

Land dispossession and its impact on agriculture sector and food sovereignty in Palestine: a new perspective on Land Day

Inès Abdel Razek-Faoder and Muna Dajani

On 30 March 1976, 37 years ago, in response to the Israeli government's announcement of a plan to expropriate thousands of dunams¹ of land for "security and settlement purposes" on the lands of Galilee villages of Sakhnin and Arraba, Dair Hanna, Arab Alsawaed and other areas thousands of people took the street to protest, calling for a general strike as a peaceful mean to resisting colonization and government plans of judaization of the Galilee. Six Palestinians in Israel were killed. A month later the Koenig² Memorandum was leaked to the press recommending, for "national interest", "the possibility of diluting existing Arab population concentrations". Land Day has been since then commemorated in all Palestine as a day of steadfastness and resistance. It became a symbol of the refusal of the Palestinians to leave their homeland, and to reject any form of ethnic cleansing and pressures for displacement. It is a day of attachment to freedom, on both sides of the Green Line and in all corners of the world.

On this occasion, 37 years later, there is a necessity to highlight the consequences of this systematic illegal dispossession and control over the land and its natural resources on farming and agriculture.

Farming has been fundamental in Palestinian identity and history, deeply rooted in the culture of land and of the struggle for freedom since the beginning of the 20th century. Predominantly an agricultural community, Palestine has been transformed from depending on its systems of self-sufficiency farming to the industrial chemical agriculture of today, all this under a brutal occupation depriving farmers of their land and water resources. After decades of Israeli occupation, it is evident that farming, in its organic form, has been weakened dramatically, therefore creating a more fragile and unstable agricultural system which increases the isolation between the farmer and the land.

This paper will explore the way forward, in order for all Palestinians to have full sovereignty over the land which will bring them one of the most vital rights: food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is a concept coined by Via Campesina³, an international movement connecting peasant organizations, advocating sustainable agriculture of small-scale farmers, indigenous people and rural women. In the context of Palestine, food sovereignty echoes a fundamental right; the permanent sovereignty of peoples over their natural resources and the right to produce food on one's own territory. Attachment

1 1 dunam = 1 000m²

2 from Yisrael Koenig, then Commissioner of the Northern District of Israel at the Ministry of Interior

3 Via Campesina Official Website, <http://viacampesina.org/en/>, accessed 30/03/2013

to the land and its value is not only about nationalism, nostalgia or a historical narrative. Sovereignty and access to the lands determines the entitlement to enjoy social, economic and political freedom. “The struggle for equitable access to entitlements is a struggle against exclusion for full rights of citizenship.”⁴ Having food security must entail the essential components of local economy, food culture and democracy.⁵

From abundance to scarcity: systematic dispossession of people from the land

Since 1967, Israel has used a complex legal and bureaucratic mechanism to take control of more than 50 per cent of the land in the West Bank. This situation is intricately linked to the illegal construction of settlements and the creation of reserves of land for the future expansion of the settlements. Since 1967, Israel has established about 150 settlements (residential and others) in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; in addition to some 100 “outposts” erected by settlers without official authorization. In 2011, the settler population was estimated at over 520,000. The fenced or patrolled areas of settlements cover 3 per cent of the West Bank; in total 43 per cent of the West Bank is allocated to settlement local and regional councils⁶. The mechanism resulted in the declaration, mostly between 1979-1992, of 913,000 dunams as state land, which comprise 16 per cent of the West Bank.⁷ Land has also been expropriated for the construction of the Illegal Wall⁸ and 10 per cent of the West Bank was trapped in the “seam zone” between the Wall and the 1967 borders, often cutting farmers from their lands. 70 per cent of the Area C (60 per cent of the West Bank is considered area C) is included within the boundaries of the regional councils of Israeli settlements, and therefore off-limits for Palestinian use and development. In East Jerusalem, Palestinian residents are allowed to build on just 13% of the eastern part of the city with limited and very expensive and almost impossible permit system. This is carried out as part of a systematic plan of judaization of historic Palestine through annexation of Palestinian land and resources and confinement of the Palestinian population to small enclaves. This plan will ensure the judaization of 85 of the total area of historic Palestine, leaving a mere 15% of disconnected pockets under Palestinian rule.⁹ Most recently, Israel has unilaterally expropriated 140,000 dunams of land of the northern Dead Sea, reclaiming

4 Rami Zurayk, Anne Gough, Ahmad Sourani, Mariam Al jaajaa (2012) Food security challenges and innovation: the case of Gaza, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs_high_level_forum/documents/FS_Challenges_Innovation_-_Gaza_Arab_Group.pdf, accessed 30/03/2013

