

PALESTINE: FOR LAND AND LIFE

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# CANAAN PALESTINE

CULTIVATING HOPE IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY





## Location: Canaan Palestine, Jenin

*Canaan Palestine helps Palestinian farmers to grow organic crops and get fair trade certification. Improved market access and increased returns on their crops makes it possible for thousands of Palestinian farmers and their families to earn a better living. The project gives hope for the future of food producers living and working under Israeli occupation.*

“In the land of Canaan, where the first agricultural revolution took place, we are defined by agriculture. Even today, agriculture is the main activity of the Palestinian population. It is not just about the livelihood – it is key to the very survival of our culture. And with the occupation, the determination and persistence to be on the land and continue to farm is the main stay of our resistance.”

—Nasser Abufarha,<sup>1</sup> founder of Canaan Palestine

Canaan is the ancient name of a vast and prosperous country, roughly located in the same place as modern-day Palestine and Israel. The heritage of this land of abundance – flowing with milk and honey – is the source behind Canaan Palestine, an initiative grounded in culture, nature, and hope.

Anchored in the harsh reality of the West Bank, where the Israeli occupation creates extreme pressures on families dependent on agriculture, Canaan Palestine was launched in 2004 with the goal to provide better livelihoods to Palestinian farmers. It links local agrarian traditions – notably olive farming – with modern organic and fair trade labeling to improve market access and economic returns for farmers.

In the span of 13 years, Canaan’s programs have successfully established stable and sustainable agricultural value chains supplied by Palestinian farmer cooperatives. The project now trades Palestinian organic, fair trade-certified olive oil as well as other delicacies with clients based in 18 countries, including the US retail chain Whole Foods and the UK supermarket Sainsbury’s.<sup>2</sup> By revitalizing dwindling olive production and markets in the West Bank, Canaan

has made it possible for thousands of Palestinian farmers and their families to earn better living. The initiative is cultivating a crucial sense of community and hope for the future for food producers under Israeli occupation.

### **FARMING UNDER OCCUPATION: THREATS TO THE OLIVE GROWERS IN THE WEST BANK**

Around the world, farming is threatened by increasing risks. Environmental degradation has damaged soil and water sources in many areas, climate variations have become more frequent and drastic, and dependence on volatile global markets is causing great precariousness.

But Palestinian farmers are faced with an additional range of threats. Under Israeli domination, their lands, water, markets, and their very lives are routinely jeopardized. For instance, since 1967 the Israeli Defense Forces have destroyed some 800,000 olive trees in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> While security concerns are used to justify this destruction, Palestinians argue that the true goal behind destroying a crop vitally linked to Palestinian identity and economy is to reinforce Israel’s domination and allow further colonization.<sup>11</sup>



“In the United States, our products are labeled as the “Product of West Bank,” and not as a product from Palestine. Just two weeks ago, Israeli customs stopped our export container going to Toronto, Canada which was labeled as the product of Palestine. It was held for ten days, before being released.”<sup>12</sup>

Olives are Palestine’s second major export good,<sup>13</sup> worth some \$150-200 million of income every year.<sup>14</sup> They have been cultivated for generations, and over 100,000 West Bank families depend on them.<sup>15</sup> As a whole, it is estimated that the agricultural sector provides formal and informal employment to 90 percent of Palestinians.<sup>16</sup> This is despite the fact that restrictions are frequently imposed by the Israeli government on the types of agricultural inputs that Palestinian farmers can use, on food imports and exports, and on transportation of the produce through road checkpoints.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Israeli agricultural production is supported by government subsidies and cheaper production costs, rigging market odds against the Palestinians.<sup>18</sup>

West Bank farmers also experience immense pressures on their lands and natural resources as Israeli settlements increasingly encroach on fertile areas and capture crucial water supplies.<sup>19</sup> The cost of water is three times as high for Palestinians as it is for Israelis living in nearby settlements, while permits to install water pipes and dig underground wells are nearly impossible to obtain.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, settlements that lack drainage infrastructure dump waste water on farms and grazing areas.<sup>21</sup>

This challenging context has made olive farming increasingly valuable since olive trees are generally rain-fed. But it has also made it more vulnerable. Olive picking is traditionally performed collectively by communities, but families who gather for harvests are subject to attacks from Israeli settlers.<sup>22</sup> Incidents can lead to the cancellation of the picking,<sup>23</sup> while transportation delays may result in product damage. Limited export opportunities can cause market oversupply and drive prices down.<sup>24</sup>

