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From the tree to the stone: transformations in Palestine's olive oil  
production, between traditions and international standards

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**UNIVERSITÉ  
DE GENÈVE**

**GENEVA SCHOOL  
OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
Department of Sociology

# **FROM THE TREE TO THE STONE: TRANSFORMATIONS IN PALESTINE'S OLIVE OIL PRODUCTION, BETWEEN TRADITIONS AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS**

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**Master Thesis**

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of  
Standardization, Social Regulation and Sustainable Development

**Supervisor: Professor Sandro Cattacin**

**Second Reader: Professor Riccardo Bocco**

September 2022

To Atwa and Amr.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to Palestinians who are rooted in their land as strongly as their olive trees.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

**EU:** The European Union

**IOC:** International Olive Oil Council

**ISO:** International Standards Organization

**MoA:** Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture

**NGO:** Non-governmental Organization

**PARC:** Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees

**POOC:** Palestinian Olive Oil Council

**PSI:** Palestinian Standards Institution

**UN:** The United Nations

**WFTO:** World Fair Trade Organization

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis studies one of Palestine's most notable agricultural products, olive oil, with a focus on international standards. For centuries, the olive tree has been a symbol of steadfastness and prosperity for the occupied Palestinian people, and a deep connection is formed between the farmer and the tree, which culminates in the flourishing season of the olive oil harvest. Since the late-twentieth century, olive oil production has been gradually modernized, shifting away from the heritage and traditions of olive pressing. More recently, a growing segment of Palestinians have been producing their olive oil within the framework of international standards and certifications. This thesis argues that the growing tendency of Palestinian olive producers to engage with international standardization processes for market access - rather than continuing to sell locally - is driven primarily by (or is a direct response to) the negative consequences of the Israeli occupation on local markets. This has consequences not only on the process and quality of olive production, but also on the social and economic practices and relations that traditionally surrounded this significant harvest season. Until today, the motives, circumstances, and impacts of olive oil production in the framework of international standards remain underexamined in the Palestinian context, which is the focus of this thesis. To do so, this research builds on primary data gathered through interviews with Palestinian peasants, agricultural cooperatives, and pertinent governmental and non-governmental institutions. This thesis aims to shed light on an unexamined chapter in the story of olive oil production in Palestine, contributing to the body of works on Palestinian agriculture and society.

## INTRODUCTION

### RESEARCH RELEVANCE, CONTRIBUTION, AND OBJECTIVES

The olive tree has always been a symbol of steadfastness and prosperity for Palestinians. Ask any peasant (in Arabic: *fallah*; فلاح) in a Palestinian village about the olive tree, and they will describe a deep connection that is formed between them and the trees in their olive orchards. That special connection, as in many of the stories told in this thesis, is based on care and attachment, involving year-round attention to the land and the trees, and culminates each autumn in the flourishing season of the olive harvest and the production of olive oil.

*Figure 1 : Photo of Al-Hajja Jazeela and her olive tree.  
Photo by 'Azmi Shuqair, Jazeela's son.*



This agricultural cycle, which takes place between October and November, is not particular to Palestine; across all countries in the Mediterranean Basin, the olive harvest season and the production of olive oil are important economic activities. In fact, Palestine is not amongst the largest olive producers of those countries, especially when compared, for example, to Tunisia or Greece. However, there are factors that are specific to Palestine which make its production of olive oil an outstanding social and economic activity, regardless of the quantity of the product.

In a place under a ruthless and expanding Israeli occupation, the olive tree represents the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. For decades, Zionist settlers have been uprooting olive trees or disrupting their harvest season, which is part of their attempts to uproot the Palestinian people from their country. Here, the olive tree becomes a symbol for peoples' rights in their homeland, and the olive harvest season represents more than a reoccurring economic activity. Harvesting olives in Palestine is an annual festival, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians practice their collective right to exist, attending to their ripe olives despite the countless obstacles enforced by the Israeli occupation.

Furthermore, in a country that is fruitful with the traditions surrounding many social activities, the olive harvest season holds a special status in the Palestinian consciousness. The songs, stories, and poems that signify the joys and hardships in harvesting the olives and pressing the oil; the family relations, the collective work, and the social connections that are related to the olive harvest; and the rewarding income that is gained each season. Major events such as marriages or building houses are planned around the olive harvest season. All of these are characteristics that distinguish Palestinian olive oil production, to which this thesis speaks.

Like most olive-producing countries, the production of olive oil in Palestine has gone through a gradual process of modernization, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. This modernization entailed replacing the long-standing heritage of manual harvesting and pressing methods, moving towards more advanced machine-based techniques. The modern production techniques were followed by increased access to the international markets, were accompanied by a series of international standards and certifications which remain continued requirements for local producers to be able to export their olive oil. Again, as a country under occupation, for Palestine to access these modernized and

standardized global markets was not an easy endeavor, unlike other olive oil producing countries in the region.

In fact, as this thesis highlights, the knowledge, institutions, and power relations that are related to standardized olive oil production in Palestine are all entangled in the complexities that result from the captive nature of the Palestinian economy in relation to the economy of the Israeli occupation. Where there is a lack of freedom for the Palestinians to access, care for, and harvest their olive trees, there is also a lack of freedom to share their profound knowledge and experience in olive oil production and integrate their products in the global olive oil markets.

Nevertheless, Palestinians have been increasingly participating in international certification and standardization bodies, with Palestinians certifying their olive oil internationally and exporting to global markets. This is a cycle which involves the efforts of several actors: the fallahin who produce the olive oil, agricultural cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, governmental institutions, and the private sector. The social, political, and economic relations involved in the production and marketing of Palestinian olive oil under international standards remain unaddressed in the current literature, and this thesis will bridge this knowledge gap, studying the past and present of olive oil production in Palestine in the context of international certificates and standards.

This thesis has three main objectives. First, it aims to explore the drivers behind the integration of the Palestinian olive oil in the standardized international markets. In a country where the production of olive oil is barely enough to cover the national consumption, and the export processes are controlled almost entirely by the Israeli occupation, there is a need to know why Palestinians are still willing to go through the heavily regulated and technically complicated process of certified production for global markets.

Second, this thesis aims to better understand the process of certification and standardization of the Palestinian olive oil by exploring the different actors who are involved in that process.<sup>1</sup> From the olive trees in a Palestinian village to the store shelves in Europe or in North America, the olive oil goes through a long cycle in which multiple individuals, groups, and institutions take part, starting with the Palestinian fallah who produces the olives and

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use the terms *standardization* and *certification* interchangeably, since meeting standards and obtaining the relevant certificates are very connected parts in the processes which this thesis explore.

ending with the foreign consumer who buys the exported olive oil. In between, the standardization of olive oil production in Palestine led to the emergence of agricultural cooperatives, private companies, public national institutions, and other organizations which aim to support, monitor, or profit from this cycle.

