

*Sharif Omar is a farmers' leader in Jayyus, a small Palestinian village in the West Bank. Jayyus is not far from the green line – the border between Israel and the West Bank established in 1948. When the Israeli government began to build a concrete wall to separate Israel from land in the Occupied Territories that might eventually become a Palestinian state, they did not follow the green line. They routed it in such a way as to embrace the illegal Israeli settlements, and in the process hived off a good deal of Palestinian farmland. Jayyus is one of the villages that the wall has cut off from its people's farms.*

## Sharif Omar



It is impossible to say how long we have lived in Jayyus. The farms have been handed down for generations, and there are huge extended families. The farms next to my land belong to my cousins, and the land beyond that to more distant cousins. Jayyus is an old village. Archaeologists have found stones from Roman times and clay and glass pots from Roman or even Greek times. Some of my olive trees are thought to be more than 1,000 years old. So we feel that we've always been here. Now, coming forward into my lifetime, as you know, in 1947 UN Resolution 181 gave the Palestinians 51 per cent of historic Palestine, and the Jewish settlers 49 per cent. Palestinians refused this because they possessed 92 per cent of the land at that time and the settlers possessed only 8 per cent. There were 600,000 settlers and 2.5 million Palestinians. The Palestinians were deceived when the Arab armies, led by Glubb Pasha, ordered them to put down their guns, saying they would fight on their behalf. There wasn't really a battle, and the Israelis got 78 per cent of Palestine and left us 22 per cent. And now, if the Israelis achieve their plans with the wall, they will leave us approximately 13 per cent of Palestine, and it will not be in one place, it will be in five compartments. And Gaza will be separate, so I don't believe that we will have a state if we have this wall.

*What sort of farming have Palestinians been doing in this region over the centuries?*

Well, let me tell you about my land as an example. It's a paradise: I have more than 3,600 trees. Over 1,000 olive trees – I personally have planted 600 or 700, and I am planning another 600 – and fruit trees: pomegranate, avocado, mango, pears, figs, almonds, grapes, 12 kinds of citrus – oranges, lemons, grapefruit, clementine, mandarin, navel orange, Valencia orange and so on. Oh, and loquat. That is very tasty.

*Do you use chemicals, or is it organic?*

Of my six farms, one is organic. Our olives are organic, but I may have to stop that, because people unfortunately don't recognise what is organic and what is not; they want cheap fruit, and if you compare the size of organic fruit with those grown with fertilisers and chemicals, they are small. I can't get the same income. I know it's not healthy, but I need to earn money.

*When did the problems begin of getting access to your land? Was it with the building of the wall?*

They began uprooting olive trees in Jayyus in September 2002; you won't believe the story. One day a farmer was returning to the village, when he saw a piece of paper hanging on an olive branch. Out of curiosity, he went to look at it. And he found, in badly handwritten Arabic: "People of Jayyus. You must come here on Thursday. The military commander will be there. We will show you the planned route of the wall, so you can move anything that might be in the way", or words to that effect. As I was the farmers' representative, he brought this paper to me. I was shocked. What if no one had spotted this notice? Well, we had no choice really but to go there on Thursday and to meet the commander, and we followed him round. Everyone was astounded. We thought the wall would be 100–150 metres to the east of the green line. No one expected that it would intrude 6 kilometres into Jayyus's land! This is crazy. It is not a matter of security, as they claim in the media, that because of the wall suicide bombings go down. Even if that were the case (and I know that there are many other reasons why suicide bombings are going down), the same result would be achieved if it was built on the green line. This is no reason for coming 6 km into our land. In some places it is

Farida  
Akhtar

Benny  
Haerlin

Carlos  
Correa

David  
Quist

Johnson  
Kpere

Francisca  
Rodriguez

German  
Velez

Hope  
Shand



20 km. Are these 20 km for security? No. It is only to seize the land.

*And so now, to be able to farm your land, you have to pass through the wall?*

Yes, through the correct gate, with my permit. None of my three sons has been given a permit yet. One of them has a master's degree from Italy in agricultural engineering, and I need him. We've applied at least 20 times but so far we have failed. There are 118 farmers in Jayyus without permits.