5 *Ibid.*

6 UN OCHA (2013) Area C of the West Bank: key humanitarian concerns

7 B'Tselem (2011) Land Expropriation and Taking Control of the Land, http://www.btselem.org/settlements/taking_control, last accessed 30/03/2013

8 According to International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion of 9 July 2009, paragraph 153, Israel must reconstitute land and properties as well as indemnify physical persons affected by the construction of the illegal wall. <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/131/1671.pdf>, last accessed, 31/03/2013

the land as state land and refuting Palestinian demand of sovereignty and ownership of this part of the land as part of the West Bank.

The Israeli policy of land confiscation in the West Bank for “security” purposes or settlement construction, restrictions of land and fishing area in Gaza and control over water resources has led to a dramatic decline in the availability of arable land for farming. Therefore, a shift from agriculture based livelihoods to services and labour force is evident today, thus generating high cost and losses for the Palestinian economy and shifting sources of income and livelihood to other sectors, mainly services.

Palestinian farming today is suffocating under occupation with its two basic resources illegally controlled: land and water. Water deprivation has been systematically used as a tool to force farmers to abandon their lands and look for alternative income generating activities in nearby towns and villages. Over 70 per cent of communities located entirely or mostly in Area C are not connected to the water network and rely on tanker water at very high costs. The Jordan Valley (87 per cent of which is Area C), the most severely targeted by land confiscation and water deprivation, has witnessed the decrease through displacement of its 320,000 residents in 1967 to a mere 52,000 in 2009. While only 37 per cent of the surface catchment area of the Jordan River Basin is located in Israel, it exploits around 50 per cent of this shared water resources, and not a single Palestinian water well has been approved since 1967 in the most abundant aquifer, the Western Aquifer. All these factors have turned the Jordan Valley, the food basket of Palestine, into a harsh land to live in and farm, transforming the abundance and fertility of the land into a heavy burden whose weight is only felt by the residents of the valley. The inability of Palestinians to access agricultural land in Area C has resulted in estimated loss of \$480 million annually and around 110,000 jobs¹⁰, and the Palestinian economy could gain \$1 billion a year if only Palestinian agriculture was allowed on an additional 3.5 per cent of the Jordan Valley¹¹.

On the contrary, Israeli agricultural and industrial settlements in the Jordan Valley are flourishing. These settlements enjoy high level of subsidies from the Israeli government¹² and are freely exploiting land and water and enjoying free market exporting of their products around the world¹³ without any scrutiny or liability from the International community.

9 ICAHD (2012) The Judaization of Palestine: 2011 Displacement Trends by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions

10 World Bank (2009) West Bank and Gaza: Assessment of Restrictions on Palestinian Water Sector Development, Report No. 47657-GZ

11 (2012), Trading away Peace: How europe helps sustain illegal israeli settlements, http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/trading_away_peace_-_embargoed_copy_of_designed_report.pdf, last accessed 30/03/2013

12 among these benefits are grants of up to 25% of the investment for the establishment of agricultural enterprises and tax benefits on profits ranging from 25-30% and on investments – used especially by settlement farms in the Jordan valley that produce mainly for export to europe.
Ibid

In the Gaza Strip, the blockade and security measures taken by Israel has also been dramatic for local farmers and fishermen. Since the so-called unilateral withdrawal in 2005, as part of its illegal blockade over the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military has gradually expanded restrictions on access to farmland on the Gaza side of the 1949 Green Line, and to fishing areas along the Gaza Strip coast. The restricted land area is estimated to encompass 17 per cent of the total land mass of the Gaza Strip and 35 per cent of its arable land¹⁴. At sea, fishermen are now prevented from accessing some 85 per cent of the maritime areas they are entitled to access according to the Oslo Agreements, therefore hindering one of the most valuable food resources in Gaza. Agriculture used to function as an economic safety net for employment in Gaza. This is no longer the case. The total value of agricultural property lost since 2005 was estimated at \$275 million¹⁵

As for the Bedouin communities, who have a long pastoral tradition, they are often left out of the analyses on land restriction and its economic, environmental and social cost. Bedouins, 55 per cent of them living in area C are food insecure facing constant displacement threat. Inside Israel, the village of Al Araqib in the Naqab (Negev) desert has been demolished no less than 43 times in efforts to transfer the Bedouin population and weaken their social, cultural and political norms and rights as indigenous people on the land.¹⁶

Inadequacy of national and international response: competitiveness vs. food sovereignty

A pernicious corollary to Israeli occupation and dispossession is that the “state-building” effort has fed a system highly dependent on international aid that has not allowed breaking the Palestinian dependency on Israeli production.

