is not merely annihilated; rather, it is molded to suit the colonizer's intentions, resulting in modification. This article examines the eco-resistance by the Indigenous people of Masafer Yatta as an Indigenous response to the environmental impact of the Israeli neocolonial entity. By delineating the tactics employed by settlers in the region to erase the Indigenous presence, the article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of colonial dominance over Indigenous lives and knowledge across multiple scales. This analysis is grounded in extensive field immersion spanning from 2016 to 2022. The article addresses critical questions: How does Indigenous resistance manifest in the Masafer Yatta region? What strategies have Israeli settlers implemented on the ground to supplant the Indigenous population in the area? How does settler colonial dominance intersect with macro-economic dimensions and policies? While these questions have been explored within Palestine Studies scholarship and literature, this analysis is distinctive in its reliance on the specific case of Masafer Yatta. This area has received limited scholarly attention to date.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous Resistance, Settler Colonialism, Masafer Yatta, Palestine, Eco-Resistance

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## 1. Introduction

“We are farmers, we are resistant by nature.” (Palestinian Resident in Masafer Yatta)

For centuries, under Ottoman rule, Palestinians practiced a type of collective land tenure called *musha'*, which promoted sustainable agriculture and equitable distribution of resources. When Great Britain took control of Palestine, they eliminated *musha'* by privatizing Palestinian lands and facilitating the Zionist

purchase of land holdings of the new land market. Thus, land grab began along with the expulsion of Palestinians from their agricultural fields (Morris 2014, 137). After the Nakba, Israel distorted an old legislative act referred to as the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 to justify the vast appropriation of Palestinian lands. These fields were not being reallocated to new Palestinian farmers but were used to establish new settlements and other colonial infrastructures. This strategy has led to the expropriation of about 40% of Palestinian land in the West Bank. The code encouraged agricultural production by reallocating farmland to new farmers who would cultivate it if it fell fallow for three consecutive years. Once the British left, colonization and appropriation of the land continued through different means, notably through the Absentee Property Law (1950), which formalized the seizure of properties of those who fled and were killed. Other lands were appropriated under the Land Acquisition Act (1953) for security and development purposes, and many were without legal pretext (Abu El-Haj 2002, 43). However, when the colonial power is not able to use one of these legislative tools to expropriate Palestinian farmers, they resort to different strategies.

Building on King's (2019) work, it is crucial to recognize the impact of conquest and violent domination on relationships: "Spillers's and Wynter's urgent questions about how the human is made require an interrogation of how conquest shapes the processes of self-actualization in relation to Black and Indigenous peoples, and the Cartesian concept of land as other than human" (King 2019, 52). Conquest not only refers to bodies but also primarily to the land and the ecosystem that composes it: settler colonialism is a type of colonialism that seeks to replace the native population of the colonized territory with a new society of settlers (Veracini 2015, 1). Classic texts like Beshara Doumani's (1995) or Meron Benvenisti's (2000) accounted for the colonial erasure of the knowledge and practices of the Indigenous farmer society; however, within this critical body of scholarship, displacement, and settler colonialism in Palestine remain predominantly analyzed through the lenses of the "land" and the "people." More recent studies instead consider wider cosmologies, ecosystems, and biodiversity in relation to colonization (Salih and Corry 2022, 382). As with all forms of colonization, it is based on exogenous domination; typically, the colonizing authority considers the settlers as racially superior compared to the original inhabitants, providing the action of settlement with a sort of ethno-legitimacy (Degani 2016; Salaita 2016). Wolfe's famous definition of settler colonialism sees it as a system defined by an unequal relationship where the exogenous collective aims at locally and permanently replacing the indigenous community (Wolfe 2006, 388). The settler colonialism framework has been widely discussed and explored in the study of the conquest and Occupation of historical Palestine. Although this represents an essential epistemological lens for relating to the modern history of Palestine, it also has limitations. As highlighted by several authors, the definition of the multiple relationships between the subjects who inhabit historical Palestine only in terms of colonial relationships limits epistemological reflections to a methodological dualism that creates a *de facto* exclusionary dichotomy. However helpful, these frames neglect the importance of other relationships, such as the one with the land and the larger ecosystem. In this regard, starting from the relationship that the Indigenous populations inhabiting certain ecosystems establish with the territory, this contribution looks at the Palestinian resistance in farm-based agricultural areas south of Hebron through the cues provided by Indigenous and settler colonial literature with references to Palestinian farmers' studies. Land is what is most valuable, contested, and desired. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital and because the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the settler's arrival but is reasserted each day of occupation. This is why Patrick Wolfe (1999) emphasizes that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event, and I will push the argument further by conceptualizing settler colonialism as a process.

Departing from Moreton-Robinson's (2016) definition of Critical Indigenous Studies as "a knowledge/power domain whereby scholars operationalize Indigenous knowledges to develop theories, build academic infrastructure, and inform our cultural and ethical practices", this work presents the Palestinian resistance taking place in the area of Masafer Yatta as an example of Indigenous knowledge that opposes colonial domination. Apart from Indigenous Studies and settler colonialism, this research also speaks to social movement studies literature. However, due to space limitations, I will only mention some of the relevant authors. In the case at hand, a whole world of everyday resistance engages with the immediate issues on the ground (Scott 2016, 33). In this regard, Bayat's definition of social non-movements is particularly salient. Bayat (2013, 14) describes social non-movements as: "collective actions or non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideological or recognizable leaderships and organizations. The term movement implies that social nonmovement enjoys significant, consequential elements of social movements, yet they constitute distinctive entities". Chalcraft (2016), on the other hand, has strongly criticized the possibility of using SMT to study the Middle East. Indeed, he refuses to talk about "Social Movements" but advocates the study of "Popular Politics". He argues that to challenge Orientalism by "situate[ing] protest within unequal power relations [...] cultural factors are either ignored or referenced ad hoc. This is one of the reasons why definitions of social movements, contentious politics, or even "protest", are missing from this historiography" (Chalcraft 2016, 16). Although elements that would characterize the groups considered as social movements are undoubtedly present, differently from these accounts, Indigenous Studies literature considers the importance of non-human actors in the analytical framework; this is why, in this piece, these references are prioritized.

