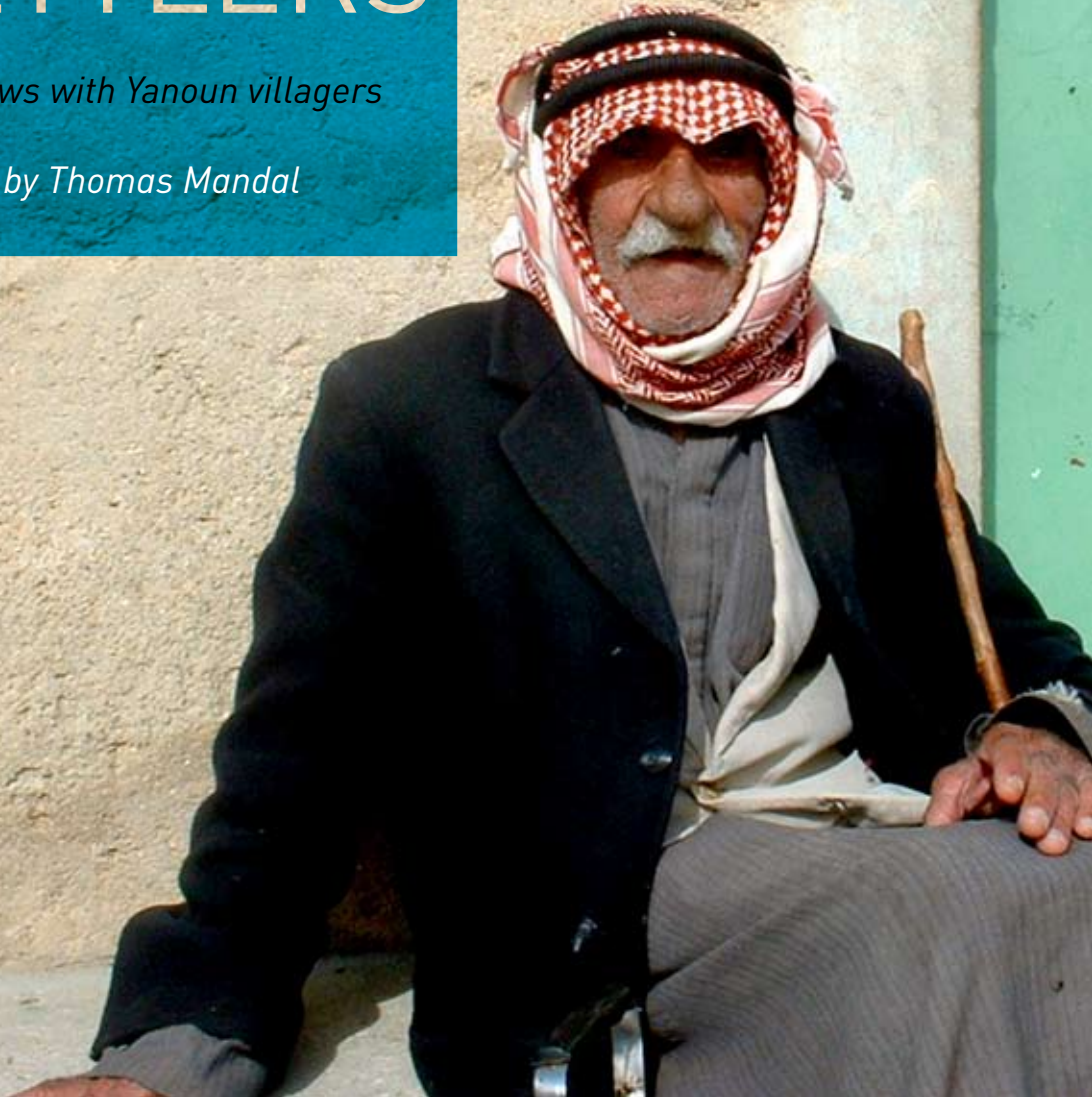


LIVING WITH SETTLERS

Interviews with Yanoun villagers

Written by Thomas Mandal



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Interviews with Yanoun villagers by Ursula Gelis, Ella Eriksen, Vivienne Jackson, Karin Huber, Thomas Mandal, Renate Leiprecht and Arne Essèn. They have evaluated and approved the final product of this book.

Introduction by Vivienne Jackson

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"My son stood in the doorway when a settler pointed a gun to his face. He wasn't able to stand on his feet for half an hour afterwards because he was shaking with fear." Khamal Sobih Bani Jaber, sheep farmer, Yanoun.

"We never hear about this. This is terrible. I've never heard about this before," Omer, Israeli, 27, Tel Aviv, on hearing about Yanoun from an Ecumenical Accompanier.

Yanoun is one of the smallest villages in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (POT). But it is remarkable that it is still a village at all. For almost ten years, extremist settlers based at illegal outposts supported by the Israeli settlement of Itamar have been persistently harassing the villagers, using means including firearms. The aim appears to be 'transfer by stealth': settlers gaining control of villagers' land by scaring the farmers away for good.

Tonight, Yanoun farmers and their families will go to sleep again under bright spotlights on hilltops barely 400m from their homes. Since 1996, residents have been beaten up; sheep mutilated; land seized; and farmers have been unable to farm certain lands now designated 'too dangerous'.

Nearly all residents in the upper part of Yanoun evacuated the village on October 18th 2002, feeling that intimidation had become unbearable. The next day, the villagers began to return, accompanied by Israeli and international activists of all faiths, outraged at the situation faced by the villagers. Ever since this time, a house in the village has been home to a permanent, voluntary international presence. Since June 2003, the presence has been provided by the WCC Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI).

This book aims to tell the remarkable story of Yanoun through the words of residents themselves and through what has been reported by the media. Here, villagers, children and school teachers explain how life has changed in Yanoun, about the impact of the arrival of settlers, about their experience of trying to find help through those charged with their protection – the Israeli Army and Border Police – and about the role of internationals in Yanoun.

Ideally there would be no need for internationals in Yanoun. But unfortunately, law enforcement against settler crime within the occupied territories is not all it could be. The residents of Yanoun feel that currently, internationals must be present to deter attacks and to act as witnesses to events in the village. The story of Yanoun illustrates all too clearly that sometimes, voluntary international action is needed to compel Israeli officials to protect Palestinians living under occupation, in line with their international commitments.

Despite the huge media interest in Israel, Palestine and the Occupied Territories, stories such as that of Yanoun rarely make the headlines; the gruelling daily process of trying to live a rural life under the constant surveillance of armed vigilantes with greater resources than the villagers. Ecumenical Accompaniers have often met Israelis, like the one above, who were shocked and dismayed to hear about the settlers' activities. And on different scales elsewhere in the Occupied Territories, Yanoun's experience of land transfer has been replicated.

Yanoun's experience suggests that Israel must dismantle illegal outposts and settlements as a matter of urgency.





Yanoun settlers. Photo:

Chapter 2: Fleeing the village

“They came with dogs and guns, every Saturday at night. They beat men in front of their children. One Saturday they said that they didn’t want to see anyone here next Saturday, and that we should move to Aqraba. The whole village left that week.”

Around the fire in front of one of the old stone houses in Yanoun, Rashid Mur-rar, the chairman of the village council, recalls what happened nearly four years ago when Jewish settlers connected to the West Bank settlement of Itamar entered the village.

It is October 2002. The 18th of the month. The last six families leave the upper part of Yanoun, and the little village of one hundred people is briefly to become famous. First come Israeli peace activists from Ta’ayush, then the United Nations Civilian Mission, then international solidarity groups, and then the media: BBC from Britain, CBC from Canada, National Public Radio from USA and Belgian TV. Israeli and international newspapers come. They report that this is the first time in living memory in which harassment by Jewish settlers in the West Bank had emptied an entire Palestinian community. They draw parallels to the refugees created in the 1948 war.

The news agency Associated Press was on the spot when the villagers abandoned Yanoun, and described the atmosphere: “In Yanoun, the men cried as

they got into two cars to leave for the nearby village of Aqraba, where they believe there will be safety. They'll live with relatives there or move into rented apartments. 'Death would be easier than leaving', Khamal Sobih said, describing his attachment to the land where generations of his family have lived. 'But there is no choice'. He said he often spent nights keeping watch for attackers from his window. He said: "It was not easy to leave after seven generations of village life, but the welfare of the children was at stake. One of my sons would cry and hold me in fear, and I had to get up with him at night and take his hand just to go to the bathroom. No one can accept living like this".

Khamal's brother, the then chairman of the village council, Abdel Latif Bani Jaber, told the British newspaper *The Guardian*: "It took five years of continuous attacks to force us to leave. They would shoot at us, at our sheep, our cattle. Then they started coming to the outskirts of the village and throwing rocks at the doors. I have been beaten up in my house in front of my family."

The whole community of Upper Yanoun left, except two brothers, Khaleb Bani Jaber and Fyakh Mahmoud Bani Jaber, and their families. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) Khaleb said: "I am the owner of this land for 200 years from our grandfathers. We are determined to stay in our houses and the village, and we are not going to leave our houses forever, even if they slay us".

On October 27th, Jacov Hayman, a spokesman for the settlement of Itamar, said to British newspaper *The Guardian* that he had no sympathy for the villagers of Yanoun. "If anyone is being terrorized it is us. Arabs have to learn that if they continue to be violent they can't live here. There is all this talk of Arab olives, what about Jewish blood?"