Meanwhile, this thesis also explores the impacts of international standards on the olive oil sector in Palestine, looking at social, political, and economic consequences from the viewpoint of the local producers. On the one hand, for example, producers find more stability in selling their olive oil in the international standardized markets as opposed to local markets with their fluctuating demand. On the other hand, they usually sell their products internationally for much less than what the local buyer would pay, especially in years where there is scarcity in the produced olive oil. As discussed throughout the thesis, especially in the concluding section, the process of standardizing olive oil production in Palestine is not black-and-white, with many gray areas and conflicting opinions from the actors involved.

This thesis engages with different concepts throughout the analysis chapters. For instance, I anchor the case of agricultural olive oil cooperatives in the framework of Social Solidarity Economy (Sahakian and Dunand 2015), where solidarity around shared values and goals in a small geography can make a difference. I also refer to traditional Palestinian methods of olive oil production as native science, which is a useful approach to understand intergenerational agricultural practices that developed from the collective heritage of human experience with nature (Cajete 2000). Those and other concepts referred to in the text are useful to better understand the Palestinian experience in a broader sociological sense.

Based on the objectives, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the drivers behind standardizing olive oil production in Palestine?
- Who are the main actors involved in the standardization process, and what are the power relations involved in the process?
- What social and economic impacts does standardized production have on the local Palestinian olive oil producers?

To answer these questions, I follow the methodological approach which I explain in the following paragraphs.

## DATA AND METHODS

This research engages with primary and secondary data. The secondary data is both qualitative and quantitative, gathered from academic research that studies Palestine's agriculture in general and olive oil production in particular; governmental reports, statistics, and policy documents related to standardization and agriculture; reports by non-governmental organizations on olive oil production in Palestine, especially in the framework of standards; reports of international organizations that work in the standardization sector; and various reports on the effects of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian agricultural economy.

The primary data is qualitative, which I gathered through interviews conducted in Palestine between April and August 2022. In terms of the research timeline, the field work for this thesis took place during the summer. Although this would have ideally been done during the olive harvest season in the autumn, due to travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict thesis submission deadline, summer was the most suitable time for field research.

In accordance with research ethics, all the data collected for this study were subject to the approval and consent of interviewees to share their names, knowledge, and experiences. Before each interview, I provided a thorough explanation about the research, its objectives, and academic nature, to which the interviewees agreed. All interviews were conducted in Arabic; interview recordings were transcribed, translated to English, coded, and their data were analyzed. This analysis, combined with data obtained from the review of the secondary sources, constitutes the body of this thesis.

Most of the in-person interviews took place in and around Ramallah in the center of the West Bank area, for two reasons; first, restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation often made it hard to travel freely between Palestinian cities. Just like the usual reality of life in the occupied West Bank, during my fieldwork the Israeli military forces constantly invaded Palestinian cities and villages, imprisoned Palestinians daily, and enforced countless closures through the suffocating checkpoint system. Therefore, I also conducted some interviews via phone calls, especially in Jenin and Salfit, which are two of the main Palestinian olive oil producing cities. The second reason for focusing the interviews in Ramallah is that the headquarters of the ministries and the organizations included in the interviews are also located in Ramallah.

The interviews were directed by the research objectives and questions, which meant that the sample of interviewees included various people working on different levels of olive oil production and standardization in Palestine. This study will not be meaningful without seeking the perspective of the fallahin, those who produce the olive oil, taking the fruit of the olive tree and in return giving it endless care to flourish. Some of them were traditional storytellers, which allowed me to dig deeper in the history and traditions around olive oil in Palestine. On the contemporary and technical levels of my research, the interviewees ranged from olive oil producers to local agricultural associations and cooperatives, to staff in governmental institutions that work in agriculture or standardization. Appendix 1 includes a detailed list of interviewees.

In this thesis, I narrate several stories told by my interviewees, their stories with their olive trees, especially as people under the Israeli military occupation. These stories have many chapters, and they can be read through many lenses; political, social, economic, and, most importantly, human. As I highlight throughout this work, both Palestinians and their olives are steadfast and strong, despite the challenges of the past and the present. They are both evergreens, enduring, and they flourish when they must. Here, beyond any doubt, is where the most important part of the story lies: the longstanding connection between the Palestinians, almost every Palestinian, and the olive trees.

This is an academic work, but the story of society, heritage, and social relations would be incomplete if it does not capture people's emotions, aspirations, or even fears and regrets. Therefore, I include in my thesis interludes that reflect the stories of some of those whom I interviewed, told not only with words, but also with their eyes when they spoke, their fingertips when they touched their olives, with their body language when they walked in the fields, moving slowly from one olive tree to another.

## **STRUCTURE**

Following the introduction, the thesis is structured in three chapters. In the first chapter, I provide a historical background related to olive oil production in Palestine. I allude to the importance of the olive harvest season for Palestinians, the reality of life for olive oil producers under Israeli occupation, and the successive traditional methods that had been followed to produce olive oil. I also discuss the shift towards modern production methods

and, subsequently, towards standards. The second chapter discusses the data related to the motives and drivers behind the standardization of olive oil production in Palestine. The third chapter explores the actors involved in the certification and standardization process, providing a critical discussion of this process. In lieu of a conclusion, the final section highlights conflicting reflections in Palestine around the impacts of modernization on olive oil production, followed by summarizing the research findings, evaluating the scope and limitations of this thesis, and providing recommendations for future research.

# 1. THE PAST AND PRESENT OF OLIVE OIL IN PALESTINE

Olive oil (in Arabic: *Zayt al-Zatoun*; زيت الزيتون) is often described by Palestinians as *the green gold*. For decades, as Hatim Mis'ef mentioned while we talked in his olive orchards in the village of Mazare' al-Noubani, many Palestinian families have planned their year according to the olive harvest season. They get married, build houses, and buy new plots of land after the olive harvest. Even going to pilgrimage in Mecca or financing the education of a son or daughter is financed from the revenues of their olive oil (Interview with Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef 2022). Indeed, the olive tree in Palestine has a significant sentimental, political, and economic value, making it as precious as gold.

## 1.1 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE OLIVE SEASON IN PALESTINE

The olive tree has existed in Palestine for thousands of years and olive oil has been one of the most important Palestinian agricultural products.<sup>2</sup> According to the Palestinian Olive Oil Council (POOC), olive trees are planted on around 45% of the overall agricultural lands in Palestine, making up to 85% of the planted gardening trees, with an estimated total of 11.5 million olive trees in Palestine, 9.5 million of which are fruitful (POOC 2019, 9). This makes the olive harvest a highly productive agricultural season. As for the production of olive oil, the POOC estimates that Palestine annually produces around 100 thousand tons of olives; 10% of which goes to table olives, while the rest are produced as olive oil (POOC 2019, 9). According to official Palestinian statistics, the annual average of olive oil production in Palestine is 20 thousand tons, out of which 4 to 6 thousand tons are exported, contributing with \$52 Million to the national Palestinian exports (Wafa 2021)

The olive fruit grows on evergreen trees, and almost all the lands planted with olive trees in Palestine are rainfed lands. As the common knowledge amongst Palestinian peasants tells us, the most important rainfall in the year for the olive tree is what Palestinians call the rainfall of the cross (in Arabic: *shatwat al-saleeb*; شتوة الصليب), and this rainfall indicates the beginning of the olives harvest season in Palestine. The exact starting date of the harvest season takes place between October and November of each year, and it varies from one

<sup>2</sup> The oldest olive tree in Palestine is in the village of al-Walajah, believed to be around 5,500 years old. See: (Stop The Wall 2011).

area within Palestine to another, depending on differences in the soil, geography, and climate.