Empirically grounded, this study draws upon a three-month fieldwork endeavor, preceded by multiple prior visits, conducted in the South Hebron Hills. Despite persistent Israeli colonization efforts, this region maintains an anti-capitalist economic system centered on farming<sup>1</sup>. The three-month duration of my stay aligns with the permission granted by an Israeli tourist visa. The primary objective of this contribution is to elucidate how the Israeli government's actions in these areas extend beyond the conventional pursuit of land and resource control associated with the Zionist agenda. Instead, these actions also aim to assimilate settlers and eradicate the traditional lifestyle of the Indigenous population. The paper proposes a multi-scale theoretical framework, interlinking settler colonialism across settler society, the Israeli government, and its endorsement of extractive agricultural practices. This endorsement serves the dual purpose of sustaining Israel's relevance in the international export market and fostering global imperialism through neocolonial methods. To substantiate these claims, the study examines Israeli government projects and official documents related to the national agricultural policy. Additionally, it references OSCE reports to underscore the extent of Israel's integration into the international market and the normalization of its colonial policies among global powers. The paper highlights the interconnection of these dimensions through insights drawn from relevant literature. Furthermore, the theoretical framework posits that localized resistance, grounded in community and land-based initiatives, constitutes a form of eco-resistance. This resistance, encompassing the entire ecosystem, is a crucial aspect of opposition to the prevailing dynamics in the studied context. The paper diverges from traditional structures. Following a concise exposition of the methodology through the lens of positionality, I

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the term anti-capitalist instead of pre-capitalist for several reasons. First, there is arguably almost no society that is outside the capitalist system; second, presenting indigenous communities as "pre-capitalist" risks reproducing an "essentialized" idea of indigenous knowledge and identities. Indigenous peoples live in tension with the present systems of power and its capitalist structures. But anti-capitalist can also relate to alternative cosmologies that are activated as forms of resistance to the capitalist worldview.

aim to engage in the discourse surrounding Indigeneity and Indigenous studies. Subsequently, a comprehensive depiction of the geographical area and the settler society (section three) will be presented as the initial analytical scale. The second scale of analysis will concentrate on the significance of agriculture within the Israeli national agenda (section four). Subsequently, the third scale will scrutinize the impact on the international market (section five). The paper will culminate with a focused examination of Indigenous agency and their resistance (section six).

## 2. Methodology

The research spans multiple visits to the South Hebron Hills area in 2016, 2018, 2019, and 2022. Residing in West Bank cities and specific villages like Susiya and Tuba in the area, the extended periods of presence allowed for an in-depth understanding of the region. Different from other Palestinian municipalities, in Masafer Yatta, the absence of the Palestinian Authority and the spreading of illegal settlements make it a clear case of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism. However, this also makes the field in question very dangerous and not easily accessible to outsiders. In this regard, it is essential to mention that being recognized initially as an activist facilitated entry into the research context, underscoring the importance of establishing trust and legitimacy within the studied communities. My first visit in 2016 was a volunteer in the village of At-tuwani. This helped establish relationships that were slightly more symmetrical than for other foreign research with no connections with the area. Most of my fieldwork was informed by the insights from Participatory action research (Freire 2005; Selener 1997; Chambers 1994) that emphasizes a collaborative approach to observation and actively involves the researcher with the participants. Throughout the fieldwork, I have constantly followed the lead of the activists on the ground. The continuous guidance, protection, and support from the involved communities, facilitated the ethical negotiations of the research aims, observation timelines, permissible actions to join, and the dissemination of results. Participatory action research, aligned with feminist research goals, serves as a collaborative, liberatory, and ethical method for social change. This praxis commits to social justice, honors lived experiences and fosters genuine collaboration in research. This was, of course, done with great attention to my positionality: recognizing the potential influence of Western feminist lenses, the research maintains a stance of non-judgmental observation. The objective is to listen, understand, identify contradictions, and act responsibly to avoid causing harm. The research process acknowledges diverse risks coming from the colonial nature of the context, including personal and psychological security, as well as the potential perpetuation of inequalities. Strategies employed encompass safeguarding data integrity, psychological well-being, and protecting participants. Beyond fieldwork, the responsibility extends to analyzing and publishing results, considering potential implications, especially in conflict zones like the one examined. Strategies for secure data storage and transmission were implemented, emphasizing ethical considerations. Finally, substantial work was also devoted to a thoughtful analysis of the material and the documents that informed the critical understanding of the Israeli agricultural policy and its involvement in the international market.

## 3. Theorizing Indigenous Resistance to Settler Colonialism

"The soil is wonderfully rich and fertile. After centuries of cultivation, it can still yield an abundant harvest without the aids to agriculture used in other parts of the world." In 1905, foreigners who visited Ottoman

Palestine were impressed by the wide variety of food produced in that territory (Reilly 1981). Different studies have shown the extent of Palestinian cultivation and the farmers' traditional ways of living in the ecosystem (Reilly 1981, 83). In addition, the mandate power was committed to improving Palestinian agricultural capacities by "modernizing" harvesting and producing technologies. The Johnson-Crosbie Report of 1930 stated: "There is a great need for the training of cultivators in simple and economical methods of cultivation" and added, "The conservative nature of the Palestinian farmer makes the introduction of new types of crops into his normal rotation difficult [...] it is questionable as to whether a good agronomist would advocate the use of expensive agricultural machinery and modern labor-saving devices for the smallholder. The Arab cultivator has neither the power to work nor the money to purchase them" (El-Eini 1999, 83). These testimonies show the will to impose capitalist ways of land cultivation on the newly colonized territory and an interest in eradicating ancestral ways of self-sufficiency.

According to settler colonial studies<sup>2</sup>, the logic of elimination distinguishes settler colonialism from classical colonialism (Wolfe 2006, 388). However, the Zionist movement aims to erase not only Palestinians physically but also their cultural and historical identity in a systematic way – after 1917, the British government helped them in this regard. Nevertheless, some indigenous positions criticized such an approach, highlighting their deterministic tendency and "colonial fatalism" (Corey, Rita, and Corntassel 2014, 8). On this line, J. M. Bacon (2019), for example, has suggested that colonial violence does not aim only at the elimination of the native population but at the destruction of indigenous eco-social relations. In this regard, Benvenisti (2000) writes: "Villages were destroyed, and most vegetation replaced." Although scholars of settler colonialism already highlighted the environmental element and the relationship with the land, Indigenous Studies tell us how the logic of elimination does not only involve the "native human" population but the entire Indigenous ecosystem in which these populations are embedded. Consequently, colonial violence and the erosion of an Indigenous way of life that opposes capitalist models of production go hand in hand.