Abdel Latif rejected his view. "No one from Yanoun has ever harmed them, and they began their intimidation five years ago, long before anyone from Itamar was killed in the Intifada. Do they think they will get peace by kicking people off their land?"

The village chairman and many of the other villagers had high hopes of returning. Abdel Latif stated to journalist Joel Greenberg that "this is our land

and we can't surrender it to them under any conditions. We hope that if the situation calms down, we'll be able to return with the children". Inshallah, he added, meaning "God willing".

Peace groups would see to it that their prayers were heard. The Israeli peace group Ta'ayush wrote a newsletter headed "Help the Yanoun villagers return home!" It read: "After years of unrelenting harassment, destruction of the infrastructure (water and electricity), armed patrols and threats of shooting, the settlers achieved their goal: the primary school of Yanoun closed down. Another abandoned Palestinian village appeared on the map. This is the moment of truth: We must not let this quiet, unheralded deportation sneak past us!"

From Sunday October 20th, Ta'ayush activists maintained a constant presence in Yanoun in order to enable the villagers to return home. And the villagers came back, little by little. The Nimr family - a father, his wife and their eight children - had left the village and taken with them their sheep. Two days later, the mother returned with three of her children. To the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* she said: "We came back when we heard that people came back to protect us. We felt a bit of security. I have to convince my little son that the Hebrew speakers around him are not settlers".

Today the villagers can look back on what happened. It took Khamal almost two years before he felt safe to return with his family. They came back in July 2004. Those October days are imprinted in the family's memory in the family forever, as the settlers marched from door to door looking for people. "My son stood in the doorway when a settler pointed a gun to his face. He wasn't able to stand on his feet for half an hour afterwards because he was shaking with fear", Khamal says, surrounded by his wife and his youngest children. Their youngest child, four year-old Tajhreed, was so afraid during the flight to Aqraba that she still has problems with internationals, unfamiliar faces, coming to Yanoun.

Rashid returned with his wife and three small children after eight months. He recalls how he saw the settlers walk from house to house. "They even entered houses where there were no men present. In one of the houses there was only

a woman with her daughter. They had to flee to the roof. But the settlers followed them, took the woman by her neck and threatened her”.

It also took Rashid’s brother, Yasser Murrar, several months before he returned back with his family.

“When we returned from Aqraba all the houses in the village had broken windows and everything inside was smashed and destroyed”, he says. Yasser’s sister and her family still haven’t returned. Today their empty house is a sad symbol of what happened.

Also Munther Bani Jaber, the oldest son in the Nimr family, remembers how the settlers broke in to the houses: “I saw how men armed with guns entered my uncle’s house and destroyed furniture.”

Because of the international presence, the villagers returned home to Yanoun. Najeh Murrar, who came back with his family after three days, says he felt safer with the internationals there: “During this difficult period the village got help from the [Israeli] army. The soldiers knew that if they did not come, the internationals would inform the media”.

But the media had left. Yanoun had had its days of fame. The ‘story’ was over. The villagers had returned home, and the internationals stayed with them. But the settlers’ terror continued. They kept coming down the hillsides and into the village. The beatings and the death threats continued. When internationals physically stood in their way, settlers beat them as well. The attacks and the terror continue to shape the lives of the villagers even now. The Canaanites used to call the village “Yanouh” many hundreds of years ago. It means “quiet and calm”. Today, fear has a more dominant position in the little community.



Nimr with sheep under outpost. Photo:

Chapter 3: The history of Yanoun

In Yanoun today there are several caves. According to Yanoun's school headmaster Fouzi Bani Jaber, the Canaanites and the Romans lived in these caves. But the story of Yanoun goes further back in time, and is linked to a little hill three hundred meters east of Lower Yanoun that is today used for recreation and picnics. The hill is called Nabinun. Ecumenical Accompanier Arne Essen from Norway learned in the spring of 2005 the importance the site has for both Jews and Muslims. One day while out walking, he met a settler family – a man and his wife, and their ten children – on this hilltop. The man said that they had come to honour the burial site of Nun, the father of Joshua, known to be the second person, after Moses, to lead the Jewish people in their early history. But Muslims also see Nun as a prophet. Today one can see stone remains on the top of the hill that the villagers say used to be a mosque. In Arabic, Nabinun means 'the grave of Nun'.

The earliest known people in Palestine were the Canaanites. Some historians regard them as part of a wave of migration of Semitic-speaking peoples out of the Arabian Peninsula, while others suggest that they had been there ever since the original Semitic emigration from Africa. Later, the Israelites, possibly descendants of a Canaanite group, appeared. According to the Bible they returned there following the Exodus from ancient Egypt, conquering and absorbing the tribes they found there and reclaiming the land it is said God promised them. Successive waves of migration brought other groups onto

Yanoun caves Photo:



the scene. Around 1200 BC the Hittite empire was conquered by allied tribes from the north. The northern, coastal Canaanites were temporarily displaced, but returned when the invading tribes showed no inclination to settle. The Egyptians called the horde that swept across Asia Minor and the Mediterranean the Sea Peoples. The early Philistines are thought to have been amongst them. The region in which they settled is known as Philistia (source: Wikipedia online).

The end of the 19th century was an important period in the history of Yanoun. It is believed that around this time around fifty Bosniaks, Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina, came to Yanoun. Bosnia and Herzegovina were taken from the Ottoman Empire and given to Austria-Hungary following the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid gave the migrants a large part of the village. According to the villagers of Yanoun, these are the owners of the village land, and (TODAY's?) the farmers of Yanoun are their partners (/ DESCENDANTS?).

The Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz claims that the immigrants were Muslim soldiers who were brought to Palestine to reinforce the Turkish army at the end of the 19th century and who settled in various places in the country, including in Yanoun. Although they were not originally from one family, they adopted a common surname, Bushnak, which attests to their extraction. When they moved to Nablus from Yanoun, they leased their land to the residents of Aqraba, who gradually began to leave their own village and settle in the wadi, the plateau and the hill of Yanoun. Payment for leasing the land could be made in the form of wheat, olive oil or cash. About three quarters of Yanoun's 16.000 dunams (4000 acres) of land is leased. The Bushnak family today lives in Nablus, and is still leasing the fields to residents of Aqraba and Yanoun.

During the 20th century, the population of Yanoun remained at around 150. Most income came from the products of the village's olive trees. Some of the villagers also kept sheep or cows, and grew other products like nuts, figs and grapes. A mixed school was established in Lower Yanoun in 1971. After the attacks from the settlers started in 1996, it became dangerous for children

from Upper Yanoun to reach the school in Lower Yanoun, and in 2001 a new school in the upper part of the village was opened. The establishment of a new school was just one of many changes that the villagers had to make after the settlers came to the area.

Facts about Yanoun:

Location: *15 km south east of the city of Nablus in the northern West Bank. The town of Aqraba is located 4 km to the south. The Jordan Valley can be seen from the village to the south east. The Jewish settlement of Itamar is located 10 km to the west. The illegal outposts of Itamar, which threaten Yanoun, begin as close as 400 metres away from the village.*

Size: *16.439 dunams of land (4 dunams equal 1 acre). 4 dunams are given out to roads. The village has around 100 inhabitants. The village is divided into two parts; Upper Yanoun to the north and Lower Yanoun to the south are connected with a road. Most of the inhabitants live in Upper Yanoun, closest to the settlement outposts. Income: The villagers' main income is from sheep and olive trees. Yanoun has around 2000 dunams planted with olive trees, and another 500 dunams with nuts, figs and grape trees.*

Education: *Until summer 2005 there were two mixed schools in the village – one in Upper and one in Lower Yanoun. When school started again later that year the number of the children in Lower Yanoun was so small that it was decided to transfer them to the school in Upper Yanoun. Now the school has 19 pupils from first to sixth grade. After sixth grade they continue in Aqraba.*



Chapter 4: Living with settlers

The only road leading to Yanoun today is through Aqraba from the south. You can see the settlement outposts before you reach Lower Yanoun. Upper Yanoun is not easy to spot, with its concrete and stone houses between the outposts up in the valley. As you make your way up the valley, you get a clearer view of the outposts: on the hilltop to the east is a water tank, plus a watchtower and some electricity poles. On the hilltop to the north west are two large animal farms (containing sheep, goats and cows), another watchtower and a caravan. The outposts on the latter hill are only about 400 metres away from the houses in Yanoun. From the village you can see clearly the settlers as they walk to and from their farms, and when they move their sheep around. The villagers living at the edge of Yanoun are afraid to go just thirty metres beyond their own houses. The outposts around Yanoun are connected with a road around the valley to the north, which surrounds the village in a semicircle.

As you drive along the steep road up to the houses you may encounter Ahmed Sobih Murrar, an elderly resident of Yanoun, blind in one eye. Despite his old age and weak health he still takes his daily walk through the village, dressed in his well-worn sandals, his long dress, the traditional Arab headscarf and with his wooden stick in his hand. With him the story of life with the settlers begins.

In 1985 fundamentalist Jews came to the hills west of Yanoun. They settled there, 10 kilometres away from the village, and called the settlement Itamar.

Israeli outposts Photo:

Itamar's own homepage on the internet states that in the very beginning the settlement "consisted of two tiny blocks of pre-fabricated concrete match-box houses, like parallel rows of white dots on a black domino". They settled here because they are convinced that they have a God-given right to the land. "Money was always short, but walking across the new fields gave a rich sense of ownership and pride. The hills were calling, 'come and claim me, come and take me'. We couldn't get enough of them. It was a kind of matrimony with the Land," writes Leah Goldsmith, one of the leading figures of the settlement.