Many factors determine the productivity of the olive oil season, and there is a regular cycle of a good production year (Arabic: *sana masya*; سنة ماسية) followed by a bad production year (Arabic: *sana shalaton*; سنة شلتوني), as Hamza Aqrabawi explained (Interview with Hamza Aqrabawi 2022). Nevertheless, according to the Palestine Trade Center, the Palestinian olive sector, in a good year, produces an estimated revenue of \$160 million to \$191million (Tahhan and Haddad 2021). Table 1 summarizes the latest available data on the overall olive oil production in Palestine between 1995 and 2018, which also shows that, in some years, the olive season yields better results than average.

**Table 1 : Quantity of olives and olive oil produced in Palestine between 1995 and 2018**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Quantity of olives (tons)</i>	<i>Quantity of olive oil (tons)</i>
1995	50050	13154
1996	50884	12344
1997	24127	5961
1998	64213	14998
1999	15092	3436
2000	126149	27062
2001	22154	5443
2002	124564	2774
2003	44573	11163
2004	95765	22106
2005	27310	6790
2006	159059	34002
2007	36032	88697
2008	76387	17584
2009	19860	47713
2010	102161	23754
2011	93565	20754
2012	104762	22951
2013	65829	17642
2014	108000	24758
2015	95142	21084
2016	84147	20135
2017	87800	19532
2018	59344	14740

*Source: (POOC 2019, 10–11)*

With this significant role that the olive tree plays in the Palestinian economy, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), around 80,000 to 100,000 Palestinian families rely on olive oil production (nearly 14% of the Palestinian population), where it is considered to be one of the main income-generating agricultural activities for the family (Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture 2014, 9). In fact, the olive oil sector offers a source of food,<sup>3</sup> income, and job opportunities for many Palestinians. Around 77,000 olive tree owners in the sector benefit directly from the olive oil production, and around 23,000 other Palestinians rely indirectly on the olive harvest season for income (Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture 2014, 12). This includes, for example, people who sell agricultural tools, workers and contractors of lands and olive oil harvest, owners of and workers in pressing mills.

However, as people who have been facing Israel's expanding settler colonial project, every aspect of Palestinians' daily life is affected by the aggressive Zionist policies, including the olive oil sector. Indeed, in the occupied West Bank, the Israeli occupation is not only aiming to control the lives of the Palestinians, but also tries to kill whatever is considered symbolic for Palestinians' rights in their homeland, especially olive trees, and there is documentation every year of the Israeli settlers or military attacking Palestinian lands that are planted with olive trees. In fact, since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip which began in 1967 and the year 2013, Israel uprooted around 800,000 olive trees in the West Bank (Visualizing Palestine 2013).

Upon signing the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995, the West Bank was divided into three areas: A, B, and C; Area A is under the administrative and security control of the Palestinian Authority, Area B is administered by the Palestinians and secured by Israel, while Area C is under the complete control of the Israeli occupation. Following the collapse of the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Israel retained its exclusive control over 60 percent of the West Bank that was designated as Area C, which included security and law enforcement, planning, and construction (Visualizing Palestine 2019). Consequently, as

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<sup>3</sup> On average, each Palestinian consumes 3.1 kilogram of olive oil annually (Al Iqtisadi 2020). Compared to Greece, where the average annual consumption is around 12 kilograms per person, Palestinians do not consume a lot of olive oil. The reasons behind this low consumption are not yet studied, but maybe this is another reason Palestinian olive oil producers tend to export their products.

many Palestinian olive fields are located in Area C, Israel prevents hundreds of Palestinian families around the year from accessing their lands, therefore damaging their olive harvest season (ICRC 2022). In fact, according to the World Bank, the Palestinian economy loses an annual \$3.4 Billion (which is around 30% of Palestine's GDP) as a result of Israel's control on agricultural lands in Area C. See: (Niksic, Nasser Eddin, and Cali 2014).<sup>4</sup> Eventually, within this structure of land control, Israel continuously allocates Palestinian lands (many of which are olive orchards) to establish new settlements or expand new ones. Meanwhile, the olive tree stands as a reminder of the true owners of the land, thus Israel spares no effort to vanish as many of olive trees as possible.

In the West Bank, Israel not only controls the land and uproot the olive trees, but also attacks Palestinians who attend to them. In 2021, during the harvest season, some 365 Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians were documented, which include brutally beating Palestinians and burning their trees and equipment (Tahhan and Haddad 2021). More recently, in June 2022, Israel uprooted 100 olive trees in Nablus alone (Muaddi 2022). Also, Palestinians in many areas of the occupied West Bank are not allowed to access or harvest their olive trees which are close to Israeli settlements, because they require special permits to access their own lands. Such permits are rarely granted, as research by the human rights group HaMoked illustrates, and in 2020 Israel approved only 24% of the agricultural permits submitted during that year, compared to 71% in 2014 (Tahhan and Haddad 2021).

Because of these Israel attacks and access restriction against Palestinians during the olive harvest season, many interviewees mentioned that Palestinians begin with harvesting the lands that are farther from their villages, especially the ones that are close to Israeli settlements, checkpoints, or the Separation Wall. As Aqrabawi and Jaber both stated, Palestinian families coordinate together when to access their neighboring lands that are constantly attacked by Israeli soldiers and settlers, believing that harvesting these lands together in large groups could provide some form of protection for the Palestinians (Interview with Hamza Aqrabawi 2022; Interview with Rabah Jaber 2022).

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<sup>4</sup> Further to the Oslo Accords, the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority ensured the captivity of the Palestinian economy within the grips of the Israeli state, which entailed Israel's control over border crossings, customs, and import/export processes. This all highly impacted Palestinian agriculture, including olive oil production. See: (Arafah 2018)

**Figure 2 : “A Land of Olive Oil and Honey”, a Zionist propaganda poster from 1935.**

Source: the Palestine Poster Project Archive (Krausz 2011). The Hebrew text refers to Palestine as “A land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey”, designed to promote the immigration of Jewish settlers.