Wolfe is not the only author who conceptualized settler colonialism as a structure. In this context, the intention is to advance the proposition that this conceptual framework necessitates a more nuanced and *relational* comprehension: the aim is to intend settler colonialism more as a *process* than a structure. Acknowledging the ongoing interactions between the settler nation and Indigenous identities makes it possible to elucidate their mutual influence and interface. Notably, the characterization of the initial Zionist settlers as industrious agriculturists adept at cultivating arid landscapes is instrumental in the diffusion of the mythology that portrays Palestine as a desert and, notably, as "a land without a people" (Pappé 2017, 4-10). The Israeli foreign ministry website quotes:

*With the gradual decline in the quality of Ottoman rule, the country suffered widespread neglect. By the end of the 18th century, much of the Land was owned by absentee landlords and leased to impoverished tenant farmers, and taxation was as crippling as it was capricious. The great forests of the Galilee and the Carmel Mountain range were denuded of trees; swamp and desert encroached on agricultural land.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Amongst many others Salamanca, O., Qato, M., Rabie, K. and Samour, S. (2012) Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2(1), pp. 1–8; Dana, T. and Jarbawi, A. (2017) A Century of Settler Colonialism in Palestine: Zionism's Entangled Project, *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, xxiv(i), pp. 1–23; Domínguez de Olazábal, I. (2019) La influencia del poscolonialismo en el estudio de Israel/Palestina: de la perspectiva anticolonial al marco decolonial, pasando por el colonialismo de asentamiento, *Revista Relaciones Internacionales*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> From the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at [mfa.gov.il](http://mfa.gov.il).

The myth of the settler farmer reclaiming ancestral lands has gained prominence within this evolutionary narrative. However, it is crucial to counterbalance this account with the historical reality that indigenous inhabitants cultivated the lands in question for centuries. Contrary to the prevailing narrative, studies conducted by Reilly (1981) and other examinations of Palestinian agrarian practices present a divergent perspective. Particularly noteworthy is the account provided by E. Huntington, an American geologist who visited Palestine in 1911, which serves to elucidate this contrasting viewpoint: “If parts of the mountains were unsuited for grain cultivation, the ubiquitous olive tree flourished in the terracing found everywhere throughout the hill country and was found on the plains as well. Apart from their usefulness as food, olives were also used to produce olive oil and to manufacture soap. During the late Ottoman period, olives acquired additional importance as sources of cash for peasants attempting to meet the demands of the Ottoman government’s tax collectors” (Reilly 1981, 82). What also emerges from this text is the farmers’ orientation to self-sustainability: “The bulk of the grain crop was consumed by the cultivators themselves, [...] until the end of Ottoman rule Palestinian grain cultivation was designed mostly to feed those who grew it and not to provide crops for sale or export” (Reilly 1981, 82). Once more, historical examinations of rural Palestine unveil a production aligned with the community’s needs. This characteristic endures in the context of Masafer Yatta.

### 3.1 Masafer Yatta

Located on the periphery of the desert, within the southern hinterlands of the city of Hebron, daily scenes unfold wherein flocks return from pastures to drink water from age-old troughs. At the same time, farmers, including women and children, manually harvest olives and wheat, perpetuating practices adhered to by their forebears over centuries. Masafer Yatta, nestled in the hills south of Hebron, comprises a collection of villages and subterranean caves, constituting the domicile for 2,800 Palestinians who persist in dwelling amidst the rocky expanse of the desert. The region, initially intended to revert to the State of Palestine according to the 1949 armistice’s “Green Line” boundary, fell under Israeli civil and military control after the Oslo Accords, specifically within the contentious Area C. In the early 1980s, the Israeli military designated Masafer Yatta as “Firing Zone 918”, attempting to expel the residents, contravening international law. Despite subsequent arrangements limiting their land access, the communities persisted until 1999, when around 700 residents were forcibly expelled (B’tselem, 2023). Legal battles ensued, leading to a provisional measure in March 2000 allowing villagers to return pending a final ruling. In July 2012, Israel signaled its intent to demolish eight villages, intensifying efforts in August 2020 by challenging residents’ “permanent resident” status undermining Indigenous connections to the land. Under settler colonialism, this strategic devaluation of Indigenous nomadism perpetuates an unequal power dynamic, reinforcing an inferior status and facilitating erasure. Such tactics parallel the historical trajectory of the Zionist Organization, whose political mandate aimed at securing European agreement to establish a new state. The case of Masafer Yatta underscores the intersectionality of land dispossession, predatory resource extraction, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge, emblematic of broader settler-colonial strategies.

Predominantly relying on traditional protections, most Masafer Yatta families subsist through livestock grazing and agricultural endeavors, maintaining an intricate harmony with the environment and equilibrium within the local ecosystem. Their economic pursuits revolve around the production of olive oil, almonds, dates, *jameed*<sup>4</sup>, zaatar, goat or sheep milk, and cheese. The temporal dimension assumes significance in their anti-

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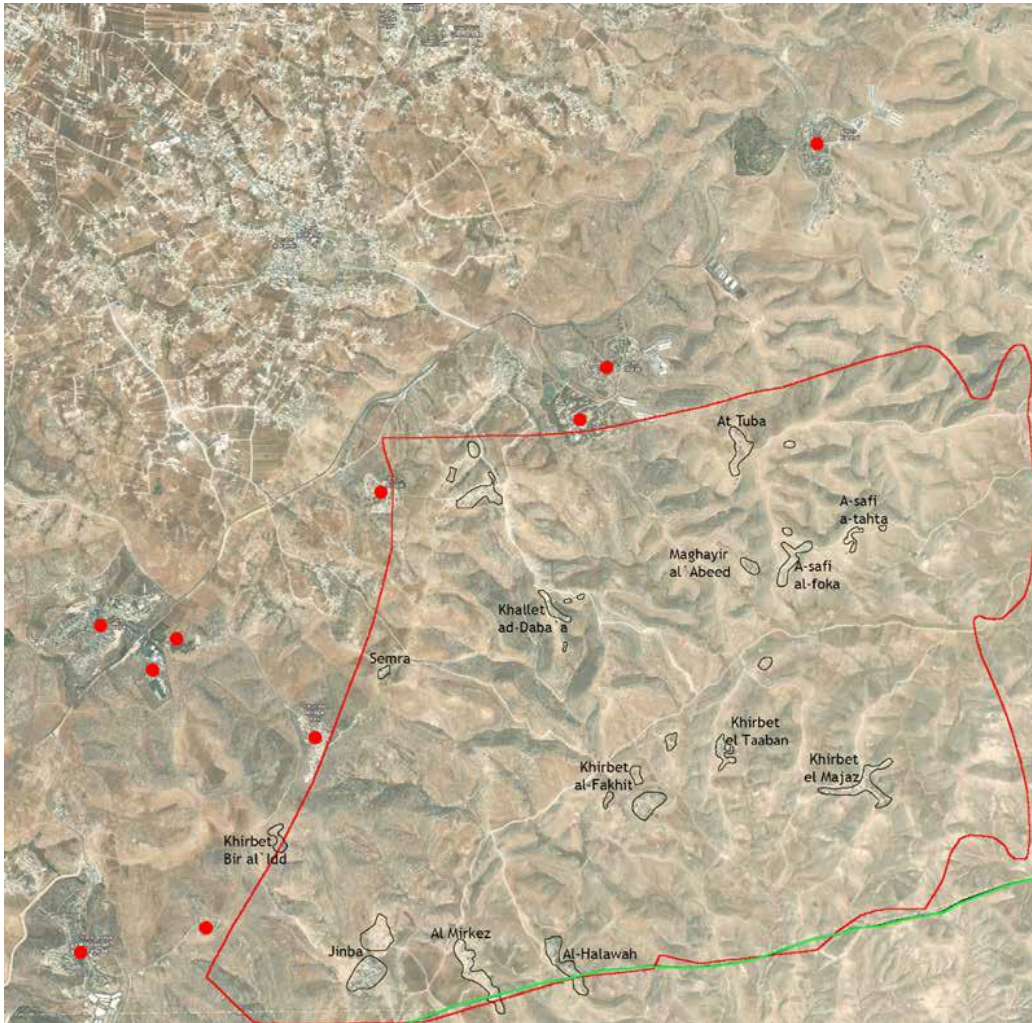
<sup>4</sup> Balls of yogurt and soft cheese.