The dispossession of land and control of natural resources have made the agriculture sector shrink from 15 per cent of GDP in 1995 to 6 per cent in 2012. Agricultural labour

13 More than 80% of dates from the Jordan valley settlements are grown for export.¹¹⁰ ; About 70% of grapes produced by the Jordan valley settlements are directed for export and make up approximately half of all grapes exported by Israel ; And According to Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, settlement exports to the EU amount to \$300 million per year
Ibid

14 OCHA (2010) Between the Fence And a Hard Face : The humanitarian impact of Israeli-imposed restrictions on access to land and sea in the Gaza Strip
http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_special_focus_2010_08_19_english.pdf, last accessed 30/03/2013

15 *Ibid*

16 Electronic Intifada (2012) Protests and strikes as Israel raids Bedouin villages, threatens to destroy homes, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/protests-and-strikes-israel-raids-bedouin-villages-threatens-destroy-homes/11792>, last accessed 30/03/2013

workforce is now 15 per cent of the total while still absorbing 39 per cent of informal workforce revealing the unleashed potential of the sector.

In order to boost the sector economically, under the occupation *status quo*, The Palestinian Reform and Development Plan has followed standards of international financing and developing institution promoting conventional economic reforms where development is seen through the prism of liberalized market standards and competitiveness. This have hindered any debate on the economic development model to be chosen by the Palestinian people, establishing a system where Palestinians have no control of their local assets but are encouraged to reach and widen access to international markets and where food security is understood as the ability of individuals and households to purchase food on the market rather than the ability to access resources of production¹⁷. The Agribusiness Development (AD) Program was established to promote the cultivation of higher added value crops and create post-harvest and marketing services to promote agricultural exports through, notably agro-business parks.

In addition, these investments have always been demised by the limited priority given to agriculture, both by international donors (less than 1 per cent of total expenditure in all sectors) and limited public investment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The amount allocated to the agriculture sector since the establishment of the PA has not exceeded 1 per cent of the total annual budget. It is worth underlining that between 2001 and 2005, 85 per cent of the PA agriculture budget went to the Agriculture Ministry's salaries¹⁸. NGOs have largely replaced the PA in this sector, but are also highly dependant on aid. In 2006, NGOs working on agriculture were 80 per cent dependent on international aid and NGOs working on water and environment dependant at 94 per cent.

Therefore for local consumption, Palestinian dependency over Israeli imports kept increasing while export of local production to foreign market has been entirely under the control of Israel. While in 2010, exports of fruits and vegetables to Israel accounted for \$2.9 million, imports reached \$72.2 million.¹⁹ Before the Second Intifada in 2000, the Israeli market was the biggest market for Palestinian agricultural production. Today, Israel is not only the leading importer of Palestinian agricultural products, but it also controls access to external markets (i.e. any export activity) through the various crossing points. At Al-Jalameh crossing-point (Northern West Bank), the average waiting time for

17 Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Jonsen. Food Sovereignty: Towards democracy in localized food systems. (ITDG Publishing, 2005), 21, cited by Rami Zurayk, Anne Gough, Ahmad Sourani, Mariam Al jaajaa, Food security challenges and innovation : the case of Gaza http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs_high_level_forum/documents/FS_Challenges_Innovation_-_Gaza_Arab_Group.pdf, last accessed 30/03/2013

18 Samer Abdelnour, Alaa Tartir and Rami Zurayk (2012) Farming Palestine for Freedom, Al Shabaka

19 Ma'an Community Development Centre, <http://www.maan-ctr.org/pdfs/FSReport/Israeli/content.pdf>, accessed to 30/03/2013

trucks to enter Israel can range between 2 to 4 hours depending on the timing, season, and some other efficiency factors; average waiting time for trucks to enter Palestine is about 20 minutes.²⁰

The way forward from local to global: a “glocal” approach

In light of all the above, Palestine today is facing many restrictions to its agricultural and farming sectors: From continuous confiscation of land, lack of control and access to more than 60 per cent of the West Bank, the whole Gaza Strip and its shore are under siege, and borders and crossing points for agricultural products are under a restricted control by Israel. The popular resistance trajectory must include demanding food sovereignty, economic and cultural development and preservation of what is fundamental to Palestinian history, heritage and culture. Food sovereignty and water rights must be dealt with as fundamental human rights demanded in the popular struggle movements to end the occupation and its expropriation of Palestinian land and destruction of livelihoods.

