

Digging Holes and Planting Trees

"The construction of the wall being built by Israel, the occupying Power, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, and its associated régime, are contrary to international law... Israel is under an obligation to terminate its breaches of international law [and] to make reparation for all damage caused by the construction of the wall."

(Advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, 2004)



Abdul Latif is planting olive trees today. He is planting olive trees next to a road on the crest of a hill on the south-western edge of Jayyous. There used to be a fence here, next to the road, and before the fence was here there were olive trees. There were olive trees where this road is too, for it used to be the military road running alongside the fence. The fence was electric, surrounded by curls of razor wire, but only the concrete foundation of the barrier remains here now. And the road.

The view is expansive – on a clear day you can see the sea on the far edge of Tel Aviv, and between here and there are great rolling hills of stepped olive groves and scattered Palestinian villages on hilltops and in valleys, as well as the regional town of Qalqilyia. The villages gather together flat roofed dwellings with black water tanks perched on top, and rising from the middle of each cluster is the tower of the Mosque, lit by night with near-neon green lights at the very top. Dry stone walls, rising between ankle and knee height, have been laid by farmers to mark boundaries of land

ownership. Rocky paths criss-cross the landscape, and where fertile land has been intensely worked, there are great greenhouses cradled in the valleys, packed full of tomatoes. And visible also are the rich, deep greens of Clementine and Avocado leaves beside the silver-green-white of the young olive leaves, the silver-green of the older olive leaves.

There are Israeli settlements in this view as well; Mediterranean style housing complexes with red, sloping roofs. There are no water tanks on these roofs (these settlements have more advanced sewage systems than the Palestinian villages surrounding them) and lush, tropical gardens are visible, even from afar.

There seem to be many barriers breaking this view, not the farmer's walls, but much larger barriers. In reality, it is just one great snake (so the villagers call it). It is the separation barrier. It curls around Jayyous, separating the village from the farm land of its occupants. From here, you can see the barrier reach far beyond Jayyous as well, circling around Qalqilyia and isolating many villages in the surrounding areas. It is quarry like, cut unnaturally into the hillside, with two electrified metal fences on either side of a military road with sandy margins on both sides, stark against the greens and greys of the surrounding landscape. It does not follow the contours of the land, and at one point the barrier curls round in such a steep curve that only a thin corridor of land, meters wide, remains accessible.

Here, at the south-western edge of Jayyous, part of the barrier has been taken down. Or rather it has been moved. Re-routed. This was achieved by a combination of mass nonviolent demonstrations and legal battles, and it is here, where Abdul Latif is planting his trees, that these demonstrations took place. It is a victory of sorts, that he can plant here. A sliver of land was returned to the farmers when the route of the barrier was changed, but many more olive trees were pulled down to build the new barrier, slightly further back. Most of the farmer's land still remains on the other side of the fence, and the same problems exist now, with the new barrier, that existed previously with the old barrier.

Abdul Latif hired a digger yesterday to scoop out a hole for each tree. He has fifty trees to plant, and he stood and directed the driver as he worked, often standing too close in his excitement, and having to jump back as the digger's hand came down. He is 75 years old, but his whole face lights up with the joy of a small boy as the digger scoops out the rocky sand. This is his resistance, but it is also his life's work. He has a deep connection to this land, a connection that is visible as we watch him work (he will not allow us to help – I think he just wants to do it all himself, with his own hands.) So instead, he invites us to drink tea with him. We sit down next to his young trees, newly planted, and from where we sit we can see his older, darker and wiser trees, fifty years and more.

Before long, four soldiers approach through the olive groves towards the side of the road. They wear dark green, slightly baggy uniforms with helmets and flat jackets, and they hold automatic weapons in their hands. They walk in a line, follow the leader style. Abdul Latif looks calm, raising his eyebrows and curling up the corners of his mouth as they approach. The four young men do not speak to him, but look curiously around at his day's work. We are all wondering what the soldiers might do, despite the knowledge that Abdul Latif has been planting trees on his own land.



"What are you doing?" We ask. "Just out for a walk" the soldier replies, "it is very beautiful here." We agree, pointing out that it was more beautiful before the barrier was built. They are not allowed to answer us, these young men, and so we steer the conversation back to more general questions. "Why are you walking here in particular?" We ask one of the soldiers. "Because we can." he says, and, seconds later, he regrets having verbalised this notion, laughs, and says "no, I'm only joking." After some time, the soldiers walk away, past the newly planted trees and across the road. As the soldiers walk away, Abdul Latif's face

betrays the pain that he feels as the soldiers walk so close to his fragile new trees. The memory of watching his olive trees torn down under the protection of other young soldiers remains fresh. These soldiers do not follow the path once they have crossed the road, but walk over the dry stone walls and straight across the older olive groves. He calls to them, gesturing, his eyes pleading that they follow the path. They turn to see what he is saying, but they ignore him and carry on walking across the land. Abdul Latif stands up, picks up his spade, and goes back to planting his olive trees. This land, where the fence was, where the road is, used to be an olive grove. And if Abdul Latif has anything to do with it, it will be an olive grove again.