capitalist ethos, where the protracted gestation period for specific trees and plants aligns incongruently with the expeditious demands of international trade.



**Figure 1 – Recently Demolished House in Masafer Yatta**

Following numerous petitions supported by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), the Israeli High Court of Justice issued an interim injunction preventing the state from evicting Masafer Yatta residents. However, in early May 2022, amidst my visa and fieldwork conclusion, the Court dismissed the petitions. The judges, selectively emphasizing unauthorized structures erected over the years, summarily rejected the petitions (OCHA 2022; McKernan and Kierszenbaum 2022). Notably, the Court asserted that the petitioners lacked “permanent resident” status in the area before its designation as a firing zone, providing legal grounds for immediate expulsion and community destruction (OCHA 2023). This notion of “permanent residents” is artificial and serves to marginalize Indigenous populations, mainly by devaluing the nomadic way of life.



**Figure 2 – Map of the Firing Zone**

In Figure 1, a recently demolished house in early May 2022 signals the immediate aftermath of a change in Israeli law regarding demolitions. The demolition notice, issued just 96 hours prior, allows families a brief window to seek a review before the High Court. Significantly, notifications are often dispatched on Thursdays, conveniently preceding the weekend closure of offices, enabling demolitions on Sundays (Field Note, May 3, 2022). This system is strategically designed to facilitate the erasure and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population in the area.

Masafer Yatta is currently undergoing a pronounced campaign of ethnic cleansing, evident from the map (Figure 2) portraying existing settlements and settler agricultural outposts. This region presents a lucrative opportunity for Zionist agricultural expansion, as envisioned by Sharon in 1979, emphasizing the creation of land reserves for Jewish settlements and agriculture (Pappé 2007, 124).



## 4. The Settler Society

The State of Israel is using all the tools at its disposal, including the military and the police, to confiscate land, demolish houses, and block roads daily, as well as informally encourage and support illegal Israeli settlements (also going against Israeli law and Israeli court rulings) and disregarding the settlers and their actions which include land theft, vandalism of farmland and flocks, and violent actions against the residents themselves. However, there are also more specific strategies and actions that the settlers implemented, and these will be explored here.

Following the court decision, residents of Al-Hallawa, a shepherd's village reliant on livestock and renowned for producing *jameed* – a significant dietary staple in Masafer Yatta – have reported an escalating frequency of settler attacks. Al-Hallawa specializes in the commercial production of high-quality *jameed*, contributing to the regional market. The village also engages in labor-intensive processes, utilizing sheep and goat milk to produce cream and butter over open flames. An account from Ibrahim, a farmer residing in Khibert Al-Hallawa, highlights the use of drones by settlers to monitor his activities, followed by deliberate grazing of their sheep in recently sown fields. This disruptive tactic is strategically employed to impede Palestinian farmers from cultivating viable crops, contributing to rendering life in Masafer Yatta untenable. Beyond the mimetic aspect, the objective is to supplant Palestinian society with settler counterparts, erasing Indigenous knowledge and disrupting established relationships with the ecosystem. Departing from the land carries profound implications for small-scale farmers, extending beyond the loss of homes to the relinquishment of a primary livelihood and the forfeiture of a traditional way of life, constituting an irretrievable loss of Indigenous knowledge and ecological connections. The consequence of land confiscation compels inhabitants to relocate to urban centers in area A, where they encounter a lack of community networks and income sources. This overt objective aligns with the intentions of the Israeli Civil Administration, which actively seeks to confine Palestinians to smaller, more manageable areas, mirroring the historical parallels of South Africa's Bantustans (Alissa, 2007). As pointed out by one of the people I interviewed:

*We are farmers; we work the land. What could we ever do in Yatta? Drink Coca-Cola and eat seeds of various kinds to die of a heart attack like one-fifth of the Palestinian population? We are farmers; we are nothing without our lands and sheep. (Palestinian Activist and Resident of MY1)*

The strategy of dividing the Palestinian population and agglomerating them into more easily controllable enclaves has been widely documented (Nasrallah 2014; Chiodeli 2016; Alijla 2020; Barakat 2018). However, clearing these areas under the pretext of the “Firing Zone” allows for the appropriation of more functional agricultural land that serves the Zionist movement to fulfill the dream of a nation of settlers capable of dominating any environment.

In this context, an additional facet emerges. The Civil Administration and the Israeli Court frequently invoke the ostensibly humanitarian pretexts of women's employability and safety as rationales for the displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral lands. A Palestinian activist residing in the village observes that the Israeli Court consistently employs the purported promotion of women's welfare for this purpose.:

*Women in the countryside are free. They graze the sheep and goats, occasionally work in the fields, and produce dairy products, zatar, and oil. They would be forced to buy everything in Yatta or areas A and B. Here men marry more than one woman, but each one has her own tent, her autonomy, and her children. What do they do if they are all moved all together to a house in Yatta where maybe seven have to stay in a room? Women don't work in the city, because you don't know each other in the city, and their husbands and fathers*

*don't let them leave the house. Here they live in the community; everyone trusts each other, and they can go out and even stay without their veil. I take my veil off when I am in Susiya, but I do not in Yatta. Moving these women to the city does not mean improving their labor conditions; it means putting them in jail. Do you know what I mean? (Palestinian Resident of MY2)*

Nevertheless, women within these communities, despite the continued prevalence of patriarchal structures shaping customary behaviors, are aware that the Israeli Civil Administration's alleged concern for their well-being does not genuinely aim at enhancing their living conditions. The prospect of relocating to the nearest Bantustan is not perceived as a substantial improvement in their circumstances.