What is more is that Israel also steals Palestinian olive trees and plants them in the illegal Jewish settlements of the West Bank, especially trees which Palestinians call Roman Trees (Arabic: *Zaitoun Roumi*; زيتون رومي), referring to olive trees that are more than one thousand years old (Daghlas 2013). In some cases, Israel even steals ancient Palestinian olive pressing mills. So, why would the State of Israel loot an ancient Palestinian olive tree or an old traditional pressing mill? To use Laila Sharif's concept, this is one way by which Israel attempts to 'vanish' the longstanding Palestinian landscape, which is part of Israel's project to eliminate the Palestinian people (Sharif 2014). Such reality signifies the magnitude of

Israel's systematic attacks on the memory around the olive tree, which is part of the longstanding Zionist strategy to falsify history (as the poster in Figure 2 illustrates) and to erase anything that proves Palestinians' rights in their lands.

Interlude: Al-Hajja Jazeela, her olive orchard, and the gate in between

*"I wake up with the silence of the dawn, I walk at 4:00 am to my olive orchard. There is no one, no lights, only me; an 80-year-old woman walking in the darkness, all by myself. My feet, so my heart, take me to my beloved olive trees. But it is not that easy, it is not a journey of joy. It is with bitterness and tears. There is an Israeli gate that separates my body from my land. I wait outside the gate for one hour maybe, standing in front of them, as my trees do on the other side. Until they open the gate, and I am in. An old lady with her trees. Usually, I rent some cattle to go, and I come back with one or two baskets of olives. But you know what? These two baskets are really not that much, but for me it means a lot. I am not leaving my trees alone; I want to hold them close and whisper to them in the ears that I will come every day, and with me the morning breeze." (Interview with Al-Hajja Jazeela 2022)*

For Palestinians, as Aqrabawi stated, uprooting an olive tree is as cruel as killing their own child, because Palestinians pay their blood to protect the land and the olive trees (Interview with Hamza Aqrabawi 2022). Perhaps this is why in Palestine, people always say 'if the olive tree knew who planted it, its oil would turn into tears.' The following section provides a background on the historical methods and traditions related to olive oil production in Palestine until the present day.

## 1.2 OLIVE OIL PRODUCTION BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

"شجرة الزيتون كائن حي وبحسّ"  
[The olive Tree is alive, she feels us]

The above quote by Taghreed Shehadeh, a Palestinian woman who is an olive oil expert, could tell us a lot about the relationship between the Palestinian people and their olive trees (Interview with Taghreed Shehadeh 2022). Historically, it has been a relationship of care and giving by the fallah throughout the year, as if their tree could truly feel them, and the olive tree gives back generously during the harvest season. Let us imagine how a typical day of olive harvest in a Palestinian village looked like fifty years ago.

After months of ploughing the land, pruning the trees, and fermenting the soil, the anticipated harvest season would finally come. Often at dawn, people would walk together to the olive fields. They would pray together and start working at first sunlight. At mid-day, they would cook together and eat their food in the shade of the olive trees. Men, women, and children would work hand in hand. As they picked the olives, they would sing songs for and about the trees, and when the afternoon came, they would rest again in the trees' shadows, close to the soil.

With the concept of *al-Owneh* (Arabic: العونة), which is a form of 'lending helping hands' to other members of the community during the harvest season, members of one family, relatives, and neighbors participated in harvesting the olives. Everyone had a specific role; Men performed the hardest labor, picking the olives and carrying the heavy loads. Women collected the falling fruits, cleaned them from leaves or stones, filled the canvas bags, and sealed them with needles and threads. Children rode on the back of the cattle, which carried the load of the day, and returned to the village. Usually after several trips, everyone returned home at sunset after a long day of work, with the bags of ripe olives ready to be pressed for their oil.

In Palestine, the olive pressing methods evolved from one epoch to another, taking different shapes and forms. In general, olive oil production includes three main stages: crushing the olives, pressing the crushed olive paste, and finally separating the olive oil from the *zibar* (Arabic: زيبار), which is the olive waste water (Sharkawi 2019). Over centuries, olive oil production methods in Palestine went through many changes from ancient times until the present, as the interviewees explained.

First, there was the mortar-and-pestle technique (Arabic: *al-Hawn*; الهاون), one of the most traditional methods used in ancient Palestine. This technique was used for both stages, crushing the olives, and pressing the oil out. There were two stone holes in the ground, where the pestle crushed the olives in an upper vat. After that, people put water on the olive paste, where the olive oil was filtered into a canal that led to a lower vat. The final step was gathering the floating oil on the surface with designated utensils and filling it into jars. This technique was used to make small quantities of olive oil, and it took so much time and effort (Sharkawi 2019).

**Figure 3 : A historical photo al-Badd, exact year unknown.**

Source: *Ajdad Al Arab Blog* (*Ajdad Al Arab* 2013)



Then came the crushing mill (Arabic: *al-Badd*; البدّ), a method of olive oil production which appeared in Palestine during the 19th century and lasted until the mid-20th century. Al-Badd was made of stone, with one or two vertical stones known as the mill stones (Arabic: *hajar al-badd*; حجر البدّ), weighing 1600 to 2800 kilogram each (Sharkawi 2019). The stones crushed the olives on a horizontal basin made of stone as well. The vertical stone was hanged on a wooden stick attached to a ceiling, and the peasants used to move the stick to crush the olives. At some stage, cattle replaced humans in moving the stick, which made the process less tiring for the peasants. This process took between 20 to 30 minutes in total. After crushing the olives, al-Badd produced a paste, and peasants then used a special type of plant-based basket, such as cannabis or date palm fibers known as al-Qufaf (Arabic: القفاف). The latter were put on the pressing bed and then pressed to extract the olive oil out of the paste.

Several technologies then changed this process of pressing olive oil significantly. First was the invention of a lever to press the olives, which appeared in two production methods. First, there was the lever and weight press, which is a wooden level into the wall and a stone

hanged to press on the baskets for olive oil to be extracted. The second was the lever and the screw press, which represented a turning point in shifting the process into more of a mechanical process. The latter method was common until the mid-20th century. Semi-automated machines began to replace the labor of man and cattle in the mid-twentieth century, but the stone remained the main component of the olive press. This method still exists in Palestine, although it is rarely used, and it carries great sentimental value.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the pressing gradually transitioned to fully automation, introducing the machine to the entire olive pressing procedure. With great technological advances in agriculture, one could find the machine at every stage of the olive harvest. Nowadays, according to the statistics published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), there are 285 olive oil presses in Palestine: 275 fully automatic olive presses and 10 traditional or partially automated presses (PCBS 2021). As in any other agricultural activity, automated olive oil production meant increased efficiency, which was accompanied in the 1990s and early 2000s by greater access to international markets. Hence, the last two decades witnessed the beginning of olive oil production in that followed the internationally recognized standards, which must be met to allow Palestinian olive oil to enter global markets.