**CANAAN, A HYBRID STRUCTURE TO SERVE A UNIQUE GOAL: THE EMPOWERMENT OF PALESTINIAN FARMERS**

“The industrialization of agriculture around the world has also impacted Palestine. In addition, we are faced with policies that are removing us forcefully and even banning us from our own



Harvest time in the land of milk and honey © The Oakland Institute

**CANAAN PALESTINE IN FIGURES**

Canaan works with 2,500 farmers from 52 communities, organized in 55 cooperatives.<sup>3</sup> These include five women’s cooperatives that involve some 200 women.<sup>4</sup>

The annual sales of Canaan’s fair trade olive oil increased from 23 tons in its first year of operation (2005) to some 800 tons in recent years.<sup>5</sup> The revenue grew from \$204,000 in 2005 to over \$9 million in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

Canaan’s members represent about two percent of Palestinian olive farmers but produce about seven percent of the crop, a testament to the efficiency of their sustainable and organic production methods.<sup>7</sup>

When the project began, the average Palestinian farmer earned eight *shekels* (around \$2) for a liter of olive oil. Canaan offered twice as much (15-17 *shekels*, around \$4) for olive oil produced according to fair trade standards.<sup>8</sup> Since then, prices have continued to rise and Canaan farmers can now receive as much as 25 *shekels* (\$6.50) per liter.<sup>9</sup>



Local products for sale at the Canaan Fair Trade facility © The Oakland Institute

land while regulatory measures deny us markets. In the face of this hardship, Canaan Palestine works to provide tools to understand how and why we can benefit from our tradition of agriculture. We are developing an economic system invested in the communities and land, and that brings value to farmers by bringing their products to the marketplace.

We complement this work with research on how to support and continue traditional practices. For instance, how do we sustain the landraces – original vegetation that nature produced and has survived thousands of years – which have distinct value in the market? Our aim is to restore and strengthen relations with land and restore the land itself. We believe that the farmers are cultural carriers and we respect and treasure them.”<sup>25</sup>

When Nasser Abufarha came up with the idea to develop fair trade olive oil production in Palestine in 2004, a liter of oil was worth a mere eight *shekels* (about \$2).<sup>26</sup> With

these low prices, harvesting and processing was barely worth the price received, forcing many farmers to abandon their crops. Abufarha partnered with farmers to launch the Palestine Fair Trade Association (PFTA), a non-profit organization that developed the first fair trade standards for olive oil.

The PFTA started with few members, but it now organizes 55 cooperatives, with 2,500 member farmers<sup>27</sup> who produce olives as well as other crops such as almonds, tomatoes, fennel seeds, and more.<sup>28</sup> The association works hand-in-hand with a for-profit enterprise, Canaan Fair Trade (CFT), which acts as the intermediary to process, package, and export the goods. CFT – also a creation of Abufarha – trades with socially and ecologically minded clients in the Global North, including LUSH cosmetics, Dr Bonners’ soaps, Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, and various fair trade and natural retail stores.<sup>29</sup>



The PFTA and CFT collaborate to help farmers obtain fair trade and organic certification, which involves training and independent third-party inspections. The training programs educate farmers on sustainable agriculture production – including soil and tree care, plowing, harvesting, and storage techniques – and on Canaan’s organizational functioning, as well as fair trade production standards.<sup>30</sup> Though training and certification costs were initially subsidized by development partners, Canaan is now financing these through its own income.<sup>31</sup>

The PFTA and CFT constantly seek to develop new products to diversify farmers’ incomes. In addition to olive oil, Canaan sells almond oil (in 2016, the project had 400 hectares of almond tree orchards),<sup>32</sup> honey, wheat goods, carob syrup, condiments, and more.<sup>33</sup> In a quest to improve agricultural techniques and marketing, Canaan Organic Research and Extension Center (CORE), a non-profit research center, was set up as well in 2013.<sup>34</sup>

**“Since we started with almonds, exports have increased by 1,000 percent.”**

“Since we started with almonds, exports have increased by 1,000 percent, with 60 percent of the growth in the US market, 20 percent in South Korea, and 20 percent in the EU. This is directly benefitting 212 farmers who are selling their almonds. The others have just planted. We see the impact of our work through enhanced production. Comparison between the local market price and the US export price has changed the minds of the farmers who wanted to pull out the almond trees. Now they want to plant more.