An additional manifestation of land and resource appropriation, characterized by contamination, unfolded during my fieldwork – the deliberate attempts by settlers to compromise Palestinian flocks. While accompanying Palestinians residing in the Masafer Yatta region, I learned of an incident which took place the previous week. Settlers from an outpost near At-Tuba intentionally approached a Palestinian shepherd with the explicit aim of mixing their sheep. Subsequently, the settlers promptly called upon the military and stole some of the Palestinian shepherd's sheep, falsely declaring a higher number as their own. Beyond the act of theft, which occurs routinely, the sheep of the Palestinian flock began to manifest signs of illness. A veterinarian later confirmed the presence of a virus that had recently affected several settler-owned flocks. The settlers not only sought to steal the sheep but also aimed to disseminate the virus. In his writings, Veracini (2010) metaphorically characterizes settler societies as viruses that infect and obliterate host cells, leaving nothing in their wake. This analogy illuminates the settlers' environmental endeavors, employing various means to supplant the native population and the indigenous ecosystem. Following this incident, fellow activists and I were instructed to establish human cordons to prevent the contamination of Palestinian sheep and the mingling of flocks. These instances of elimination – whether in the fields before sowing, through diseases affecting the flocks, or under the guise of concerns for women's employability – collectively embody a settler colonial matrix of domination. This matrix seeks to obliterate the entire ecosystem of the Indigenous community through the direct agency of the settler society, leveraging settler institutions while also acting autonomously.

These examples partially address the question of strategies employed by settlers on the ground. However, as illustrated, these actions are intricately integrated into a broader oppression, accumulation, and exploitation system. The viable resistance, therefore, necessitates a site-specific approach involving an active commitment to staying in place and maintaining authentic relationships with the land that encompasses the community and the ecosystem.

## **5. Agriculture as the National Agenda**

When considering the Israeli colonial attempt to control, change, and exploit the Palestinian land through its agricultural policy, there are several key environmental issues to consider. These include population growth, lack of space, depletion of water resources, solid waste disposal and deterioration of water quality, land degradation, and the level of geographical discontinuity between Palestinian areas determined by the wall of segregation, checkpoints, settlements, and bypasses. Many of these issues intersect and influence each other in terms of their impact on sustainability (Isaac and Powell 2007, 146). Current population growth contributes to Palestine's chronic lack of space due to Israeli restrictions and annexation. In the West Bank, more than 50% of the land is closed or has been confiscated by Israel. Limited areas for urban sprawl, high land prices, and

the difficulty of obtaining a planning permit from the Israeli authorities, especially in areas designated for settlement activity, have forced many Palestinians to build on their land without planning permission. These houses are then subjected to demolition by the Israeli authority to control the Palestinian demographics (Isaac and Powell, 2007, 147).

The Israeli government notoriously favors the relocation and settlement of Israeli citizens in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (OPTs) with various tax benefits and concessions, not to mention that the cost of living in the settlements is notoriously lower (Mudde and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2020). In addition, however, some financial aid comes from the Israeli government to companies that produce agricultural products to be exported abroad. As described by the OECD website:

*Israel’s agriculture is unique amongst developed countries in that land and water resources are nearly all state-owned, and co-operative communities dominate that agricultural production. Since the late 1980s, agriculture in Israel has benefited from: a stable macroeconomic climate; policy reforms; high levels of investment in R&D; a developed education system; high-performing extension services; and accumulated farm management expertise. Israel is a world leader in agricultural technology, particularly in farming in arid conditions. Israeli agriculture thus relies on an “induced”, rather than “natural”, comparative advantage, one built on knowledge and technological progress.<sup>5</sup>*

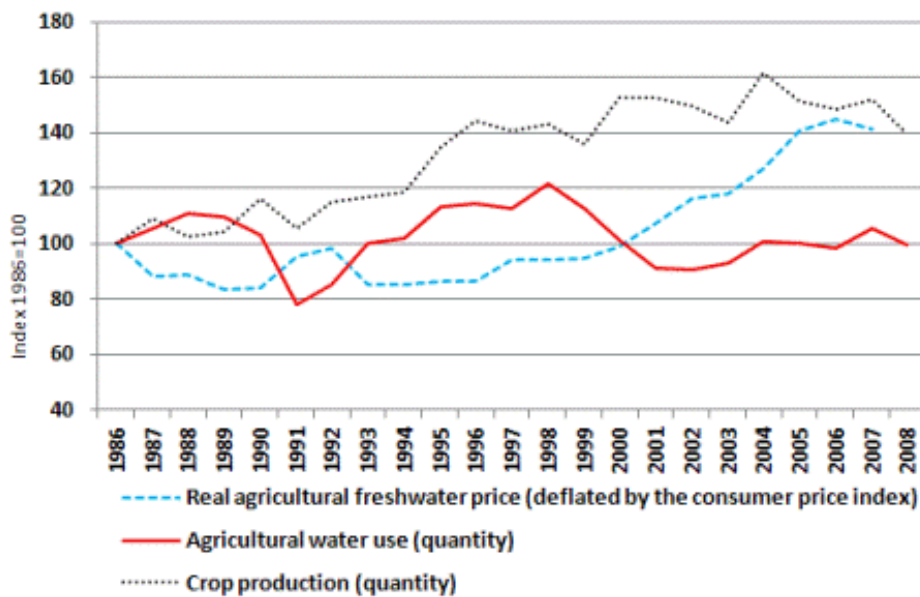


Figure 3 – OECD Review of Agricultural Policies: Israel

It is quite explanatory that, in conclusion, it is mentioned that Israeli agriculture relies on an “induced” rather than “natural” comparative advantage. Like any neoliberal state, Israel must maintain specific production standards; hence, it has to *induce* productivity. Moreover, the OECD report does not distinguish between agricultural goods that come from illegal settlements. In 2021, the Minister of Agriculture, Oded Forer, initiated a massive reform in agriculture, which had two main priorities: to lower the cost of production and to promote local agriculture. As part of the reform, the Ministry of Agriculture has provided a long list of subsidies that include reduced production costs, increased permits for foreign workers, and subsidies of hundreds of thousands of Shekels for advancing agricultural technology in 2022 and 2023. Customs duties

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/israel/oecdreviewofagriculturalpoliciesisrael.htm>

have already been reduced on a number of types of fruit and vegetables, and, in the coming years, taxes will be gradually reduced for the rest of the agricultural produce as well (Haaretz, 2021). Although it is not possible to establish a causal link between the increase in state support for agriculture and the direct expropriation of Palestinian land, it is undeniable that these agricultural endeavors need, first and foremost, water and most of the water comes from the West Bank<sup>6</sup> (Isaac and Powell, 2007), hence, in any case they will favor further exploitation of the Palestinian resources.