Standards, as defined by The International Standards Organization (ISO), are “the distilled wisdom of people with expertise in their subject matter and who know the needs of the organizations they represent – people such as manufacturers, sellers, buyers, customers, trade associations, users or regulators” (“ISO - Standards” n.d.). To achieve this definition, standards need to be agreed upon by internationally recognized experts, including local standardization bodies. Palestine is a correspondent member at the ISO, and the Palestine Standard Institute (PSI) is the national body which represents Palestine in the international organization. Within the framework of ISO’s standards, the PSI sets its own local standardization mechanisms, including those related to olive oil production. Amongst the national olive oil standards in Palestine is the Palestine Quality Charter standard.

Some of the standards related to olive oil are also set by the International Olive Council (IOC), which was established under the sponsorship of the United Nations (UN) in 1959. It is an international intergovernmental organization dedicated to the production of olive oil and table olives. The IOC puts its efforts to control three main aspects for sold olive

oil: quality, purity, and authenticity. Therefore, they ask their member countries for chemistry experts in the detection process with the use of most advanced technical methods and scientific data and research (“IOC Standards, Methods and Guides” n.d.). As discussed below, Palestine recently became a member of the IOC, whose guidelines play a role in setting the national framework of olive oil certification. Some of the certificates and standards related to certified olive oil in the Palestinian context include the notions of Fair Trade<sup>5</sup> and organic farming. These standards are monitored by the PSI, the POOC, and the Palestinian national team for olive oil tasting.

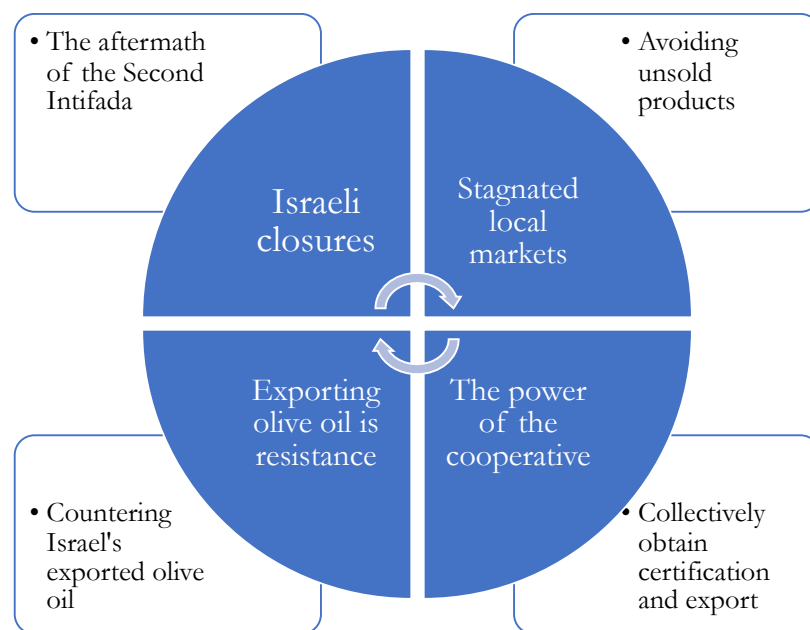
In the following chapters, I move to discuss the data with regard to the relationship between olive oil production and standards, starting with the drivers behind the growing trend of standardized olive oil production in Palestine.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion around the history behind the notion of Fair Trade, which developed in the 1940s as a critique of the historical inequalities inherent in international trade, see: (L. T. Raynolds and Bennett 2015)

## 2. OLIVE OIL AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS: MOTIVES AND DRIVERS.

There were key themes which the interviewees discussed when asked about the main drivers behind their efforts to meet international standards and certifications in olive oil production, with the goal of exporting their olive oil to international markets. The following graph summarizes these motives and drivers. As I discuss below, these motives and drivers are both economic and political, stemming either from the consequences of the Israeli occupation on the olive oil sector or from factors related to the local markets.

*Figure 4 : The drivers behind standardizing olive oil in Palestine*



### 2.1 ISRAELI CLOSURES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE LOCAL MARKET

In September 2000, Palestine witnessed the Second Intifada (Arabic for *uprising*, also known as *al-Aqsa Intifada*), which led to one of the cruelest Israeli invasions into the West Bank. The Second Intifada technically ended in February 2005, and during that period, Israel paralyzed the lives of Palestinians with endless closures and curfews (Hussain 2017); this severely disrupted all social economic activities in Palestine, including agriculture, and was therefore destructive for the olive oil sector.

In most of the interviews, interviewees referred to the devastating effects of the Second Intifada and the resulting closures as the main driver behind seeking to export their olive oil to the standardized international markets. They discussed how people suffered from the social and economic consequences of the closures, namely the inability to market their olive oil — if they were able to harvest — for five consecutive years. Eventually, when the dust of the Second Intifada cleared, olive oil producers found themselves with a stockpile of five years of production and a market with very little demand. This disrupted the local olive oil economy for years to come. According to the interviewees, that was a turning point, and they started to think strategically about accessing international markets, thus having to follow international olive oil standards in their production.

Mahmoud al-Qadi, who is a Palestinian olive oil producer and the director of the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) in the Ramallah area, described in detail the situation of producing and marketing olive oil in Palestine before the Second Intifada. Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, Palestinian olive oil producers were able to market their olive oil much more easily than today. Traders would come to producers while they harvested the olives or pressed the oil and they would buy their products for export, sometimes in advance. The exported oil would either be sold in Israel or sent to the Arab Gulf region. The latter, as al-Qadi and others mentioned, was an open market for Palestinian olive oil. Thousands of Palestinian olive oil canisters were sent in trucks every season, especially as many Palestinians lived and worked in the Arab Gulf countries, and the olive oil which they received was considered as trusts (Arabic: *amanat*; أمانات) that reached them consistently year after year (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022; Interview with Rabah Jaber 2022).

This marketing strategy, which continued to a lesser degree during the early 1990s, meant that overproduction was not a problem for the Palestinian olive oil sector; peasants sold excess products from households and the local market to exporting agents. Further, as Ramez Obaid, the Director General of the olive oil department at the Ministry of Agriculture, explained in an interview, the Gaza Strip market was also open for the olive oil of the West Bank. Since Gaza did not produce olive oil at the time, Gazans relied on the West Bank for their household and industrial olive oil consumption. In recent years, as Obaid further explained, the MoA and other institutions started projects to develop the olive oil sector in Gaza, and the latter started to plant olive trees in areas with suitable soil and atmosphere. Gaza then gradually reached sufficiency of production—despite the siege and

the lack of the technological equipment that are available West Bank (Interview with Ramez Obaid 2022)

#### Interlude: Israeli closures systematically destroyed the local olive oil market

*“In the Second Intifada, Palestinian farmers suffered from a marketing issue in olive oil sector due to the Israeli closures. Israel stopped demanding any of the olive oil produced in the West Bank and Jordan stopped importing as well. Israel cut all of the economic and social ties between the West Bank and Gaza, making the important marketing process between the two areas of occupied Palestine impossible. All of this led to the stagnation of produced olive oil in the years of the Second Intifada, which pushed the Palestinian farmer to sell their olive oil for low prices; 7 Israeli Shekels per kilo [around \$2.15], instead of 15 to 20 Israeli shekels per kilo [\$4.58 to \$6.10]. People only thought of selling their olive oil at any price. I was one of those farmers, I had 5 tons of olive oil that I couldn't sell, and I had to do the same as others.” (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022)*

As the interviews show, the Second Intifada was a turning point for the Palestinian fallah to think differently, attempting to overcome the economic burdens which suddenly fell on their shoulders. According to Ramez Obaid, between the years 2005 and 2012, many projects funded by the European Union were directed to supporting the olive oil sector and those projects were implemented with the cooperation of the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture. He describes this period as *the golden period* for olive oil production, where a huge jump occurred from the ongoing traditional ways of production to more advanced production methods. Here, international standards really emerged as a trend, and more Palestinian olive oil producers tended to adapt international standards and certifications in olive oil production.