They expanded their territory, and in 1996 the villagers of Yanoun could see constructions being established on the hills around the village. With M-16 automatic rifles on their backs, and with one of the most powerful military forces in the world protecting them, settlers engaged in what they call 'the competition over land':

"To a great extent, this wild, agricultural type of settlement is a certain adaptation by the younger generation of the rules of the game as played by the Arabs, one closely connected to the struggle over land. The way in which they settle on the hills of Yitzhar and Itamar doesn't require big budgets or a lot of people. All you need to do is what the Arabs do - put up two shacks, graze a flock of sheep, and plant trees. This is how borders are established and it provides a new challenge in the competition over land. Contrary to the public image, they're not involved here with revenge and redemption of blood, but with redemption of land", the homepage states.

But redemption of blood it was. And old Ahmed Sobih was to be the first to bleed.

One day in 1996, he was tending his sheep on the hillside in the village. When a stranger approached he mistook the man for being someone from a neighbouring Arab village and went over to offer him a handshake and a cigarette. But the man was a settler. Ahmed Sobih was beaten up with his own walking stick, several bones in his body were broken and he was left blind in his left eye.

From this moment onwards, the lives of the villagers of Yanoun would change. The threat from the hills would affect them physically and psychologically. Men would be beaten up in front of their children. Women and children would be threatened. Guns would be pointed at children. Armed strangers would enter the houses to destroy and steal. Sheep would be stabbed and their entrails torn out. Electricity and water would be sabotaged. Most of Yanoun's land would be seized and the olive trees stolen. A new phrase became usual. The fear, they felt, had a name. Shouted, spoken and whispered. Mustawteneen. Settlers.

"Before the settlers came in 1996, the life in Yanoun was very good." Today, Khaleb, the brother of Ahmed Sobih, looks back on the peaceful life they once enjoyed in Yanoun. He was born in one of the caves in Yanoun and has lived all his life in the village. He has had eight daughters and seven sons. Three of them have died. Now, in his late 60's, he has 51 grandchildren.

"More than 200 people used to live here and there were big herds of sheep, cows and horses. It all changed. In the period from 1996 settlers came to the village, threatening and destroying. I have myself been threatened many times and once got hurt by a stone hitting my shoulder."

Hamdah Abu-Haneia lives in Lower Yanoun. She explains the fear that people feel. "After the settlers came it became a dangerous place. People feel afraid. It is difficult for anyone to stay too long here, and that is the reason I have married my daughters outside of Yanoun."

The villagers of Yanoun learned to recognise the settler. The man dressed in long, wide, light clothes, often with a long, black beard. In his hand the automatic M-16 rifle. On his head the kippah, the skullcap observant Jews wear to remind them of their relationship with God. The woman in a long dress and a scarf around her head. The children would often hold guns, too young to be prosecuted. The youths would ride their motocross bikes. The men would ride in their open four-wheel drives, or in jeeps. Most of the time they would come down from the hills by foot, always carrying their M-16 rifles. The villagers started to recognise a pattern. They would mostly operate on Saturdays, which



Police Visit Photo:

is known as Shabbat, the holiest day of the week in Judaism – the day of rest. They spent their days off terrorising the villagers of Yanoun. And from the children of Yanoun, the question was always: “When will it be Saturday again?”

The settlers would beat up the men of the village and declare the fields of Yanoun their own. At first, the villagers filed complaints to the police about the assaults. This was done at the Israeli Civil Administration base in Huwarah just south of Nablus. “Causing damage to private land, uprooting trees”, is recorded under “confirmation of the filing of a complaint” in February 1998. “Building a road on land owned by you”, the police wrote in July 1998 (source: Ha’aretz, Oct. 25, 2002).

“We saw that there was no point in complaining. No one came to our aid”, said Abdel Latif to Ha’aretz (ibid).

Settlers’ attacks on Palestinians often fall into a legal ‘grey’ area, with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the police and the military civil administration in the Occupied Territories all involved to varying degrees. An IDF spokesman, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Associated Press just after the evacuation of the village in October 2002 that soldiers try to prevent conflict between settlers and Palestinians, but that forces are primarily in the area to protect Israelis from attacks by Palestinian militants. However, the United Nations Geneva Convention states that an occupying power is responsible for the security and civil rights of the people living on the occupied land.

While some parts of the Occupied Territories today are under full Palestinian control, the upper part of Yanoun is situated in Area C, which is under the full security and administrative responsibility of Israel. The villagers feel they have never been offered any protection by anyone.

“The settlers want our land, and the army does what the settlers want them to do”, says Rashid, who has been the chairman of the village council since the former chairman Abdel Latif fell ill and had to move to a nursing home. He adds that it can be difficult to distinguish the army from the settlers.

“Last August [2004] settlers made a checkpoint between Upper and Lower

Yanoun. They were dressed in army uniforms, had dogs with them, and wore black camouflage colour in their faces”.

Yasser says that the army is always on the settlers’ side.

“When the settlers call the army, they come immediately. When we call the army it takes a long, long time before they arrive. The soldiers ask ‘where are the settlers?’ long after they have left, and when they hear they have left, then they leave too without doing anything”.

In September 2000 the Al-Aqsa Intifada, also known as the Second Intifada, broke out. For the villagers of Yanoun, this meant an escalation of the settlers’ terror. In an interview with The Guardian on October 27, 2002, chairman Abdel Latif said: “After the Intifada in 2000, it got much worse. I have been beaten up in my house in front of my family, in the courtyard and out in the fields”.

The Alternative Information Center (AIC) is a joint Palestinian-Israeli organisation that prioritises political advocacy, critical analysis and information sharing about Palestinian and Israeli society and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. AIC has recorded several attacks from the settlers of Itamar. Two of them took place in late 2001.

November 4, 2001: Thirty settlers, some armed, attacked houses in Yanoun. Abdel Latif was seriously beaten and his eye damaged. From his hospital bed, told the AIC that this was not the first act of violence committed by settlers in Yanoun (source: AIC Report XXXII).

December 26, 2001: Settlers from Itamar started to level land belonging to the village of Yanoun. “Tens of settlers, some armed, arrived with tractors with the express purpose of damaging our agricultural land. This has happened many times before”, Abdel Latif said. 100 dunams of land planted with olive trees in an area called Bab il-Waqf were rendered unusable. The land belongs to brothers Yusef, Zuhdi and Fahmi Zbeh and to the Atha Nimr family. The current situation in practise curtails any possible development of the village

(source: AIC Report XXXV).



Hala 12 years

Events came to a head on April 17, 2002, when settlers, in the middle of the night, burnt down the electric generator donated by the United Nations Development Programme. The generator provided electricity to the village and to a pump that filled water reservoirs situated above the village and connected to the households with pipes. The repair would cost \$17,000 (Ha'aretz 25.10.2002), and it was made clear to the residents that a new generator would also be destroyed. The villagers were left without electricity or running water. They had to go down to the village spring to fill jerry cans with water. Three large water tanks were also upturned and damaged.

On June 20, 2002, a Palestinian gunman attacked the Itamar settlement. Five settlers were killed and eight injured before the gunman was shot dead. Palestinian attacks on Itamar during the second Intifada have resulted in the deaths of eleven people. The residents of Yanoun have not been linked to these deaths, nor have they been to any other violence against settlers. Nevertheless, outpost settlers took their anger out on the villagers of Yanoun, and the habitual violence escalated again during the summer and autumn of 2002.

The violence continued as groups of masked and unmasked settlers entered the village, coming night and day, often with dogs and sometimes riding horses. They hurled stones through windows and beat men with fists and rifle butts. At the end of July, the settlers upturned the two large water tanks that were formerly connected to the ruined generator. Increasing numbers of families started to leave Yanoun, most of them to live with relatives in Aqraba. Of the 150 inhabitants, only half remained.

On October 6, a few young people from neighboring Aqraba had gone to pick olives near Lower Yanoun. A group of armed settlers showed up and, from a distance, opened fire. One of the farmers, Hani Beni Maniyeh (24), was killed. The people of Yanoun were still having to carry water in jerry cans from the local well. One day they were astonished to find three settlers bathing themselves and their dogs in the drinking water. The settlers came every Saturday. On Saturday October 12, the settlers again raided the village. This time the message was clear: "We do not want to see you here next Saturday. Leave the village! Go to Aqraba!"

The following Thursday, the headmaster of the small school bade farewell to his last students. The terror had become unbearable. The next day the last six families left Upper Yanoun. Only the two old brothers with their families stayed behind. For the first time since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967, harassment from Jewish settlers had emptied an entire Palestinian community. That which we know as 'transfer', such as when the Palestinians were expelled in 1947 and 1948 from what was to become the State of Israel, and following the 1967 war, was about to happen again. On November 15, 2002, Ta'ayush wrote the following in a comment in Ha'aretz about the event in Yanoun:

"[...] transfer isn't necessarily a dramatic moment, a moment when people are expelled and flee their towns and villages. It is not necessarily a planned and well-organised move with buses and trucks loaded with people, such as happened in Qalqilyah in 1967. Transfer is a deeper process, a creeping process that is hidden from view. It is not captured on film, is hardly documented, and it is going on right in front of our eyes. Anyone who is waiting for a dramatic moment is liable to miss it as it happens".

Facts about Itamar settlement:

Founded in 1984 by fundamentalist Jews who justify their presence in religious terms.