When mentioning state-owned water, the OECD report also does not consider the fact that most of the water used in and by the settlements comes from Palestinian sources. At the same time, as reported by Amnesty International (2022), the Palestinians cannot attach their pipes to the settlers' water supplies and are forced to constantly rely on cisterns, which then become an easy target for the settlers.

*Israel's control of water resources and water-related infrastructure in the OPT results in striking inequalities between Palestinians and Jewish settlers. The Israeli authorities restrict Palestinians' access to water in the West Bank through military orders, which prevent them from building any new water installation without first obtaining a permit from the Israeli army. They cannot drill new wells, install pumps, or deepen existing wells and are denied access to the Jordan River and freshwater springs. Israel even controls the collection of rainwater in most of the West Bank, and the Israeli army often destroys rainwater-harvesting cisterns owned by Palestinian communities. As a result of these policies, the average Palestinian consumption of water in the OPT is about 70 liters per person, with approximately 420,000 people in the West Bank consuming 50 liters a day, less than a quarter of the average Israeli consumption of about 300 liters per person. For Israeli settlers residing in Israeli settlements, the average daily water consumption is 369 liters, about six times the amount consumed by Palestinians. (Amnesty International 2022, 28).*

As observed in the Amnesty report, Palestinians not only encounter restrictions in utilizing their indigenous resources but also contend with systematic exploitation by Israel, surpassing the consumption levels of Palestinians in the West Bank. This situation is exacerbated in Gaza, where the destruction of water distribution systems and sewage infrastructure during military operations renders reconstruction unattainable due to the imposed siege impeding the entry of essential materials. Moreover, the pelvis aquifer supplying Gaza, concurrently exploited by Israel, proves inadequate for its burgeoning needs and, being situated below sea level, is susceptible to continuous infiltrations of wastewater and saline water. Consequently, an alarming 95% of the water in Gaza is deemed unfit for human consumption. The water resources in historical Palestine encompass both surface and groundwater. While intermittent streams and the Jordan River constitute surface waters, the latter is the sole perennial source. Groundwater, predominantly in the West Bank, comprises the Western, Eastern, and Northeastern Aquifers. The depletion of water resources is chiefly attributed to Israeli consumption, which surpasses 80% of Palestinian groundwater, while concurrently denying Palestinians access to the Jordan River. Israel allocates 93 million cubic meters annually for Palestinian agricultural use, resulting in a per capita domestic consumption of less than 30 cubic meters per year. In the West Bank, settlers consume Palestinian water at a rate exceeding 100 million cubic meters annually. On an annual per capita basis, Israelis consume over four times the amount of water compared to Palestinians (Isaac and Powell 2007, 149). Israel has illegally exercised sovereignty over water resources in the area since 1967, when it integrated, through a series of military ordinances still in force, the water system of the OPT into the Israeli system. The very location of illegal Israeli settlements in the OPT is strictly decided according to the control of water

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<sup>6</sup> This is self-evident if we considered that the only on ground river is the Jordan River located in the West Bank but controlled by Israel.

resources. The integration was completed in 1982 with the transfer of the water infrastructures of Palestinian property in the West Bank to the Israeli Mekorot Company for the symbolic price of one shekel (Euro 0.20).

Beyond the established legal framework, a pervasive aspect of daily life involves interactions that underscore the centrality of water-related concerns. During my fieldwork, I observed a provocative incident wherein settlers deliberately attacked and squandered water from one of Susiya's cisterns, as depicted in Figure 4.



**Figure 4 – Settlers Vandalizing a Palestinian Cistern**

During this instance, I encountered settler violence for the first time, specifically about water, as detailed in my field notes:

*We eat something quick because then we are urgently called back to Susiya. The settlers have been causing problems for the residents since this morning. My group is the first to arrive, and we are faced with four settler boys who are playing with the water from the only source accessible to the Palestinians who live in Susiya. They are just wasting their water. The most inaccessible resource in the desert. This source guarantees the survival of the inhabitants of Susiya, who sip it to get through the summer without having to buy more. Nasser and the other inhabitants of Susiya stay behind and keep us going. Assaf starts yelling at the settler kids to leave, saying that they cannot stay there. They do not want to take off; they know we will not raise our hands, so they continue to provoke. After a while, other activists arrive, and the kids move away from the source to head toward the Palestinian olive trees and start pulling off branches. [...] We have been there for an hour, and eventually, we manage to convince them to leave, but it is only for a very short time; they come back in greater numbers and start throwing stones. [...] The question that haunts me all afternoon is: why don't they stay at home playing video games or watching Netflix? It will be explained to me when we go back: on Shabbat, Orthodox Jews have no electricity and cannot do anything. They are bored. Having nothing better to do, they might as well go and harass some Palestinians. (Fieldnote, 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2022)*

Primarily, in collaboration with fellow activists, we formed a human chain as an immediate response to safeguard the cistern. This form of activism called *protective presence*, is undertaken by international,

Palestinian, and Israeli activists in the region. Its objectives extend beyond safeguarding Palestinian residents, often targeted by settlers, to the protection of Palestinian resources and the environment. This section endeavors to illustrate the extent to which Israel relies on the exploitation of Palestinian resources to uphold its colonial narrative of transforming the desert and to adhere to capitalist standards that position it as a central actor rather than a peripheral one in the Western market. In instances where institutional mechanisms fall short, settlers take on the role of attacking Palestinian ecology and vandalizing the most vital sources of Palestinian life. In response, Indigenous populations actively defend their resources through solidarity actions and collective efforts to protect the entire ecosystem.

## 6. Agriculture as an International Objective

As already underlined by Clarno (2017), there are clear connections between the neoliberalization of racial capitalism and the (de)colonization of settler colonial regimes in South Africa and Palestine/Israel. Until the 1980s, South Africa and Israel were settler colonial states managing racial Fordist economies defined by state support for industrial and *agricultural* production, racialized welfare states, and split labor markets (Clarno 2017, 13). Securitization, surveillance, and counterinsurgency strategies have been integral aspects of racial capitalism, colonialism, and empire for centuries. The massive expansion of state security expenditures has come during an era of aggressive cuts in government spending. Clarno (2017) focuses mainly on the security element of the neoliberal Apartheid, demonstrating how this international technological development also favors global control systems. In this paper, however, the attempt is to illustrate how the expropriation and cultivation of the land and the Israeli agricultural policy aspire to integrate the Zionist project into the world market. This also seeks to sever the Indigenous relations with the land in a multi-scalar process: at the level of settler society, at the nation-state level, and the level of the international market.