We believe that the solution must not only be state-based but rather « Glocal », according to the clever neologism viewing inseparable correlation between the global and the local levels.

At the global level, Palestinian leadership should advocate, as an integral part of its diplomatic strategy - especially after the recognition of Palestine as an observer State at the United Nations - for fundamental human rights related to access to land and natural resources, and the right to self-determination encompassing the right of nations for control over their own national resources²¹ and fostering empowerment and steadfastness of local communities and economy and for the Palestinian people as a whole.

With the vote of Resolution A/67/L.28 in November 2012, Palestine can use international law, International Court of Justice and tools offered by all United Nations Agencies to which it has now access. Palestine should fully ratify and use United Nations Conventions on human rights and environmental protection that Israel has ratified, and include articles on cooperation between neighbouring countries. This is the case of the Convention to Combat Desertification and the Convention on Biological Biodiversity. One of the recent examples of this international battle for defending local communities in maintaining their sovereignty over their land is the international case to safeguard endangered village of Battir, in southern Jerusalem. Battir is a Palestinian village, unique for its ancient stone terraces, springs and irrigation systems, which are today threatened by the project of the Israeli defence administration to expand the Separation Wall

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 1803, 14 December 1962

through its landscape. The PA has applied for Battir to become a World Heritage site under UNESCO (the vote will take place in June) seeking a globally recognized and respected protection²² for saving this endangered land.

On the other hand, locally, we have to shift from the rhetoric of “state and institution” building to a farming and local agricultural policy, connecting all national stakeholders towards a resistance economy.²³ This policy has to be developed as an integrated approach based on qualitative agriculture rather than quantitative: respecting natural ecosystems and favouring compatibility of locally grown crops; using natural fertilisers and limit water footprint therefore preserving soils from erosion and respecting seasonal cycle.

This will notably be possible by the promotion and replication of successful local experiences happening in all Palestine, all around the country and involving all stakeholders: the PA, youth, NGOs and agricultural unions.

One of the examples is PARC, Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee programmes, which has developed a programme called “from besieged farmers to besieged families” where instead of distributing imported food aid packages, it has been purchasing food from farmers and cooperatives at reasonable prices and distributing food baskets to the most food insecure families in Gaza.

This integrated and local approach is also the vision behind Sharaka, a volunteer-run association that is building a local food chain from producer to the consumer, without any international financial aid.

It is interesting to underline that the cultural and social value given to land and to the local dimension of development is not exclusive today to the Palestinian narrative and struggle for freedom but is also perfectly reflected in the emergence of similar social and economic movements in Europe and the United States which bring into light the limits of the globalization and agroindustry and defend the concept of food sovereignty, such as the Slow Food movement, the local associations of farmers selling directly to the consumers²⁴, the anti-waste social enterprises etc.

This demand for inclusive and sustainable consumption embodies a modern vision for sustainability and breaks the fatality of the *status quo* by revealing steadfast determination of the Palestinian people to peacefully resist in their land while preserving

22 Al Monitor (2012) PA seeks UNESCO protection for threatened village, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/unesco-battir-separation-barrier.html>, last accessed 30/03/2013

23 Samer Abdelnour, Alaa Tartir and Rami Zurayk (2012) Farming Palestine for Freedom

24 Official Website: *Annuaire National des Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne* <http://www.reseau-amap.org/amap.php>, last accessed 30/03/2013

healthy livelihoods. Palestine is not a humanitarian cause plagued by lack of resources and poverty, it is very much orchestrated and hand made by a belligerent occupation depriving its indigenous inhabitants from their rights to self-determination, access to and development of their natural resources.

The French philosopher Edgar Morin sees in the second face of the political ecology, "the positive necessity to change our lives, not only towards sobriety, but mainly towards quality and poetry of life"²⁵, echoing the famous verse of our greatest Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish, "on this earth is what's worth living". It is time for completing the political paradigm of the attachment to the land with the fundamental link between environment, natural resources, entitlements and sustainable agriculture as way for a resilient economy and freedom.

The commemoration of the Land Day should not be perceived as a tradition hankered in our past, in memory of dispossession and grief, but also as a way forward to regain our fundamental rights and build our future.

²⁵ Edgar Morin, « Changer le rapport de l'homme à la nature n'est qu'un début » in Le Monde, 12/06/2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2009/06/12/changer-le-rapport-de-l-homme-a-la-nature-n-est-qu-un-debut-par-edgar-morin_1206207_3232.html, last accessed 30/03/2013.