Population was 557 in early 2004 (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics). This number does not include the outposts, as the outposts are illegal according to Israeli law.

The settlement has all public facilities that are characteristic for a normal town.

The settlers survive by farming the land and raising livestock.

No response from Itamar

The Itamar settlement has been asked the following questions via e-mail:

The villagers of Yanoun have suffered violent attacks from settlers during the last nine years. Why have Itamar settlers regularly entered Yanoun?

Is this the work of a specific group or does the whole settlement support such action?

Do you feel threatened by the residents of Yanoun?

How can Israelis and Palestinians live in peace on the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river?

There has been no response to the questions.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The conflict is by no means a simple two-sided conflict with all Israelis (or even all Israeli Jews) sharing one point of view and all Palestinians another. In both communities, there are individuals and groups who advocate total territorial removal of the other community, those who advocate a two-state solution and those who advocate a bi-national solution of a single secular state encompassing present-day Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have been officially committed to an eventual two-state solution. The main unresolved issues between these two bodies are:

- The status and future of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem which comprise the areas for the proposed State of Palestine.
- Israeli security from attacks against Israeli targets.
- Palestinian security from Israeli military attacks.
- The nature of a future Palestinian state.
- The fate of the Palestinian refugees.
- The settlement policies of Israel, and the ultimate fate of settlements.
- The refugee issue arose as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The issue of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem arose as a result of the Six-Day War in 1967.

[source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli-Palestinian_Conflict]



Ulrika picking olives Photo:

Chapter 5: International presence in Yanon

Under the 1947 Geneva Conventions, the Palestinians theoretically have protected status by the Israeli Government. The people of Yanoun had no such actual protection, but were lucky in a different way. They had the focus of the international and Israeli media. International and Israeli peace activists moved in. Ta'ayush maintained a constant presence in the village the first days. A number of humanitarian groups, such as International Women's Peace Service and International Solidarity Movement (ISM), visited Yanoun repeatedly, providing an international presence and showing solidarity with the residents. These groups, volunteers from all corners of the world, did good work where bodies like the United Nations and state governments failed.

Despite the international presence, the violence from the settlers didn't halt, and the internationals were not spared. Only a week after the abandonment of Yanoun, Itamar settlers attacked again. "Five people were injured Sunday, when settlers from Itamar attacked activists and Palestinian olive-pickers from the village of Yanoun", Ha'aretz reported on October 27, 2002. The farmers, aided by peace activists from Israel and the United States, were harvesting the crop of olives. The settlers, numbering between five and seven, threw stones at the olive pickers and activists, and beat them with their guns.

The injured were, according to the newspaper, taken to a private clinic in Aqraba. Security forces did not arrive at the scene to investigate.

Justin Huggler, a journalist from the London newspaper Independent, found the victims in Yanoun. James Delaplain, a 74-year-old from Wisconsin, was so badly beaten that he found it painful to stand up. Mary Hughes-Thompson, 68, from Los Angeles, had her left arm covered in black bruises. Two other activists, an Israeli and an Irishman, were also beaten. When the settlers began threatening them, the peace activists said, it was agreed they would go back to the village with the Palestinian farmers. The Palestinians left first, so the volunteers would be between them and the settlers. "I remember saying just a few days before, 'What can they do to me, they won't attack me at my age'," Ms Hughes-Thompson explained. She saw the settlers attack Mr Delaplain. "I was very afraid for James, I thought I'd got away. Suddenly a young guy stepped in front of me. I was going to say something but, before I could, he hit me. Two others came up and hit me, in the ribs. The first guy kept saying 'You want to be dead? You want to be dead?'"

[source: http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article126084.ece].

On January 30, 2003, two International Solidarity Movement (ISM) activists, one from the UK and one from Japan, were assaulted by Itamar settlers. The incident began, according to the ISM, when the two volunteers were informed by Palestinians that settlers from Itamar had moved tractors onto Palestinian farmland. The activists went to observe the situation, and were approached by two armed settlers who demanded to see their passports. When the activists refused, an altercation took place, and the settlers called in reinforcements from Itamar. Twenty minutes later, three armed settlers arrived, and the activists decided to retreat. They were overtaken by the settlers who attacked them and confiscated their phone and camera. The activists' jackets, shoes, socks, wallets and passports were taken, and they were forced to lie face-down on the ground while the settlers kicked them, walked on them, and trod on their fingers. After about 30 minutes of abuse, the activists were marched towards the Itamar settlement. At the fence separating the farmland from the settlement, the settlers got a phone-call and halted, making their prisoners lie face-down on the ground again, and again kicking and treading on them. This continued for another 20 minutes until the Israeli army arrived. The troops set the activists free, and returned their property – except their phone and camera. The activists returned to Yanoun, but were arrested ten minutes

later by the army. They were then taken to Ariel settlement and charged with trespassing on settler property

[source: <http://www.ww4report.com/71.html>].

A few days later, on February 2, the two volunteers together with an Israeli Ta'ayush member, obtained permission from the army to visit the farmland where the attack took place. The Palestinian owners of the farm had been too frightened to visit it since the incident. Shortly after the activists arrived at the farm, a group of soldiers arrived. Three settlers arrived a few minutes later. Victor Avery, one of the leaders of the Itamar settlement, shouted at the Ta'ayush activist in Hebrew, "You're here to put us in jail. We're going to kill you!" He then hit the activist in the face with his assault rifle, breaking his nose. The army did not restrain Avery and has not sought his arrest (ibid).

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) became involved in Yanoun in June 2003, initially on an intermittent basis. The first task for the Ecumenical Accompaniers (EA) was specifically to accompany workers employed in installing electricity to the village, a project which commenced mid-August and was completed by the end of September. Since September 2003, and up until today, the organisation has maintained a consistent and permanent presence in the village, and accompaniers live in a concrete house that has been set aside by the village for their use. Guns have been pointed at Ecumenical Accompaniers; Accompaniers have been verbally threatened and spat at during the last two-and-a-half years. No one has yet been physically harmed. Marianne Solheim from Norway never thought she would be threatened with machine guns. Yet on Saturday December 27, 2003, one Shabbat, she was. Two settlers came down the hillside to Yanoun, pointing M-16 rifles at the people and threatening to kill them.

"My colleague Christine [Cannon from the UK] and I were in another part of the village at the time, we were picked up in a car and driven at full speed to Upper Yanoun where the settlers were walking around threatening the people. When we arrived, the settlers were making their way down through the village. But when they noticed our presence, they pointed their guns at us and told us to leave the village, screaming "Yalla, yalla" (come on, come on). It was a very frightening experience, although I knew that they would never try to kill



Walid Bani Jabber picking olives

us since that would cause too many problems for them. Harming an international comes with a price for the settlers, whereas, unfortunately, doing the same to a Palestinian usually has no repercussions. I have never had a gun pointed at me before but I know that the villagers have experienced this many times

[source: <http://www.eappi.org>].

Teams consisting of two to four Ecumenical Accompaniers are stationed in Yanoun, and each team is replaced by a new one every third month. The main task for the Ecumenical Accompaniers is to simply be present and visible, so that the settlers know that there are internationals in the village who will document and report on any violence. Other tasks can be to accompany shepherds to their fields or farmland, help school children with homework or simply talk with the residents about their situation. The most tense time of year for settler incursions seems to be during the olive harvest in October.

The olive tree is one of the most typical characteristics of the Mediterranean environment, and olive oil is one of the oldest and most important products of the material culture in this part of the world. In the spring, careful pruning is practiced. The aim is to preserve the flower-bearing shoots of the preceding year, while keeping the head of the tree low, so as to allow the easy gathering of the fruit; a dome or rounded form is usually aimed at. In the autumn, the olives are harvested. The ripe fruit is picked by hand by the careful grower and deposited in cloths or baskets before being taken to the mill [source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive_tree].

Yanoun has 2000 dunams planted with olive trees. Some of the trees are estimated to be several hundred years old. The olive fruit is pressed to make olive oil. It is also cooked to make a soap that is supposedly good for both skin and hair. The olive cores are crushed into small pieces and used as firewood. Before the latest Intifada, olive products from Yanoun were being sold in markets in Nablus, in other cities in the West Bank and in Jordan. Today the olive farmers are not allowed to export their products out of the West Bank. This has led to a drop in the price of olive products. The olive tree has an indisputable status in Yanoun, as it has in other Palestinian communities and in the whole of the Middle East. Not only is it a source of income – it is also a symbol

of connection with the land. For Palestinians, it embodies the lasting roots of the people on this land.

Most of Yanoun's olive groves have been taken by the settlers. If the farmers try to prune or harvest from the trees in these areas, they are likely to be attacked and beaten up.

"It is the most difficult time of the year," Munther, 24, says about the time when the farmers are harvesting. He was born in Saudi Arabia and has nine brothers and sisters. In 2001 the family moved back to the family farm in Yanoun. He studied in Nablus to become a teacher, and is now teaching in the school in Upper Yanoun.

"Then the settlers attack us, beat people to prevent the harvest. On one of these occasions a settler said to me "my people planted these trees 2000 years ago, that is why this is our land."