The deployment of advanced technologies extends even into settler society, prompting an examination of the phenomenon termed circular settlement colonialism. In contrast to Wolfe's conceptualization, I contend that settler colonialism is better understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed structure. This perspective emphasizes the reciprocal nature of settler colonialism, acknowledging its operation through distinct and discernible structures while simultaneously shaping and being shaped by responsive actions. Reaction takes the form of Indigenous resistance, as illustrated in the article's last section. Ghantous and Joronen (2022) have demonstrated how settler organizations such as Ragavim constantly develop new techniques to speed up the pace of the elimination of native Palestinians. They define these settler-state dynamics as operating to accelerate the prevalent pace of settler-colonial elimination as *dromoelimination* (Ghantous and Joronen 2022, 394). Similarly, this was corroborated by my experience: I witnessed the following during an action accompanying the shepherds of the village of al-Fakhi in Masafer Yatta to their crops.

*Together with a group of Israeli and international activists, we accompany the residents of Kiber Bir al-Eid to their lands to graze their flocks. This village is particularly targeted by settlers who chase and control Palestinians with drones to patrol the area. We do not chat much today as we must keep our ears open for drone noise. At some point, we hear it. Above our heads, at about thirty meters, are two drones coming from the nearby Israeli shepherding outpost Havat Talia. After about ten minutes, two settlers on board as many quads join us and order the Palestinians to leave those lands, claiming they belong to them. (Fieldnote, 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2022)*

A confrontation unfolds between the settlers and the activists at this point, who effectively mitigate tensions and persuade the settlers to withdraw. This field note reiterates the foundational concern: the colonization and expropriation of Masafer Yatta, a distinctive region where Palestinian Indigenous communities persist in inhabiting the land and preserving ancestral ties. Noteworthy are two seemingly incongruent elements: drones and quads. While these technologies are deployed on the ground to assert control over the lives of Palestinian individuals and their environment, they stem from decades of Israeli investment in the sector of technology and innovation.

The Israeli polity greatly prizes and supports its agricultural sector. On the Israeli government's website<sup>7</sup>, it appears that agricultural production is one of the main sectors of the Israeli economy, preceded only by high-tech and the military apparatus. Interestingly, many development and agricultural support projects aim precisely at supporting plans in areas where there are only settlements that, as we know, are illegal under international law (Erakat 2019). A financial support program issued by the Israeli government in November 2022 aims to finance agricultural projects in South Judea and Samaria, Jerusalem, Judean Foothills, Hasharon, and Central North. Illegal settlements proliferate in these areas. The fact that this is never mentioned should not be surprising. By reading the whole project, it appears that it aims to support and sell the export of fresh agricultural products to new markets for 2023 - 2025. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development promotes the possibility of applying for sales promotion support to export fresh agricultural products. The two primary goals mentioned at the beginning of the formal document are: 1) expanding and developing marketing destinations - new markets and unique niches within the markets; 2) special encouragement for the development of exports of branches (products) / new markets<sup>8</sup>.

In the text in Hebrew analyzed and issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in February 2020, the obligation to state whether the products come from the OPTs is never mentioned. Hence, three conclusions already pointed out by NGOs and Human Rights groups can be re-stated: 1) the economy and production of the illegal colonies within the OPTs are completely integrated at the national level; 2) the Israeli market is a constituent part of the world economy; 3) there is often no way to demonstrate that the products exported by Israel do not come from illegal settlements. Therefore, the illegal settlements are fully integrated into the international market, as exemplified by the following field note passage.

*Mariam invites me to dinner at her place in Ramallah. I arrive well in advance and take the opportunity to visit the Ramallah suk. I have many spices, scarves, and other Palestinian products that I intend to bring to Italy. I ask her if she needs anything for dinner, and she tells me to buy bread. I also get some strawberries and ensure they are not from the settlements. However, I got attracted by watermelons, and the seller noticed this and started a rant about the quality of Jericho's watermelons. Without thinking too much, I take one for dinner. Once at home, Mariam cuts the watermelon, and we notice the small sticker that indicates its origin in Hebrew. Jericho watermelons come from a settlement just outside of Jericho. (Fieldnote, 12<sup>th</sup> of May 2022)*

## 7. The Palestinian Indigenous Resistance

*Sumud*, meaning “steadfastness” or “steadfast perseverance” in Arabic, is a common term used to describe Palestinian nonviolent everyday resistance against Israel's colonial attempts. The term entered political

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/publications/?limit=10&keywords=agriculture>

<sup>8</sup> From Hebrew, and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; The Agricultural Settlement Law February 2020

discourse as a national symbol during the 1960s. However, the collective Palestinian consciousness of struggle for staying on Palestinian land is part of a longer historical development of resistance to oppression and dispossession. The concept of *sumud* has acquired several meanings and applications at various junctures of the Palestinian struggle against ethnic cleansing. Rather than having a fixed definition, *sumud* is a continuum of goals and practices of resistance responsive to changes in the dialectic of oppression and resistance. It covers a wide range of cultural, ideological, and political practices and values. Potential areas of *sumud* are manifested in concrete activities such as building and rebuilding houses despite the risk of demolition, investing in education, investing in economic projects in Palestine to strengthen self-sufficiency, ensuring social responsibility of companies, arranging or partaking in Palestinian cultural activities, and organizing activist campaigns. *Sumud* thus spans covert, unrecognized, and routine-based practices in everyday life to the outright articulation of defiance in events such as demonstrations. A Palestinian activist described this type of resistance with obvious and convincing words:

*In Masafer Yatta, we are living as farmers, shepherds. We gain our income from milk products and farming the land. If we were employees, we would not stay there; we would move to areas A or B. However, being a farmer means being in the field. [...] When it comes to the people who feel the threat to the land, the olive trees, the crops, the sheep, the livestock, everything becomes clear: this is not this abstract occupation. Some of us had the choice to be in Yatta, a bigger town, where some have houses, but we prefer to live in caves instead of living in houses. We are doing our daily lives, so people's everyday actions are very important because the nature of this is embedded resistance. We are the community. We want to do this. We care about the protection of our land, which is like many farmers all over the world. (Palestinian Activist and Resident of MY3)*

While the discourse surrounding *sumud* initially emerged within the context of the liberation national movement, it can be aptly characterized as a non-violent Indigenous practice. An integral aspect of this *sumud* involves steadfastly remaining on one's ancestral land, even in the face of formidable challenges. Consequently, in conjunction with the *sumud* strategy, activists in the remote region of Masafer Yatta, situated in one of the more secluded areas of Palestine, adopt a form of eco-resistance. This manifestation of activism primarily seeks to allow Palestinians to remain in their current locations. Unlike traditional *sumud*, this variant transcends the national framework, encompassing the protection of the entire ecosystem imperiled by colonial erosion and substitution by the emerging settler society. It assumes the guise of safeguarding and fortifying the entire environment, including its ecology, way of life, production, and self-sustenance. Through the words of a Palestinian resident:

*We are women. As a woman, I am standing in my land, in my community. This is my contact with my land, stronger than the occupation, stronger than everything everywhere. They have forbidden us to use the water and the electricity. But the line of the water and electricity is just 20 meters from our home. It is the same the settlement is using. We cannot use all these things, and at the same time, they forbid us to use them. They come here and say we cannot stay here because there are no services, no water, no electricity. They **make** the reason, and they **use** the reason. But we are staying in our land. Without water, without anything. We are staying in our land. (Palestinian Activist and Resident MY4)*

One of the tangible manifestations of this eco-resistance involves the deliberate planting and nurturing of new olive and almond trees. Olive trees (Figure 5) do not produce olives suitable for oil production for the first 7 or 9 years. Yet, olive trees can have a very long life. It is no coincidence that one of the provocations most frequently implemented by the settlers in this attempt to eradicate the Palestinians' ancestral bond with the land



is precisely that of uprooting the olive trees<sup>9</sup> (Salih and Corry 2022). The roots of the olive trees do not dig deep in the ground, but they spread horizontally, making these trees a concrete example of resistance and more challenging to uproot. Similarly, growing almonds is a long-term commitment. Almond trees (Figure 6) are generally productive for 25 years and produce their first crop three years after planting. Indigenous peoples who know they have a right to experience the land, given the presence of an ancestral relationship with the motherland, are not afraid of the menace of time. They do not follow the dictates of the market. However, the rules of the natural succession of the seasons and this way, these communities perform an eco-resistance embedded in traditional and Indigenous ways of living the land and their relationship with it.



**Figure 5 – New Olive Tree Planted in Al-Majaz to revitalize an area brutalized by the settlers living on the settlement on the top right side of the picture.**

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to experience several different types of activities carried out by the communities in the area. Through ethnographic participant observation, followed by a daily annotation of these experiences, I could report most of those. Here, for example, is an exchange with farmers who live near a settlement.

*The activists with whom I conduct my research take me to the first village of the day: Imneizil. Here, we are supposed to plant some new olive trees. It is tiring, but not many are left. Ahmed had started before we arrived this morning. In the distance, on the border with Israel, he shows us a checkpoint and the settlement from which they have come to uproot the olive trees his family had grown since before he was born. The settlement is that of Beit Yatir. In Imneizil, they have also planted almond and fig trees in addition to the olive trees. An olive tree takes five years before giving the first olives. Planting trees that need all this time to grow is truly an act of courage, faith, and hope for the future and a clear example of Sumud: this is the Palestinian land, and Palestinians are going to stay there for as long as it takes an olive tree to grow and become strong. (Fieldnote, 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2022)*

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<sup>9</sup> As of 2004, up to 45,000 fruit trees were uprooted for the segregation wall alone (Isaac and Powell 2007, 151).

Settlers striving to colonize the area mainly target the trees, the animals, and the land, and this is not by chance. This is a way to uproot and erase not only the Palestinian Indigenous presence in the land but also Palestinian relation with the land, which is what defines Indigenous identity (Pinson, 2020). Again, the capacity to resist these attacks through an active *sumud* that constantly reiterates and reaffirms the Palestinian presence on the land makes it a type of eco-resistance that continuously passes through the land, the plants, the animals, and the whole ecosystem. Indigenous eco-resistance against settler colonialism is instrumental in defining settler colonialism as a dynamic process rather than a fixed structure. This dynamic nature stems from the perpetual need for settler colonialism to reinvent itself and devise novel strategies on different levels of action to obliterate Indigenous communities. How a settler population establishes itself can manifest in diverse forms, yet it invariably operates through the structures elucidated in the existing literature. Nevertheless, acknowledging this does not negate indigenous identity, particularly in the context of resistance. It is in relation to Indigenous resistance that colonial structures undergo transformations and seek to extend their control.



**Figure 6 – Checkpoint on the southern border behind some Palestinian almond trees**

## **8. Conclusions**

Diverging from prior investigations, this article concentrates on a region within historical Palestine that has been notably understudied compared to other case studies: Masafer Yatta. By delineating the types of control exerted by Israel in this area, the main aim was to scrutinize the concept of settler colonialism and engender a

dialogue with that of Indigenous resistance. Through this exploration, we propose an interpretation that articulates how the intersection of these two paradigms allows for a conceptualization of the phenomenon as a process rather than a fixed structure. Within this dynamic process, the resident populations enact forms of resistance that encompass the entire ecosystem, thereby influencing, in a relational manner, the practices implemented by the state and the settler society.

In addition, the article offers a reading of settler Zionist colonial expropriation and exploitation of Historical Palestine from a multi-scale perspective that relates three levels of analysis. First, the paper was concerned with evaluating through an ethnographic field study the techniques that settlers implement to expropriate, oppress, and take advantage of the Indigenous population that inhabits the area of Masafer Yatta. Settlers on the ground are an integral part of the Israeli government's agricultural policy that exploits natural resources to survive. In turn, most of the new incentives given to the agricultural sector aim to increase the Israeli export market competitiveness internationally.

Small-scale peasant agriculture is not only a source of livelihood and income creation, but it is also a form of resistance to a system of production and exchange that undermines people's identities and neglects their food sovereignty in order to secure political and economic dominance over people and natural resources. For some time, farmers' movements worldwide have been fighting to promote a new production and consumption model inspired by agroecology principles, enhancing local productions, favoring a different approach to food, claims access to the land, and fair resource utilization. Increasingly, even in Palestine, small farmers, who are constantly facing land expropriations, forced expulsions, denial of water rights, and attacks by occupation forces and settlers, are undertaking initiatives that promote food sovereignty and local biodiversity based on agroecology and the social and solidarity economy. For Palestinian farmers, agriculture is a living example of the intimate connection with the land that is an integral component of Palestinian identity and culture. In Palestine, farmers' struggles for food sovereignty are integral to the resistance to the colonization and occupation of their land by the Israeli apartheid regime; this way, it is possible to frame it in terms of eco-resistance.

Ultimately, this contribution illustrates how the adoption of indigenous and environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, as opposed to the neoliberal approaches to appropriation and production embraced by the settler community, poses a challenge to the Israeli regime. In its persistent pursuit of expansion, the regime resorts to various tactics and pretexts to seize Palestinian lands for distribution among its settlers. Masafer Yatta's case is the latest instance in a protracted series of injustices and expropriations. However, the expulsion of its communities signifies not only a crime against humanity and a blatant violation of human rights and international law but also the ultimate obliteration of an Indigenous way of life and subsistence.

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