## 2.2 AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES AND COLLECTIVE CERTIFICATION

When asked why they chose to follow international standards, interviewees answered that they mainly wanted to achieve higher quality in the olive oil they produced, at least in the eyes of the Western importers, which could give their olive oil the qualifications to travel the world with internationally recognized labels and certificates. Entering those international markets, as Hatem Mis'ef said, could ensure marketing for the Palestinian producer even before they harvest the olives, which takes place through pre-orders from local export and foreign import companies (Interview with Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef 2022). However, as Mis'ef and other interviewees revealed, entering this structure was not easy for individual Palestinian producers; many realized that collective

production not only yielded higher quantities of olive oil but also easier certification and more bargaining power in the export process. This was the case of the Bani Zaid al-Sharqiyah Cooperative Association for Organic Olive Oil (hereinafter Bani Zaid Cooperative).<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 5 : Photo of the olive fields in Mazare' al-Noubani.**

*Photo by author.*



I interviewed four members of the Bani Zaid Cooperative in the village of Mazare' al-Noubani, which is a magnificent mountainous area to the north of Ramallah, planted with thousands of olive trees. Sitting in their olive orchards, Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman Ziben, Samir Mis'ef, and Mahmoud al-Qadi told stories about working together to create better living conditions as peasants in solidarity, producing and selling high quality, certified organic olive oil within the cooperative. The Bani Zaid Cooperative, which they established after the Second Intifada in 2005, includes olive oil producers from two neighboring villages, Mazare' al-Noubani and 'Arura. In total, 31 olive oil producers are part of the

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<sup>6</sup> In Palestine, there is a total of 35 agricultural associations and cooperatives which work in the olive oil sector, mostly in the northern West Bank area. See: (Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture 2014, 21)

cooperative, and their annual sales of organic olive oil ranges between 10 to 15 tons. (Interview with Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef 2022).

During the interview, I asked the four founding members of the cooperative why they decided to start this initiative. They all corroborated that the Second Intifada was the turning point after which they decided to combine their efforts to obtain certification for their organic olive oil according to international standards and export their products collectively. The cooperative also established their own olive press in 2015, which they share with three other olive oil cooperatives in the neighboring villages. This press allows the cooperative members to better follow the olive oil production standards, since they control the conditions under which their olive oil is produced. Moreover, they mentioned that the dispersal of land ownership hinders certification and export in the olive oil production in Palestine and that they used the cooperative as a tool to facilitate the certification of their organic olive oil. Indeed, due to the land distribution between multiple inheritors, many olive orchards are divided into smaller units instead of large plots of land. As a cooperative, the fallahin of Bani Zaid decided to go through the struggle of certification together and to produce and market their products as one entity.

According to the POOC, the ownership of small plots of lands is a common phenomenon in the Palestinian olive sector. For example, in 2010, small ownership of lands (less than 5 donums) was estimated to constitute 56% of the overall lands planted with olive trees, compared to larger plots of lands which made up around 11% of the overall olive-planted lands in Palestine (POOC 2019). When discussing this issue, olive oil experts such as al-Qadi and Obeid confirmed that divided land ownership affects the efficiency of the olive oil production process (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022; Interview with Ramez Obaid 2022). One of the most important effects of the divided ownership of land on the quality of olive oil is that it is hard to maintain the same standards of the soil and the trees when the same olive orchard is divided amongst several owners. In the case of the cooperatives, even if members do not own large plots of lands, they can still follow the same standards in olive oil production.

According to Wilson Majee and Ann Hoyt, cooperatives are the efforts by which members of a community undertake in situations of urgency, also serving their self-constituted goals, which are based on common geography, experiences, and values (Majee and Hoyt

2011). With this lens, the Bani Zaid Cooperative is an example of how the solidarity under shared values and goals in a small geography can make a difference in olive oil production in Palestine. Further, according to Marlyne Sahakian and Christophe Dunand, a concept that could be applied to this form of collective production, certification, and marketing is Social Solidarity Economy (SSE), which is “associated with the notion of reciprocity, which is understood as going beyond duality to giving, receiving and the obligation to give in return that crosses through different subgroups, binding people together in solidarity” (Sahakian and Dunand 2015, 3). Here, forming agricultural cooperatives was one outstanding example of facing the socioeconomic complication which the individual Palestinian peasant faces before meeting standards, obtaining certifications, and exporting their olive oil.

### **2.3 WE ARE ‘THE HOLY LAND’: COUNTERING ISRAELI EXPORT OF OLIVE OIL**

Furthermore, according to the Bani Zaid Cooperative members, another driver for their willingness to follow standards and obtain certificates to export their olive oil is the Israeli exploitation of the “olive oil from the holy land” marketing label. “If we do not do this”, Abdul Rahman al-Ziben told me referring to exporting their standardized olive oil, “Israel will be the one to market the olive oil in EU for under this label [olive oil from the holy land] without mentioning the producing country. So, if anybody wants to buy a Palestinian olive oil, will immediately assume that this olive oil comes from Palestine, and the revenues will go to Israel” (Interview with Hatem Mis’ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis’ef 2022).

The Bani Zaid Cooperative members, as well as other interviewees, felt that, through exporting their olive oil worldwide, their bottles of olive oil will serve as a political tool to fight and resist the Israeli occupation. On the shelves of the international markets, Palestine’s name will exist despite all the obstacles that they face to achieve their goal of exporting their certified organic olive oil. This is a theme which is further discussed in the following chapter.

### 3. STANDARDIZING OLIVE OIL: WHO MAKES IT POSSIBLE?

As the interviewees discussed, for Palestinian olive oil to be exported to international markets, it must meet certain labels and certificates in all stages of production. Different actors are involved in guaranteeing the standardization of Palestinian olive oil.