This is concurrent with what is stated on the Itamar website. Leah Goldsmith writes: "We came here to LIVE and revive the land THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN OURS....why do you think the Arabs are willing to blow themselves up? Because they know that the end is very near, the sands in Ishmael's hourglass have just run out"

Today the residents of Yanoun are left only with the land around their houses. But even in these areas they are not allowed to cultivate their land freely. The areas closest to the settlers' outposts are declared a "security zone" and are out of bounds for the villagers. In these areas they need military protection to harvest. The farmers complain: olive trees need to be cared for and maintained by cutting their branches, and they need just two weeks to harvest the olives. Instead they are given eight to ten days a year to harvest. Rashid estimates that 90 per cent of his land has been stolen from him.

"My family had fields in Lower Yanoun, but now they are all taken. I have now four thousand olive trees, but no time to harvest them all. In the Yanoun valley we need the protection of the army, and they only give us one single day to harvest. The trees also need maintenance, such as cutting. Since we can't

work our lands the trees get damaged. The settlers want our land, and the army do what the settlers want them to do."

There are numerous examples of attacks from the settlers during olive harvest. Ecumenical Accompanier Erik Mohlin from Sweden reported his experience from October 7, 2004, a day of harvest that began peacefully and ended in violence. He and his fellow Ecumenical Accompanier and countrywoman Ella Eriksen were engaged in picking olives with a number of people from Yanoun. The work was only interrupted by tea breaks and the sharing of candy, vegetables, and fruit in the shadow of the olive trees. "Time passes by and as 3pm approaches, I think to myself that it has been a good day in every way. Shortly thereafter, I am drastically reminded of the everyday problems and dangers facing the villagers in Yanoun and the reason for the international presence there. Two Israeli settlers emerge from the trees together with some Israeli soldiers. Totally unprovoked, one of the settlers starts beating one of the Palestinian farmers and he even fires some rounds with his automatic gun close to the feet of the farmer. At the same time, the other settler fires a few rounds in the air to keep people away. The screaming and crying of children and the elderly follows a second after the deafening shots from the settlers' guns. The settlers force the farmer down to the ground and tie his hands behind his back. The soldiers do nothing to protect the farmer, seemingly only interested in keeping the crowd at bay. The soldiers declare that this olive grove is off limits to the Palestinian farmers, even though they are the rightful owners - something about the army not being able to provide protection from the settlers in this area. The farmer is finally released at about 5:30pm when some members of the Israeli peace organisation Ta'ayush arrive and intervene on his behalf. Fortunately, none of the shots hit anyone,"

[source: <http://www.eappi.org>].

Given the lack of protection from police and the IDF, Israeli civilians and organisations such as Ta'ayush and Rabbis for Human Rights are making considerable efforts to provide a sense of security for the Palestinians during the annual olive harvest. Rabbis for Human Rights is an organisation made up of rabbis from every denomination in Israel who work together for human rights. Ecumenical Accompanier Arne Essén met one of them, Beny Gefen, 78, in the fields of Yanoun in early April 2005. He fought for Israel in the 1948 war, has



Rashid ploughing Photo:

lived many years in a kibbutz, and was working as an agricultural supervisor for the Israeli state before he retired.

“There is terrorism here, but the terrorists live in the settler colonies. Too many settlers are pure criminals. The Palestinians in the West Bank get no protection against criminal settlers. The IDF and the police are obliged to give these people protection, but they don’t. That is why I come here, to try to prevent violence and injustice when my country refuses to do it. I reach so little, but somebody has to protect them. That is why I intend to dedicate the last years of my life to show people that not all Israelis are like these settlers. I am ashamed of Israel, this country that I at the same time love so much.”

The settlers’ violence continues. Today, every resident in Yanoun has a family member who has been physically beaten or threatened. The last year has seen many bloody assaults.

At the end of March 2005, two leading figures from Itamar attacked Khader Abu-Haneia from Lower Yanoun as he was ploughing his fields. The usual arrangement is that the District Coordinating Officer gives the farmers permission through the village council to plough their land in the Yanoun Valley. The permit is given to guarantee protection from the settlers. When the permit is given, police officers patrol and guard the area. Both EAPPI and the Israeli group Volunteers for Human Rights reported the incident, and took a statement from Khader.

“On the morning of March 20, 2005, the day the DCO gave us permission, we went to plough our land. Three or four police patrol cars were on guard in various places. I was working with a tractor and at about 9am. I saw four settlers coming down towards us from the direction of Itamar. I saw they were chasing my friend Amar and he was running away from the settlers and running towards me. When they were about 20 metres away from me, the settlers caught Amar, lay him on the ground and beat him on the head. The settlers left Amar on the ground after wounding him and cutting his head open. He was bleeding a lot into the ground.

“When I saw what was happening I turned off the tractor’s motor. Then the

settlers came to me. They cut the tractor's electricity and diesel wires. One of the settlers aimed a gun to shoot, and then I went over to him and asked: 'Why? Why this way?' Then he started beating me up with his hands and the others hit me too and wounded me in the nose. They beat me a lot and I bled a lot from my nose. Later it turned out they broke my nose.

"While they were hitting me the police were between one and one-and-a-half kilometres away from us and were not present. The settler who broke my nose said to me: 'Don't tell the police what happened. I am Avri, and if I have any kind of problem, you better watch it, because I will come to your house and hurt you.'

"The settlers stayed there with us and when Rashid from the council came by Avri threatened him too: 'You are not allowed to be here.' Rashid moved 20-30 metres away. I couldn't call the police because there was no phone reception where we were.

"Meanwhile a group from Rabbis for Human Rights was patrolling around there, including Rabbi Arik Ascherman. He passed by and when he saw me he called the police. At about 11am the police arrived. When the settlers saw the police was coming to us they warned us not to tell the police, 'because later we will slaughter you.' A guy named Hussein Awadallah from Aqraba who came to plough with us and knows Hebrew very well, translated what they said for us. He was with us but the settlers did not hurt him, maybe because he is older.

"The policemen who came (3-4 policemen) took the settlers in a police van, and Amar and I went with the police in another car to the Ariel police. When we got to Ariel they asked us who hit us. The settlers were sitting in another room at the police station. I pointed at Avri Ran, whom I know for a long time because he has been coming to Yanoun for a long time and harassing people. When I pointed at him Ran said I started with him. He told the police that the area is his and we are not allowed to be in it.

"I have not heard from the police since. Meanwhile I fixed my tractor and continue ploughing my land."

Only two weeks after, on Saturday April 2, assaults happened again. Three settlers approached an Aqraba farmer on his tractor near the hill of Nabinun in Lower Yanoun. They took his ID and his phone. The farmer became fright-

ened and he ran away to find help. Assisted by the police he returned to get his the tractor back. All of the tires were flat and someone had tried to set it on fire by pouring diesel over it.

Until recently the sheep farmers have taken their sheep halfway up the hill-sides in Yanoun valley. On September 14, two settler cars came down into the village. The settlers threatened to hurt all the villagers if anyone walked on either side of the valley. IDF officers were standing next to the settlers when the threats were made, and did not appear to have any objections.

Also the 2005 olive harvest was marked by violence from the settlers, and on several occasions they forced the villagers to leave their fields. On Tuesday November 8, Khaleel Rabea Bani Jaber (48) from Lower Yanoun was going picking olives with his son Feraz (25) from their olive trees on a hill between Upper and Lower Yanoun. The trees are situated only a few hundred meters from the fence that the settlers have put up around the outpost west of Yanoun. They had asked the District Coordinating Officer (DCO) in the IDF if they could harvest in that area, and the DCO had assured them that they would be protected. Khaleel and Feraz had only been picking for around fifteen minutes when an armed settler approached them. According to Feraz, the settler asked what they were doing there. Picking my olives, the father replied. Then an argument started about who of them owned the land. Feraz stayed in the background, 20 meters away. Then suddenly the settler hit Khaleel in the face with his M16. Khaleel fell to the ground. The settler then pointed the gun at Feraz. His father, lying on the ground, signalled that he should stay away. When Feraz picked up his phone to call the village council and the police, the settler ran away.

Feraz got his father down to the village. There they waited for the army and the police to show up. It took them around 45 minutes to come, and when they finally came one of the soldiers did first aid on Khaleel's face injury. He was then taken to hospital in Nablus where they found out that his chinbone had been broken on four different places on the right side of his face. He was operated at the hospital and had to stay there for more than a week. Feraz was taken to the police station to be questioned. He knows the settler well from

before and could easily pick him out on photos that the police had in their archives.

By the end of 2005, only one settler has been legally prosecuted for assaults on the villagers of Yanoun. After being caught attacking Yanoun residents in March, Avri Ran, Victor Avery and a third settler were placed under house arrest. Ran escaped. Israeli news media reported on August 31 2005, that the police had caught Ran while on a holiday with his family on the bank of Lake Kinneret in northern Israel. Ha'aretz called him 'a fugitive leader of the 'hill-top youth' right-wing extremists', and reported:

"Ran is considered one of the most prominent members of the extreme right, who police have defined as a fleeing criminal. He will be brought for investigation by the Ariel police. Until recently Ran lived in an outpost near the West Bank settlement of Itamar. Police put him under house arrest after he was accused of beating a Palestinian during a quarrel, but Ran fled from his detention. Ran has been wanted by the authorities since then."

Ran is, at time of writing, defending himself in a Jerusalem court.

Settlements and outposts

From the late 1970s onwards it has been Israeli government policy to establish settlements in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, in the West Bank and Gaza. The Fourth Geneva Convention forbids an Occupying Power to "transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies" (article 49(6)). There are today around 433,000 settlers, in 323 settlements, living in territory occupied after the 1967 war (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_settlement).

