

# Trees: colonial and anti-colonial

*Trees have been planted in Palestine as an act of war and an act of resistance, as Eurig Scandrett reports.*

Ahmed plants olive saplings in the orchard he inherited from his father. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years, but he has to plant anew because so many of his ancestral trees have been destroyed by Israeli settlers, who are trying to chase Ahmed and his family off the land. Today, Ahmed's brother Yousef helps. Yousef normally works in the Israeli construction industry, the money he earns there making the long and humiliating checks by young Israeli conscripts at checkpoints worth tolerating. However, since October 2023, Israel has closed the checkpoints and Yousef now works on the land alongside Ahmed. Ahmed has worked the land since he was a boy, planting, tending and harvesting the olive trees and vines on his father's farm. All except for three years when he was arrested arbitrarily and detained without charge in an Israeli prison. During those three years, Ahmed's wife Fatima cared for the trees on top of her other work. If the trees had been abandoned, even for a few years, the settlers would have taken them, or the Israeli authorities would have confiscated the land as uncultivated. Caring for trees is an act of resistance to the constant threat of



the eradication of Palestinian people and way of life.

Ahmed and his family are fictitious names—indeed, to identify individuals publicly can put them in danger—but their situation is real and multiplied thousands of times in the Occupied West Bank. The Palestinian Land Research Center, an independent NGO based in Palestine, has calculated that since the 1967 occupation over two million olive trees have been destroyed or damaged by Israeli actions. Since the 2023 Israeli war against Gaza, many Palestinian men who previously worked in Israel have returned to the less lucrative but more sustainable work of cultivating their land. At the same time, settler reservists have become part of the military and the repression has intensified. During the olive harvest in 2024, more than 800 attacks against farmers by settlers and occupation army have been documented. In the face of this violence, Palestinian commitment to maintaining trees on their land is part of the resistance to Israeli colonisation: a nonviolent resistance that Palestinians call *sumud* (meaning steadfastness).

This resistance is supported through international solidarity. The saplings

being planted by these Palestinian farmers have been financed by Plant a Tree in Palestine [1], a project of the international Stop the JNF campaign, of which Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign is a founding member. More than 10,000 vines and olive trees have been planted in recent years, mostly by farmers in the southern West Bank areas around Bethlehem and Masafer Yatta. Raising funds for saplings and equipment is matched by international presence in the West Bank in the planting season and during the olive, vine leaf and grape harvests. Through the Faz3a project [2], Palestinian farmers are accompanied by international volunteers trained in nonviolence, to assist in the defence against settlers and soldiers. As I write, there are plans for a delegation for the olive harvest in autumn 2025. Of course, that could change at any time, depending on the situation in the region.

Olive trees are indigenous to the Mediterranean region, where they have been cultivated for centuries. Likewise, vines are indigenous, and many local cultivars have been developed. Palestinian coordinators of Plant a Tree in Palestine ensure that farmers are able to access the varieties appropriate to their local conditions and traditions.



Top: Boy and soldier.

Above: Sapling. All photos: Mohamad Zwahra.

### Green colonialism

Plant a Tree in Palestine originated in the international Stop the JNF campaign, an alliance of Palestine solidarity and Jewish anti-Zionist groups. The JNF (Jewish National Fund) was established in 1901 in England by the World Zionist Organisation for the purposes of obtaining land in Palestine for Jewish settlement. The JNF's deeds regard its property as held in trust for 'the Jewish People', a device through which land can only be occupied by or transferred to Jews, and any non-Jewish occupants can be evicted. After 1948, when 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their villages for the State of Israel to be established, the JNF became custodian of vacated Palestinian land. The JNF was subsequently established by statute as a para-statal arm of Israel, whilst maintaining a network of offices throughout the world.

Throughout its existence, the JNF has planted trees: as land barriers, commercial forests and recreational parks constructed over the ruins of Palestinian villages in order to erase their history and prevent the return of the displaced refugees. Tree planting has also served as propaganda, as Jewish communities throughout the world have memorialised loved ones or marked significant rites of passage such as bar mitzvas and weddings by planting trees in Palestine (and since 1948 in Israel), often unaware that they were being planted on land expropriated from Palestinians. This has also enabled the JNF to promote itself internationally as an environmental organisation. It regularly accompanies the Israeli government at UN climate summits and its international offices often register as environmental NGOs.

The JNF's tree planting and afforestation projects have been criticised even by Zionist environmentalists. Its favoured tree, the Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*), which the Zionists call the 'Jerusalem pine', is indigenous to sparse-canopy mountain tops in the Levant, but the JNF has planted it in monoculture forests in order to simulate the northern and central European landscapes where many of the leading Zionist pioneers originated—to

Harvesting.

'Judaise' the landscape. The founder of Zionism, Theodore Herzl, in his only visit to Palestine, expressed surprise at the lack of forest compared to his native Austria. Fast growing, non-indigenous eucalyptus species have also been used to drain swampy land and to colonise even desert land quickly, its demand for water being met through a system of reservoirs fed from redirected Jordan river water. Ecological considerations are not necessarily paramount to the JNF since the primary purpose of tree planting is ethnic cleansing: Jewish settlement and the expulsion of Palestinians.



JNF's use of tree planting for colonisation has been countered by the Plant a Tree in Palestine campaign, which uses tree planting as resistance to colonisation. Stop the JNF formed to challenge JNF wherever it is, in the State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as its offices throughout the world. JNF Scotland is registered as a charity with the Office of the Scottish Charities Register (OSCR) through its objective of environmental improvement in Israel. In the early years of OSCR, JNF Scotland reported that its primary activities were fundraising for a reservoir on Kibbutz Gazit in the Galilee. Kibbutz Gazit was established on land of the Palestinian village al-Tira, whose inhabitants were forcibly expelled in 1948 by the Haganah on the orders of Yosef Weitz, JNF's director of land and afforestation and convenor of the 'transfer committee' whose purpose was the eviction of Palestinians. As a Scottish charity JNF Scotland is benefiting from tax exemption whilst colluding in the

crime of ethnic cleansing. In 2023, the Canada Revenue Agency revoked JNF's tax exempt status, an action that is being pursued by activists in Scotland and elsewhere.

The Israeli war against Gaza is continuing, with over 55,000 Palestinians dead as of mid-June 2025 and a clear intention of the Israeli government to annex the Gaza strip and replace the Palestinian population with Jewish settlers—a continuation of the Zionist ethnic cleansing project. Eighty percent of the population of Gaza are already refugees, many from the villages

between Gaza and Jaffa whose land was taken by the JNF after 1948.

In the context of an active programme of settler colonisation and ethnic cleansing, planting trees can be used for colonisation or for resistance. While Palestinian farmers plant and cultivate trees for anti-colonial resistance, Stop the JNF will continue to support them in their *sumud* through Plant a Tree in Palestine.

### References

1. [tinyurl.com/Palestine-trees](https://tinyurl.com/Palestine-trees)
2. [defendpalestine.org](https://defendpalestine.org)

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