We have limited power to change things. So we work on the ground. There is a shortage of water. So we are providing almond tree varieties that are rain-fed. In addition, we are doing research on irrigation. While the productivity is lower given the dependence of trees on rain, the value for the crops is helping farmers.”<sup>35</sup>

Since 2013, CORE has been organizing research, training, and extension services to enhance sustainable agricultural methods while preserving traditional Palestinian varieties and revitalizing rich agricultural and social traditions.<sup>36</sup> The center also researches agricultural value chain opportunities to expand the market-reach of farmers locally and abroad.<sup>37</sup> Two commercial enterprises based in



The Canaan Palestine team © The Oakland Institute

Europe and the US (Canaan USA), are helping promote and sell the products overseas, while a US-based foundation, “Land of Canaan,” is providing endowments to help sustain Palestinian farmers.<sup>38</sup>

**BEYOND PROFIT: THE SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF THE CANAAN PROJECT**

Canaan’s innovative hybrid structure is empowering farmers through economic stability, community building, and the preservation of traditional farming practices and livelihoods. Canaan directly benefits an estimated 15,000 people<sup>39</sup> – both farmers and their families – but has also had an indirect revitalizing effect on Palestinian olive farming. By opening new avenues for international olive oil marketing, the project has helped decrease local oversupply and driven prices up.<sup>40</sup>

**“Market is a huge issue for farmers. In 2004, when Canaan opened, the price of olive oil was plummeting. Given the political situation, we did not have the market or the quality. So the best plan was to sell olive oil from the West Bank to Gaza. When Canaan opened the international markets – first in the US and then in Europe – prices were higher for farmers through fair trade.”**

—Samer Jarrar, staff at CORE<sup>41</sup>

Canaan's product costs include a social premium, which is redistributed to individual producers, cooperatives, and the PFTA. This helps invest in infrastructure that benefits communities as a whole, and covers organizational needs.<sup>42</sup> CFT and the PFTA have developed social and environmental programs including scholarships for farmers' children, a microloan program, and interest-free loans to Canaan managers who develop social entrepreneurship projects. Canaan's Tree for Life initiative also donates tree saplings to help counter the destruction of plantations by the Israeli army and get poorer farmers started with fair trade production.

Supporting women farmers is another important element of Canaan Palestine. It is intentionally developing products made from traditionally women-grown crops and organizing women's cooperatives to ensure female members have a say in organizational decisions.<sup>43</sup>

Additional outcomes of the Canaan project include ecological benefits, as farmers do not rely on chemical pesticides and work to regenerate soil fertility (practicing crop rotations, applying organic fertilizers, fighting erosion, etc.).<sup>44</sup> Canaan's Green Track Palestine program is converting farmers' tractor engines to run on used falafel oil.<sup>45</sup>

Most importantly, though, Canaan is proving that collective effort, pooling of resources, and community can achieve spectacular results. While building renewed pride in Palestinian identity and culture by sharing Palestine's traditional crops and specialties with the rest of the world – not only olives but also wheat products such as *freekeh* and *maftoul* and spice blends like *Za'atar* are now known around the world.<sup>46</sup> In unity with the global ecological and social movement, farmers are experiencing new freedom from the many restrictions to economic development imposed by Israel. Sharing their stories with the world through Canaan's interface, the CFT website, profiles of producers and their families<sup>47</sup> have been met with widespread international interest and solidarity.

Canaan products come "from the land of milk and honey," urging others to recognize the rich and ancient culture that is deeply rooted in Palestinian land, instead of focusing on the conflict and despair. For farmers under the control of Israel, Canaan's impact is tremendous. Canaan Palestine is an effective form of peaceful resistance – an agro-resistance that is carving space for dignity, ambition, entrepreneurship, prosperity, and hope. It is ensuring basic human rights.

"Take back our story and share with the world. We love that people visit us and bring back the print and image of our people. Farmers might not know the concept of organizing but they are doing it. And at Canaan, we are learning from the farmers as we combine traditional knowledge with expertise. Our Hassad Asad almonds are special. Their root stock makes it rain efficient. Golden in color with less stripes, they are perfect on the eye. Most important, they have an added value – they are organic, fair trade, and have nutritional value. And unlike creating dependence on aid, they provide dignity for the farmers."<sup>48</sup>



Fair Trade delicacies at the Canaan Fair Trade facility © The Oakland Institute

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## ENDNOTES

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