Discussing this issue, Abu Ghazaleh used the phrase “from the field to the spoon” to describe the whole value chain of the olive oil production to get the best quality and make it compatible internationally. He explained that the process of evaluating the quality of olive oil is not only related to the liquid in the bottles, but also to the entire production process, from the pre-harvest until post-harvest of the olives (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022). Similarly, Taghreed Shehada stated that “the farmer’s practices, the pressing mills, and the storage techniques all make the olive oil of a higher quality, and all of these stages should be examined [in the certification process]” (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

Based on data from the interviews, the following graph summarizes the actors involved in producing certified olive oil in Palestine, followed by discussing each of those actors and the roles they play in the production, evaluation, certification, and marketing of Palestinian olive oil.

*Figure 6 : The actors involved in the certification and export of olive oil in Palestine*



### 3.1 THE LOCAL OLIVE OIL PRODUCERS

In the process of producing olive oil that meets certification and international standards, the Palestinian fallah who tends to the land and trees throughout the year, from season to season, is the principal actor. For them, the importance of producing olive oil with the highest quality goes beyond any standards or certificates; it is an integral part of their daily lives, their continuous struggles, and their political and economic hardships.

As al-Ziben from the Bani Zeid Cooperative told me during the interview, “the land is sacred for us, and the olive trees are as precious as our own children” (Interview with Hatem Mis’ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis’ef 2022). For Palestinian peasants, they inherited the lands from their ancestors, generation after generation. With their deep connection to the land, and despite all the challenges that they face in their daily life from the Israeli occupier, they try to remain tight-fisted and attached to the trees. Hence, throughout the complicated process of olive oil production and certification, everything stands on the shoulders of the fallahin.

The process of looking after the olive trees involves many steps before getting to the final product, olive oil. As Aqrabawi explained, the olive harvest season is “the father of all Palestinian agricultural seasons” (Interview with Hamza Aqrabawi 2022) because the calendar of all other agricultural seasons revolves around it. It is well-known to any Palestinian that they shouldn’t start the olive harvest season before the shatwat al-salib (or rainfall of the cross, as explained above). They usually wait until the first rain of the year, and the longer they wait, the higher the quality and the quantity of olive oil they get. However, as Shehada stressed, farmers should not start so early or wait for too long (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022). Therefore, it is a delicate process to get olive oil of the best quality.

Indeed, to ensure the best quality of the olive oil (which also means meeting certifications and standards, although Palestinians have done this since long before the emergence of this term), trees should be treated carefully throughout the year. This starts with the ploughing, which should be done three times, using a different method each time. The ploughing should be done around the shadow of the tree, neither too close nor too far from it. The soil around the tree itself should not be ploughed, so that the soil retains its moisture, keeping the beneficial insects under the soil. The sunlight the soil is exposed to due to the

ploughing process is beneficial for the soil; this is something that confers great benefits to the quality of olive oil if the farmer carries it out every two years.

***Figure 7 : Photo of olive fields in 'Aroua, Ramallah.***

*Photo by author.*



Another task that falls on the shoulder of the fallah in the certification process is pruning the trees, which is carried out in certain times during the year and using careful techniques. Fertilization must be done using organic fertilizers from sheep and chicken, as opposed to pesticides which have a huge negative impact on the olive trees, the soil, and the quality of

produced olive oil as well as the entire ecosystem around the olive tree. This is another area that demonstrates the power of native technology, with practices that have recently become idealized in Western agricultural standards, but which have been ingrained in the Palestinian agricultural tradition for hundreds of years. As the members of the Bani Zaid Cooperative mentioned, even before they began to seek international certifications, they had been following these traditional techniques and producing organic olive oil of the highest quality, which made it easier to gain international certification for their organic olive oil.

All of these are pre-harvest practices which the fallah follows to ensure the quality of the olive oil. During the harvest, other practices must be followed to ensure that the olive oil meets certain standards. As explained in the first chapter, olive harvesting methods vary in Palestine; some people use modern machines for collecting the olives from the trees, while most Palestinians use their hands to collect their olives. As Samir Mis'ef said, "you have to be kind to the tree, if you were cruel with it, it will not be generous with you" (Interview with Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef 2022). And for many fallahin, this kindness goes beyond collecting the olives with their hands. For example, instead of using plastic bags to store the collected olives, they use canvas bags or wooden boxes for storing the collected olives, which helps the fruit to breathe on its journey from the orchard to the pressing mill, exposing the olives to air and preventing any mold from growing inside the bags. All these practices have great impact on the final taste of the olive oil, which is also part of producing certified olive oil that meets international standards.

Then comes the press. Sometimes, even if all the above mentioned practices are followed, the olive oil could lose its ideal characteristics if not treated well in the press, which is a main part in the journey of the olive oil between the tree and the bottle. To use Shehada's words, the olive press is "beit al-zait" (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022), or the house of the olive oil, and it truly is. Hence, there are many issues to consider when the oil reaches the press.

There is one phrase that all interviewees mentioned, which is the title of this thesis: *from the tree to the stone*. This is an old Palestinian proverb that says a lot about how one should not wait until pressing their olive oil. Keeping the olives stored for days and weeks, which al-Qadi and Shehada both described as a malpractice amongst some olive oil producers in

Palestine, increases the acidity of olives, which translates into lower quality (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022; Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022). Shehada stressed is importance of the temperature inside the press, remarking that high temperatures lead to lower quality olive oil. Moreover, the press should always be clean, and the press owners should not wait long after its use to clean it (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

The final step is storing the olive oil. Shehada says that storing olive oil in a perfect environment and without facing the sunlight directly maintains the quality of the olive oil. She further mentions that she instructed the MoA many times that “they must forbid the use of the yellow plastic gallons in storing olive oil, because it is made of non-degradable plastic and the color is not dark enough for storing olive oil. Instead of that, they should only use stainless steel canisters, but unfortunately nobody cared” (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

While Shehada didn’t mention the reasons why farmers still use plastic gallons instead of stainless steel ones, it is worth mentioning that the price of stainless steel olive oil containers is more than double the price of the plastic ones. Here, for example, there is room for intervention by the MoA, where special programs could be designed and implemented to advocate against the use of plastic containers and fund farmers to store and sell their olive oil in stainless steel canisters.

To summarize, with all the practices discussed above, the Palestinian fallah is the key actor in maintaining olive oil production within the framework of international standards. Therefore, there are many projects being implemented to train them on how to develop their agricultural practices to produce olive oil of the highest quality. Here comes the role of other actors, who support the peasants throughout the production process to make sure that their olive oil adheres to the international standards.

### **3.2 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS: PARC AS AN EXAMPLE**

The second main actor in the production of certified Palestinian olive oil according to standards are non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as PARC. According to al-Qadi, organizations such as PARC have an important role in connecting local olive oil producers with international markets, which begins by introducing them to best practices in olive oil production. As a non-profit organization, PARC does this through development

projects which are financed by international organizations that work in developing agriculture, such as OXFAM. In this context, organizations such as PARC produce several publications that inform olive oil producers about best practices in olive oil production (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022).

