Opinion

The Olive Tree Facing the Geographic Trap

How Is Control Exercised in the Name of "Administrative Classifications"?

Opinion | Dr. Amin ABU AL-SOUD - Researcher in Policy and Agricultural Development

When media reports, citing official Israeli sources, reveal a recent move by the Israeli government to prevent Palestinian farmers from harvesting olives on what is called "state land," and to restrict their access to some of their own land through specified arrangements and restrictions, this is not a passing security measure or a neutral administrative decision. It is another link in a longstanding system of segregation and racial discrimination. These policies redefine the Palestinian's relationship with the land, turning someone with an inherent right into a person who needs a permit from the occupying authorities to reach their land and source of livelihood.

The danger of this kind of arbitrary decision is that it is not usually presented as confiscation or uprooting, but as an administrative classification or a temporary measure purportedly intended to protect the security of Israeli settlers. Its practical effect, however, is clear: restricting access to the land, diminishing the ability to use it, and leaving it vulnerable to damage, attack, or de facto seizure. Administrative language thus becomes a tool for producing a new political and on-the-ground reality.

From Interim Division to Permanent Control

The division of the West Bank into Areas "A," "B," and "C" under the Oslo Accords was an interim arrangement that was supposed to lead to a final resolution. But rather than bringing the Israeli occupation to an end, over time this arrangement became a permanent structure for managing movement, land, and resources. In this context, the phrase "state land" does not appear to be merely a legal description; when used to prevent landowners from accessing their land, it becomes a means of entrenching control and reshaping priorities on the ground.

The problem lies not in the term alone, but in the consequences, it produces in practice. A farmer who cultivated their land or inherited it from their forebears, and continued to access it for decades, now finds themselves facing a gate, a checkpoint, or the separation wall; required to undergo complex security-coordination procedures; or subject to a military order barring them from reaching and harvesting their crop. In this way, the Israeli occupation authorities redefine the natural right to land, turning it from an inherent right into a privilege conditional on their approval, and use military orders as cover for administering deprivation and entrenching control over the land.

The Olive: Economy, Identity, and the Right to Live

The olive season cannot be reduced to a limited agricultural activity. In a statement published on 5 July 2026, the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture said that Palestine has about 13 million olive trees planted across an area of approximately one million dunums.1

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have also reported that the olive sector in the West Bank and Gaza Strip supports the livelihoods of at least 75,000 farmers, provides around 100,000 seasonal jobs, and contributes about 15% of agricultural GDP, according to 2020 data.2

These figures show that preventing access to olive trees does not mean losing just one season's crop. It threatens farmers' income, seasonal employment, and the chains of transport, pressing, packaging, and marketing, while also undermining local food security. More importantly, the olive tree represents a historical and social bond between families and the land; disrupting the harvest therefore harms the economy and identity at the same time.

Attacks Are Not Isolated Incidents

United Nations reports show that the problem is not limited to access decisions. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented 167 attacks related to the olive season between 1 October and 10 November 2025. They affected 87 villages and towns and resulted in about 151 Palestinians being injured, in addition to damage to more than 5,700 trees and saplings, most of them olive trees.3

The attacks included assaults on farmers in their groves or on their way to them, theft of crops and harvesting tools, and damage to trees.

During the 2023 season, OCHA reported that more than 96,000 dunums of land planted with olive trees went unharvested because of access restrictions, and that direct losses exceeded $10 million. It also documented 113 incidents related to the harvest season and damage to more than 2,000 trees in those incidents.4

When official restrictions linked to military orders coincide with settler attacks, and effective protection or genuine accountability is absent, talk of "organizing the season" becomes misleading. In practice, the result is to push farmers away from their land, leave trees and crops uncared for, and create conditions that help gradually reshape ownership and control on the ground.

What Is Needed Is Protection of Rights, Not Management of Deprivation

Addressing confrontations with settler invaders, if that is the stated pretext, cannot mean denying farmers access to their land. The solution is to protect civilians; keep roads and gates open regularly and predictably; guarantee safe access to fields throughout the year; investigate attacks; and hold those responsible to account, regardless of their identity.

The international community cannot simply issue statements of concern whenever the harvest season begins. What is needed is real political and legal pressure to guarantee Palestinians' right to work and to access their land, and to reject the transformation of occupation into bureaucratic procedures that appear neutral in their wording while producing deprivation on the ground. Arab states should move from verbal solidarity to supporting farmers and Palestinian products, documenting attacks, and calling for clear protection and accountability mechanisms.

The olive tree faces not only the threat of uprooting; it also faces a geographic and administrative trap intended to separate Palestinians from their land without a formal declaration of direct confiscation. Defending the olive season is therefore a defense of the right to land, to work, and to dignity, and of the Palestinian community's continued presence on its land. No classification imposed by the occupation can turn this right into a temporary grant or a revocable permit.

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