During the first decade of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip the Israeli government justified the seizure of land in the Palestinian Occupied Territories for the establishment of settlements to fulfil military needs. This policy was successfully challenged before the Israeli Supreme Court, including by Israeli settlers who reiterated that the reason for establishing settlements was ideological, and not military necessity, in 1979. Subsequently Israel declared approximately 40 per cent of the West Bank as "state land", which can only be used by Israeli Jews - a clear violation of the principle of non-discrimination. During the years of the Oslo peace process, between 1993 and 2000, the number of Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories increased from about 240,000 to about 380,000 - an increase of more than 50 percent. In the same periods Israel built an extensive network of roads (commonly referred to as 'bypass roads') in the Occupied Territories to connect the settlements to each other and to Israel, seizing and destroying large tracts of Palestinian agricultural and pastoral land for this purpose.

From the mid 1990s onwards, settlers began to populate land not authorised by Israeli governments. According to the Sasson Report, an official Israeli government report published in March 2005, the establishment of these illegal outposts adjacent to settlements began after new construction was frozen by the Rabin Administration in 1993:

"Building in settlements was still approved, but the approval rate fell as the

negotiations with the Palestinian representatives accelerated. The unauthorized outposts phenomenon began expanding, in light of the government's position opposing the authorizing of the building of settlements in the territories. In fact, the unauthorized outposts phenomenon is a continuation of the settlement enterprise in the territories. But while in the distant past the Israeli governments officially acknowledged and encouraged the settlement enterprise a major change took place in the beginning of the nineties. The Israeli governments were no longer officially involved in the establishment of settlements, apparently due to Israel's international situation, and the negative position of most nations towards the settlement enterprise. That was not the case for public authorities and other Israeli government bodies, who took, along with others, a major role in establishing the unauthorized outposts. Some of which were inspired by the political echelon, sometimes by overlooking, sometimes by actual encouragement and support, but never as a result of an authorized resolution by the qualified political echelon of the State.

"The ways the outposts were established:

The outposts are mostly established by bypassing procedure and violating the law, displaying false pretense towards some of the State authorities, and enjoying the cooperation of other authorities in harsh violation of the law.

One way to establish an outpost is first to falsely ask for an antenna to be placed up on a hill. Afterwards comes a request to supply electricity – under false pretenses that it will only be for the antenna. Then a cabin is placed, for the guard, and the cabin is also connected to the electricity. Then a road is paved to the place, and infrastructure for caravans is prepared. Then, one day a number of caravans arrive at the place – and an outpost is established. Another way is falsely requesting to build an agricultural farm (either an acclimatization or a biosphere farm). The farm is supposedly built for agricultural needs. After a while, caravans arrive to the place and an outpost is established.

Another way is founding an educational institution. "Staff" families settle in the place and an outpost is established."

[source: <http://domino.un.org>]

Chapter 6: Yanoun today

The light from one of the watchtowers sweeps, as it often does, over Yanoun. This happens several times a week, and sometimes every day. It is early evening, and darkness has just fallen. It is a bright, starry evening, but the stars are not easy to make out thanks to the light from the watchtower. One light to the east, one to the west. The light lingers on one of the houses for a while, before sweeping over the fields. What is he looking for, the settler up there in the tower? What does he hope he will see?

He will see three or four small fires lit outside houses, where villagers gather to tell stories and talk of the day's events. He will see children playing football in the narrow streets, even though it is now too dark to play. He can even hear them. The older children are inside doing their homework or making tea or coffee. Some are asked to help father or mother give the sheep their last feed for the day. Two Ecumenical Accompaniers are on their way over to one of the families, having accepted an invitation to dinner. He can't see the wild dogs in the valley, but he can hear them. The flock of deer are both silent and invisible. He doesn't hear the woman, serving her finest food to her family and the visiting Ecumenical Accompaniers, when she says, "They see everything we do. They know everything about us".

None of the residents of Yanoun have ever, since the Jewish settlers came to the neighbourhood, harmed the settlers in any way. Still, the settlers see it as

their right to monitor their neighbours with searchlights, and the Israeli authorities allow them to do it. Day and Night.

The day starts early in Yanoun. The cockerel announces the new day at six, and the international visitors can't not take notice, given that the sound originates from a pen about four metres away from their bedroom. A couple of the women are soon to be seen making their way to the bakery along with some of the youngest children. The bread is lowered down, slightly below ground level, into a little fireplace. The older children are waiting for the local school to start at eight. The school bus takes the oldest children to school in Aqraba. Some of the shepherds are already out in the fields with their sheep. They know they cannot take them too far up the hillsides where the outposts have been placed. If they cross the invisible border to the 'security zone', they know there will be trouble. From the hills they can see Aqraba, five kilometres distant, and on a clear day the view stretches all the way to the Jordan valley. They can see the old road from Lower Yanoun to Nablus. It used to take them fifteen minutes by car into the city. Now the road is closed. It comes too close to the settlement of Itamar. Only settlers are allowed to use it now.

In Lower Yanoun, the smallest children are playing football in the street, not bothered by their older brothers and sisters who are in school. In the school building in Upper Yanoun the pupils are normally hard at work – but not at the moment. The time is 10.20 and they are running past the international house towards the sweet shop next door. The long break has started, when the intense consumption of crisps, caramel and chocolate can begin. The teachers drink their tea, and can hear the call to prayer from the mosque in Lower Yanoun. The building was built recently, ready for Ramadan i October 2004. The money for its construction was donated by an anonymous benefactor from the Ramallah area. The donation included wages for the villagers, who built the mosque themselves.

After 2002, Yanoun has undergone several types of development: two new water reservoirs have been built, an electric network has been installed, the road between Lower Yanoun and Aqraba has been paved, and the road between Upper and Lower Yanoun has been enlarged and improved, and finally paved in mid



Yanoun pupils. Photo:

October 2005. A school bus between Yanoun and Aqraba has been sponsored by a French organisation, so that the pupils no longer have to walk a potentially dangerous road to school.

Upper Yanoun is located in what Israeli Authorities refers to as 'Area C'. This area is under the full security and administrative responsibility of Israel. Since 1992, the Israeli Civil Administration has forbidden any construction in the area. While extremist Jews have settled on the hilltops around Yanoun, the villagers themselves have not been able to build any new buildings on their own land. Several of Yanoun's young men have lately expressed a wish to build a house and establish a family in their village, but have had their request denied. This happened to one of Khaleb's sons. He had almost finished building a new house for his wife and himself beside his father's house, when a bulldozer from the Israeli Defence Forces demolished it. The damaged building, still standing on the property of Abu Hani, is a sad reminder of the stranglehold the Israeli authorities exert upon all Palestinian development.

This ban against building new houses and the threat posed by the settlers are the two main difficulties the villagers of Yanoun face today. Yet the villagers have learned to appreciate the improvements that have been made to the town since 2002.

"Compared to some years ago, we are in a good condition now. Before, the settlers made problems, no one knew about our problems, and no one cared about these things. Now if there are small problems, everyone comes to help. Many projects have made it better to live in Yanoun; new electricity, the paved road, and the school bus", Samira Bani Jaber says. Her son Munther also appreciates the developments that have made village life easier.

"Sometimes I am sceptical about the current situation in Yanoun, with the settlers around us. But then I think of these projects that have been done to improve the quality of people's lives in Yanoun", he says. "Before we had no concrete road and no electricity, but life was peaceful. Later the settlers came down to our village and made problems. After the internationals came the problems became less," Khamal concludes.

"Without the settlers, Yanoun is more beautiful and better than every other place," says Yasser.

Adnan Abu-Haneia, 33, lives with his wife and son in Lower Yanoun. Born in Yanoun, he studied chemical engineering in Jordan for five years, and today works for the Ministry of National Economy in Nablus. He will never leave Yanoun, and points to his father's experience in 1948 when he had to leave his village in what was to become the state of Israel.

"Until this day my father speaks about his village, Ajoor. He can talk about it for hours. If I leave my village I will face similar difficulties in the future. I will not leave Yanoun, and I hope we can develop here", he says.

Najeh, 51, was also born in Yanoun. He studied in Aqraba and in Nablus. In 1977 he left Yanoun and moved to Kuwait where he lived for 14 years. He says that life in Yanoun is good but not without difficulty. It is a daily struggle to reach work, which is outside the village, due to current travel restrictions.

"I am very disappointed about the Palestinian Government because it does not give any money to the people in Yanoun. If I want to get to my work near Nablus, first I have to go on foot to Aqraba then take the bus and pass two checkpoints where I often have to wait for more than an hour", he says.

Manal Bani Jaber lives in Lower Yanoun with her husband and their six children. Her husband was released from prison in April 2005. He spent 12 months on so-called 'administrative detention' – arbitrary imprisonment without trial or conviction. She says she would prefer to live in Yanoun than in Aqraba, even if Yanoun was without electricity.

"The people here are very nice. There is no noise here, the air is good and I love the nature and agriculture. Most of the villagers are here because of the sheep. We used to have sheep, but not any more, it was too much when my husband was in prison. Life in general is hard in Yanoun. A farmer's life is hard everywhere, but here it is especially difficult because of the settlers. Sometimes I am afraid to go to the well and I always look to see where my children are. You are

automatically afraid when you see people with weapons”.

Today, every resident in Yanoun has been affected by the presence of the settlers. Asked if they have had any positive experiences with the settlers, the villagers say no. Their encounters with settlers have been exclusively negative. Many of the women are afraid and angry, and see no improvement in the relationship between the villagers and the settlers.