*Out of how many?*


Well, not everyone is a farmer; but at the same time, you can't say that anyone is not a farmer. Jayyus has 550 families, of which about 300 depend completely on agriculture. Others may depend partly on agriculture: there's a teacher who teaches in the mornings; there are some who work as policemen with the Palestinian Authority for four days a week, and on the land for three, if they can. To have a permit to go through the gate, you must prove that you own land on the other side of the wall. The workers who used to work on my land can't now because they can't show that they own any land. So now my workers are farmers who have a little land, and this was a problem for me this season. This season was the richest olive harvest of my life. But the smaller farmers first gathered their own olives, and I waited until they had finished, and then some came to work with me. What's the result? They could sell their olive oil, and because I was the last farmer in Jayyus to finish harvesting, I sold only half of mine. I've still got more than 1,200 kg in my house.

*So you are still managing to get to the olive trees and make some olive oil?*

Yes, but I don't have help, and the system of permits creates all sorts of difficulties, and then it's difficult to sell the olive oil even when we can produce it. We are not allowed to export it to Jordan. We can export it to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, the Emirates, but in all these cases you need a friend or relative to sell it for you and send you the money. If I tell you who bought my olive oil you will be surprised. I have Israeli friends, anarchists, people who participate in our demonstrations. A lot of Israeli groups do it, refuseniks, women against house demolitions, Jews against the Occupation, and so on. They are too few so far to have any large influence on the wider Israeli community, but they are active. We need their help especially on the farms surrounded by settlements. The settlers are extremists: they stop Palestinians harvesting their olives, and sometimes they steal the crop. But when we have Israelis with us, showing solidarity

– they don't even have to work with us all day – the settlers see that other Israelis are there, watching the situation. Then the Palestinian farmers can work and we are grateful and have great respect for them. They buy a lot of our olive oil, and I hope they continue. The people who used to work for me can't any more.

*What about your fruit? Can you export that?*

No. And we are not allowed to sell it in Israel; we can't even sell it in Nablus. Nablus is the largest city in the West Bank and the closest to the village. Because of the system of the gates, the merchants who used to come to buy our produce stopped, because their permits allow them to pass through their gate; they can't use two gates, so they can't come through our gate. If we send a truck to Nablus, it has to pass the checkpoint, where the soldiers make the driver unload all the boxes. We could be talking about five tons. It takes two or three hours, and then the soldiers have to check the boxes, and two or three more hours to reload. The day is lost. No trader can wait later than midday, because he wants to sell. The next day he can only sell at half price, because the goods are not fresh. So we don't do that. Where do we sell? Villages are small markets, and unfortunately the villagers don't pay a lot of money, so we sell cheaply. You know two of my sons and one of my daughters live in Nablus. They eat Israeli produce, not my produce, because the Israeli trucks, which are easily recognised by their number plates, pass the checkpoints without stopping. When I ask my daughter or my sons about cucumbers or tomatoes, for example, they tell me that the price of one kilo there is the nett price of one box here, which is fifteen kilos. It's economic war. They want to persuade us that our land is useless. Just south of Jayyus, they are planning to build an industrial area. The message is clear: those who can't work on their farms can work there. Now, if a farmer neglects his land for three years, the Israelis will take it, according to an old Ottoman law that the Israelis use: if you don't plant your land three years continuously, it becomes state land. This is actually Islamic law. According to Islam, ten per cent of your income must be given to the poor. In the last days of the Turkish occupation, the government wanted that ten per cent, and they issued this law to oblige farmers to plant yearly. The farmer who didn't plant lost his land to the state. The Israelis kept a version of this law, so Israel is now an Islamic state. They take two aerial photographs each year, the first in May and the second in November, and if it is after harvest in May, or before ploughing in November, how can you prove that it was planted? Many, many farmers have lost their land this way. 

**I**brahim Ouedraogo

**J**ack Kloppenburg

**K**Joseph Eve



**L**axmanma 29

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