“My first feeling when I see them is fear. I hate them from the deepest part of my heart because one of them shot at me when I was picking olives in Nabinun, a year ago. I was with some of my children. When I escaped, the settler ran after us. Another time, I was with my husband and daughter Rada working. A journalist from Egypt was there, and when he went, a settler said to us: ‘We’ll kill you if you stay here’,” says Hamdah Abu-Haneia from Lower Yanoun. She can’t see any way Palestinians and settlers can live in peace.

“It’s impossible to make peace with this small group, because settlers see what their government does. The government kills Palestinians and makes war. How can you make peace with people who steal your land?”

Her neighbour in Lower Yanoun, Manal, says she has no positive experiences with settlers whatsoever.

“They destroy a lot of things and scare the children. I would never talk to settlers. When I see one, I run away. Settlers are like the wolf in the fairy tale ‘Red Riding Hood’: First they talk very nicely and then they eat you. There will be peace when settlers want peace, because we want to have peace.”

Samira says that her view on settlers is clear.

“There is a feeling of injustice. If you were a Palestinian, and someone took your land and your house, how would you feel? The settlers should not have guns and weapons. And they should live in Israel, because we can’t live on our land. They should end the apartheid between Palestinians and settlers. There is no problem for settlers to build houses on this land [The Occupied Territories] but it is forbidden for Palestinians even if it is our land.”

Despite having endured nine years of terror, there is no urge for revenge among the people of Yanoun. The general attitude among the villagers is that, if they were only able to farm their fields and graze sheep on their land, there would be no problem with having settlers as neighbours. But the villagers of Yanoun have very little hope of changing the nature of the settlers and the attitude of the Israeli government.

Fouzi, the school’s headmaster, remembers November 2002. Thirty or forty settlers armed with automatic guns entered the village. They entered the house of Khader Abu Morad; and he and his wife and Fouzi’s father were injured. Khader was taken to the hospital. “We only want to live in peace. The settlers make the problems. They have taken our land and left just a small part of it to us. What can we do?”

Khamal’s children were traumatised after settlers came to their house in October 2002. “If we can go freely to our fields and feed the sheep, we can live together with the settlers. Now our fields are closed for us.”

Rashid says the same. The settlers have stolen his family’s fields in Lower Yanoun. He has four children to feed. “We can live in peace if they let us have our land. I am a peaceful man.”

When Yasser fled to Aqraba with his family, settlers killed their chickens and stole their sheep. When they returned after several months, the windows of their house had been broken and everything inside was smashed. “The settlers want to have the whole valley for themselves so that they can build new houses. I cannot see how we can live peacefully side by side with the settlers.”

Despite having lost around 100 dunams (25 acres) of land to the settlers, Khaled does not feel bitterness or anger. “We only want to live in peace. Then we will have a very good life here in Yanoun” he says.



Since Upper Yanoun is located in Area C, the villagers' security is the responsibility of the Israeli administration. Under the Geneva Conventions the Palestinians have protected status in international law. The people of Yanoun do not feel they have the legal or physical protection of any government. They have not been harmed by the Israeli Defence Forces or the Israeli police, but neither do they receive the protection that is both their right and that they so desperately need.

"When the settlers come, there is nothing we can do. Rashid can call the army but they are of no help. They are here to protect the settlers", says Fouzi.

"When the Israeli army does show up in Yanoun, the soldiers clearly want to give the impression that they support the villagers and are trying to help. Yet their actions show that they side with the settlers. When, at harvest time, the Palestinians prepare for the olive picking, the army asks the settlers if the Palestinians can pick the olives or not. If they say no, the army says no", says Samira.

On January 13, 2005, two police cars and two army jeeps drew up outside Rashid's house. A police officer questioned Rashid and took note of his answers. The police were there because seven settlers had been in the village an hour before. The settlers had climbed on top of the house of the Khaleb family. The family ran into the house when they saw them. From the roof the settlers screamed and waved their weapons, before they made their way across the fields and out of sight. While Ecumenical Accompaniers Karin Huber from Switzerland and Thomas Mandal from Norway observed the officer questioning Rashid, Yasser came up to them. "The police spend a lot of time here now. It is because they see that you are here. Before, when we called them, they would just come and ask where the settlers were, and when we told them that they had just gone, they would leave, and we never heard anything from them".

Also Najeh stresses the importance of an international presence in the village. He and his family fled to Aqraba in October 2002, but returned after three days because they felt safer with the peace activists in the village.

"During this difficult period the village received help from the army. We knew that if they didn't help us, the internationals would inform media and press."

Adnan has also had his share of settler violence. A bullet, fired by a settler, hit a stone next to his leg. The stone shattered, fragments injuring his leg. Hurt, he returned to his house. He was beaten by the settlers along the way. He spent four days in a hospital in Nablus.

“If the internationals leave, the villagers will leave soon after. The army gives no protection to us. They are here to protect the settlers, he says.

Since the incident in October during which the villagers had to flee from their homes, there have been international observers in Yanoun. EAPPI representatives have been there every single day since September 2003: living, working, eating, drinking, crying and laughing together with the villagers. Young men and women with western, urban backgrounds can find it difficult to adjust to life in a tiny Islamic village society where cultural and religious norms are so different to what they are used to. Palestinians, sometimes find it difficult to accept the way foreigners behave in their village, such as when unmarried men and women live in the same house. Nevertheless, villagers and visitors alike have displayed mutual humility and understanding, and life side by side has been not only possible but also productive. The villagers have shown a remarkable tolerance and openness across the boundaries of faith, culture and age. The result is that the vast majority of the around 27 Ecumenical Accompaniers so far to have lived in Yanoun have left the village with new friends and an urge to return again.

The internationals have, according to the villagers, been professional in their work and generally very sociable.

“I am very happy about the internationals,” Khaleb says. He appreciates the help he receives during the olive harvest. “I have made many personal friends. Some of them call me from abroad,” he says.

“People feel good about them because they represent a kind of protection. They make people stay. This feeling is particularly strong in Upper Yanoun,” Adnan says. “But there should not be too many internationals here at the same time. Two are enough. Even during the [olive] harvest the farmers can make it on

their own,” he says.

“I am glad the internationals are here. They can observe the truth and can give a kind of protection”, Fouzi says.

“Yanoun is better with internationals, because we are afraid of the settlers, and because it is more interesting to live here with them around,” Hamdah says.

Samira smiles when she is asked about the internationals. “They are good! Sometimes they ask us strange questions – not these internationals but the first – about Bin Laden, what we think of him. There is no Bin Laden here,” she laughs.

“Now I know that my children are safe. I can go to Nablus knowing that they are safe when there are internationals in the village,” Rashid says.

But the international presence in Yanoun cannot continue indefinitely. Both the villagers and the EAPPI are fully aware of this matter. What will happen when the internationals leave? Yanoun’s villagers are convinced that the settlers will attack the village once more, with the same intensity as they did in the months before the villagers fled in October 2002.

“If the internationals leave, it would only take half an hour before the settlers come down. They watch everything we do, every movement. They know everything about us,” Rashid says.

“The settlers would come more regularly, and there would be a lot more problems. I would be more afraid, especially during the olive harvest,” Manal says.

“In my opinion, the internationals are supportive and friendly. If they moved away, the army would not come to help us when we need help”, Munther says.

“Without the internationals, the problems would start again and the children would be afraid again,” Khamal says.

Some are convinced that the settlers' violence would become unbearable, and that they would be forced to leave their homes again.

"I am very glad the internationals are here. We could not live here without them," Najeh says.

"I would move to Nablus if they left," Hamdah says.

Adnan is worried about the fact that the village has become dependent upon the internationals. "We have to realize that they will not be here forever, and try to find solutions. Which solutions, I don't know," he says.

Palestine has been under occupation since 1967. How can Israelis and Palestinians resolve this conflict?

"Without occupation or settlements", Samira says.

Hamdah also stresses the need to dismantle the settlements, and to remove the wall that is currently under construction. She believes the Palestinian refugees who were expelled in 1947 and 1948 must be allowed to return to their homes.

"To have peace, everyone must return to their homeland. Some refugees have the keys to their houses. Before the first Intifada, my father would take his children to a village called Ajoor and show them their land. Then a large number of settlers went into the village and made their marks on stones, water wells and other things that belonged to Palestinians. Once I went there with my brother, and the settlers threw stones at us", she says.

Yasser believes that peace with Israel would be possible if Israel were to withdraw to the borders of 1967. Rashid agrees. "It has to be a two-state solution with the borders from 1967. We can't have one state. A border would be the safest. The two peoples have to be separated. I am a peaceful man – it is the settlers who are the terrorists", he says.

Manal also believes in a peaceful solution. "The Israeli government must forbid the settlers from behaving as they are doing. Then peace is possible – even in one state. When the Israelis stop harassing us, then peace will be possible."

There is hope for a peaceful solution in Yanoun, but if the Israeli authorities do not dismantle the illegal outposts, the village's future is questionable. For most of the inhabitants, there is no other solution. A few villagers – mostly the younger generation – are at least partially optimistic. Adnan has just started working with bees, which supplements the income he receives from his chickens.

"You have to accept the fact that the settlers are here, and try to look forward and enjoy your life. So many things are better than before. I have my job, there are is electricity, and a paved road - and I have my projects".

When he has finished his studies, Munther wants to live in Yanoun. "I would like to complete my studies at the University of Nablus and gain a Masters degree in Arabic. I like my village and I want to stay here in the future," he says

But most of the people in Yanoun are pessimistic.

"Yanoun used to be a very good place to live. There were cows and goats and a family could have more than 400 sheep. Yanoun was called 'The Jewel of the mountain'. Now the future seems dark. No one is allowed to build a new house in the village. The young people have to move out. The fear of harassment by the settlers is always there. Knowing that you are fenced in on three sides with only one way out is a burden," Fouzi says.

IBRAHIM (aged 12)

"I can't look at the settlers or speak to them. I just hide from them. I hid once at Khaleb's house, at the lake. There was a big plant, and some settlers were there, so I hid in the plant. Another time I was with the shepherd. The settlers had a quad bike and they fell off, so the settlers were angry and the children were happy."



Can Palestinians and settlers live peacefully together?

"Maybe small children can. If they are playing together. But older ones can't because both sides know what is happening around them. Older ones know what Israelis did. They stole our land. Israelis have the wrong idea about Palestinians so they would struggle to live peacefully."

EAPPI on the future of Yanoun

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) has maintained a consistent and permanent presence in the village of Yanoun since September 2003, with representatives living in one of the concrete houses in the village. What future plans does EAPPI have in Yanoun? If any change is to be made to the status quo, how will this happen? Can people live in Yanoun without an international presence in the village?

Hermina Damons, EAPPI Local Programme Coordinator, explains that the international presence cannot remain in the village indefinitely.

“The community has the mindset that their mere survival depends on our presence there, and during the Gaza withdrawal put lots of pressure on us to mobilise more people. The fear is real. But what is also real is that they cannot go on like this forever and it is my belief that while we have a protective presence there the locals should start looking at how they could survive on their own. It of course only seems possible right now if the occupation is stopped and the Itamar settlement is evacuated, both of which is out of their hands.

“I believe that our advocacy efforts should and could showcase Yanoun to the world for special attention. EAPPI will be a protective presence for as long as we are needed but even this, considering that the lifespan of the programme, might not outlive the conflict.

“Some glossary of the current developments is that: The village mayor in Aqraba and the residents are putting asphalt on the road linking Yanoun to Aqraba. The villagers of Yanoun have bought a ‘new’ school bus. Families are returning to Yanoun, although very cautiously. This shows us that the villagers have a hope for a better future with no threat from their immediate neighbours.”

Ta’ayush on the future of Yanoun

Ta’ayush describes itself as a ‘grassroots movement of Arabs and Jews working to break down the walls of racism and segregation by constructing a true Arab-Jewish partnership’. Ta’ayush activists were among the first to come to the villagers’ aid in Yanoun in October 2002 when the villagers had to flee from their homes. Ta’ayush representative Gadi Algazi has been deeply involved in the situation in Yanoun. In his opinion the villagers of Yanoun can depend on no one but themselves in the future. The best way to help the villagers is by providing infrastructure, communication and attention.

“Our basic position is that the struggle to stay on one’s land is basically a Palestinian one. Others can help, but it remains basically a Palestinian struggle. We therefore decided very early not to institutionalise a continual presence in Yanoun. We know very well how dangerous the Itamar settlers are and how isolated, topographically, Yanoun is. Even our activists, privileged as they are with Israeli citizenship, have had their share of the settler violence. But our idea was to avoid a situation in which the life of the village depends on the presence of outsiders. We therefore focused (within a broad alliance involving many groups) on infrastructure (the road to Aqraba), communication and attention (a sort of safety shield: no other single village in the West Bank has become as well known as Yanoun), and make the plight of the village visible within Palestinian society in order to draw on its energy and solidarity. This does not guarantee, of course, that the people of Yanoun will stay, but the chances are good, given their admirable determination and the fact that they are not alone. One should not forget that many other small, Palestinian communities face similar, though not identical, pressures from settlers and the army.”



Yanoun – Human dignity in practice

A personal reflection from former Ecumenical Accompanier Ursula Gelis

The increasing influence of the media – its bias and power – and how it forms our opinions and our lives is constantly under discussion. Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to Israel-Palestine. Personal observation alone can provide us with a clearer picture. An example of this can be experienced in the village of Yanoun. Negative media coverage is challenged, as absolute polarisation between the conflicting parties no longer holds. Palestinians are talking and listening to Israelis and Israeli peace activists are talking and listening to Palestinians.

For about ten weeks I had the privilege of living with the villagers in Yanoun. I witnessed many encounters between people unwilling to accept the creation of hostile images. The villagers made the effort to look closely at people, not necessarily focusing on where they came from and where they belonged. They are proud of their long history in the region. If you go for a walk with them among their olive orchards, still cultivated in the traditional way, the owners smile at you and talk proudly about the spiritual and economic value of their trees. The people are strongly connected to their soil and they practice an Islam founded on the principles of modesty and sharing. Their daily rhythm basically follows the course of the sun, they are grateful for the water springs and their crops, and tough politics is left to the cities. Family life, their flocks of sheep and the olive trees determine the life of the people of Yanoun.

The Israeli action plan to make the ‘new territories’ available to Jewish settlers – with all the negative consequences to the local Palestinians – is clearly visible in Yanoun. The settlers are not interested in dialogue and the fate of the

Palestinians is not their concern. Their presence today is a tremendous threat to the inhabitants of the Palestinian village because the people of the Itamar settlement are heavily armed. They want the country for themselves and fantasies of expulsion of the Palestinian communities nourish their dreams.

The current situation causes much trouble and relaxation is rarely possible in Yanoun. Many have not returned after they were driven out of the village in 2002. Up until today their empty homes in the beautiful village are silent witnesses of the incursion. The people of Yanoun have succeeded in continuing their lives with joy and an interest in anything new in spite of the fact that nothing can be seen as 'normal' any more. Every single activity, every incident can turn out to be of great risk. People manage to cope with the daily irritations brought by the occupation of their land. They are able to distinguish between friend and foe. Israelis who visit Yanoun to help and to show their solidarity and understanding of the perils the Palestinians face are always welcomed in Yanoun. This openness of the villagers is a true sign of hope.

The people of Yanoun wish to be free. They want to be in command of their lives. International peace volunteers and the Israeli peace activists acting in solidarity with Yanoun understand that legitimate demand. I found Yanoun to be a place where dialogue is possible, a place where the official images of sworn enemies are put under close scrutiny. The villagers have kept their inherent and inherited pride. They know that their suffering and perils are caused by unjust means and believe that their rightful cause will prevail. In Yanoun I personally experienced the indestructibility of human dignity. I am grateful to all the people of Yanoun who received me warm-heartedly and openly. The willingness of the people of Yanoun to educate their children, to stand up for their rights and to listen is a positive attitude on the way to a peaceful future.

Conclusion

In December 2003, two young men, of roughly 17 and 20 years of age, walked through Upper Yanoun carrying M-16 rifles. The rifles were not slung over their backs, but in their hands, ready to be fired. They threatened the villagers, trying to force the men into their houses. The women and children had already withdrawn to safety. The intruders had a close look at the well before they walked across the valley and started up the track to the house of Khaleb. We saw the children run inside but the old man continued to sit outside. The settlers walked through the yard, rifles in their hands. Khaleb rose and followed them as they moved across his property and out onto the hillside. "Tea?", he asked. "Please sit down and have some tea".

The non-violent actions and attitudes of the villagers of Yanoun is admirable. For the last nine years they have been living in constant fear of their neighbours who believe that the land is theirs, given to them by God. Their encounters with the villagers have shown that they are not willing to communicate. Instead, they allow their M-16 machine guns to do the talking, a form of communication that has no place in civilized society. Every individual, of whatever faith, culture or background, who finds his way to the village of Yanoun will meet people who are willing to listen to, and to respect, his views and standpoints, to discuss them, to agree or to disagree. In Itamar, if you do not share the faith of the settlers, your e-mails and phone calls will remain unanswered.

Israeli peace activists have since 2002 travelled deep into the West Bank, to areas that most Israelis consider to be dangerous for Jews. Areas where most Israelis are convinced they will be slaughtered by Palestinian gunmen. The peace activists have found partners for peace in the villagers of Yanoun. They have found each other, and, together with voluntary international observers and activists, are carrying out good work where the United Nations and the international community have failed.

The Jewish settlements and their outposts in the West Bank are illegal according to international law. Only the outposts are illegal according to Israeli law. Thousands of Palestinians are liable to become displaced or, indeed, find themselves as refugees in the West Bank as these outposts continue to grow. People like the villagers of Yanoun have no legal protection from any authority. Of all the violent incidents, and the theft of large areas of land and hundreds of olive trees, only one individual from the Itamar settlement has been held responsible and legally prosecuted.

None of the villagers of Yanoun have ever attacked the settlers. Their lives continue under harsh conditions: all development in the village is blocked, the 'security zones' around the outposts prevent them from tending their olive trees, and the threat of violence from the settlers is constant. The spotlights on the hills and the potential for violence have been ever-present factors in the childhoods of many of the children of Yanoun. If the Israeli government were to dismantle all illegal outposts in the Occupied Territories, these children and their parents would be able to live normal lives, and tea drinking would once again triumph over the use of guns.

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Useful information

Norwegian Church Aid: <http://english.nca.no/article/view/4158>

Ecumenical Accompaniment in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI): www.eappi.org

Itamar homepage: www.shechem.org/itamar

Amnesty International: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENG-MDE150852003>

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