Another role which NGOs play in the process of certification is supporting the establishment of agricultural cooperatives. Doing so, as discussed above, enables local producers to apply for certification collectively, which facilitates the certification process. For example, PARC played an important role in supporting the establishment of the Bani Zaid Cooperative, which is a successful example of producing Palestinian olive oil that meets international standards. Finally, NGOs have an important role which is to connect local olive oil producers with international markets. In the case of PARC, this is done through their relationship with Al Reef company – another actor in the chain of standardizing olive oil in Palestine.

### **3.2 MARKETING COMPANIES: AL REEF AS AN EXAMPLE**

Another main actor in the production of certified olive oil according to standards is the private sector, such as Al Reef Company. In the case of Bani Zaid Cooperative, Al Reef is the entity that informs producers about standards and certificates, monitoring their production process, and checking the olive oil they produce.<sup>7</sup>

The mandate of Al Reef, which is one of 16 Palestinian companies that work in the olive oil export market (Wafa 2021), includes obtaining certification related to international standards in the Palestinian context. For example, Al Reef is a member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), thus they work within the framework of the international standard ISO-22000 which is related to the safety of food systems, which is one of the standards related to olive oil production. According to Abu Ghazaleh, the Director General of Al Reef, the company has an obligation to sustain Palestinians' access to the global markets and understanding of market trends. This, as Abu Ghazaleh stressed, is important to

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<sup>7</sup> Al Reef is a limited private company which is owned by PARC and the Arab Agricultural Engineer's organization. It was established in 1993 as with the intention of helping the farmers in developing the quality of their agricultural products in general which includes olive oil production as it is the major sector in Palestine. Over the years, Al Reef opened new marketing opportunities for Palestinian olive oil in international markets.

support Palestinians in their resistance against the occupation, through building a sustainable marketing strategy (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022).

To achieve this, Al Reef built strategies to improve different aspects of its work: it has a sustainable vision for the human resources of the company, which are seen as the main asset in improving the work of the company; it is increasing its use of modern technology in the production process including in labs and quality control methods; and it is creating programs with the farmers in cooperation with the government and NGOs to introduce new, modern, correct concepts and techniques in agricultural practices in the olive oil sector.

**Figure 8 : Photo of certified Palestinian olive oil bottles marketed by Al Reef.**

*Source: Al Reef's website ("Al Reef Fairtrade Products: Olive Oil" n.d).*



A key role of private companies such as Al Reef in the certification of olive oil production and marketing is to tackle technical programs related to improving the quality of the product, including advising against traditional methods which are not suitable for quality standards and market regulations. As a technical professional, Abu Ghazaleh described the methodology for sensory tests and the existence of national teams who are trained for years to

test the quality of olive oil.<sup>8</sup> Al Reef understands that there are requirements for technical standards within the IOC, which they take into consideration as they work on Palestinian olive oil.

In my interview with Abu Ghazaleh, I inquired about the company's relationship with international certification bodies. He mentioned that the auditing process of the company by third-party international organizations is not easy and complicated, taking up to one or two months. Further, Al Reef is not allowed to be with the foreign auditors when they interview the olive oil producers, and even if someone from the company translates for the auditor inside the company then the translation is recorded for them to guarantee the accuracy of the translation. This indicates the intricate nature of certification, which the company must regularly update (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022).

In its work with local olive oil producers, Al Reef includes seven internationally recognized certificates for the olive oil to be exported. One of which is a national quality certificate of the quality for the olive oil product, which is set by PSI, another actor in the certification process.

### **3.3 LOCAL STANDARDS INSTITUTIONS**

The PSI, which is the national body responsible for studying and monitoring standards across all sectors, is another key actor in the process of certified olive oil production. In my interview with Shehada, who is the director of the Transformative Industries Unit in the department of Quality and Rehabilitation at PSI, we discussed the different roles which the organization plays to ensure that Palestinian olive oil meets international standards and is thus certified for exports.

According to Shehada, her unit was formed in 2006 when Palestine was a member of the IOC but all the data about Palestine was listed under Israel. After Palestine became an observer state at the United Nations, Palestine was approved as a full member of the IOC. The organization then sent experts to evaluate the Palestinian olive oil team at the PSI, which they approved. "At the beginning", Shehada says, "we worked so hard. We used to

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<sup>8</sup> There are two types of testing olive oil, as al-Qadi explained: *sensational* tests which include taste, smell, and color; and *chemical* tests which include acidity levels and PH numbers., the EU markets first conduct sensational tests for any imported olive oil, and if the sample fails it is thrown away without even undergoing the chemical tests. This adds additional pressure on producers and exporting companies.

meet twice a week. Whenever I travelled, I brought back with me bottles of olive oil in my luggage and used them to train my team on the different tastes that we don't have in our olive oil. Each time we tasted different olive oil samples, we knew better how to detect high quality olive oil" (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022). Indeed, Shehada's team holds solid experience in determining the quality of olive oil, especially in the framework of international standards.

As a legislative body, the PSI advises farmers on the ideal methods of ploughing the soil, pruning the trees, fertilizing the land, and pressing the olives to produce olive oil. They also reside in a national tasting committee which evaluates the olive oil. According to Shehada, the certification process is optional but, if an olive oil producer wants to obtain it, the PSI does the follow-up, sampling, and audit to those who have the certificate. Even companies like Al Reef must adhere to the regulations. The PSI takes three to four random olive oil samples from certified olive oil producers each year. Shehada's team checks the safety, quality, and categorization of the olive oil based on the samples they take. They then either grant or deny the certificate that the olive oil is ready for consumption, both nationally and internationally.

Regarding the standards acknowledged by the PSI, Shehada stressed on international olive oil standard number 188, which meets the standard of the IOC. For local producers who want to market their olive oil internationally, they are obliged to meet the international standards with the national standards that they use. Here, their olive oil will have one of three categories: extra virgin olive oil, virgin olive oil, or ordinary virgin olive oil (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

On the dynamics between the PSI as a local standards institution and the international standardization bodies, Shehada stressed that the PSI tries to get the approval from international accreditation bodies to apply international standards in Palestine and give the certificates to local producers. When they get the approval from the international body, she reported that the PSI works transparently, without any bias in the audit process. The quality certificate they issue for the olive oil adheres to international treaties for olive oil which concern the whole value chain, where the farmer must prove that they follow good agricultural practices in the field, as well as the pressing mills which must meet industrial regulations (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

Here, the role of the MoA becomes more visible, which accompanies the PSI staff in their regular visits to the olive pressing mills. During those visits, Shehada is very thorough; she brings a thermometer with her and checks the temperature of the olive paste inside the press. The maximum temperature which she permits according to the ideal standards is 30 degrees Celsius and nothing more. However, discussing the malpractices in olive pressing, Shehada mentioned that she sometimes went to mills and the room was full of steam, which is a disaster for the olive oil, finding the temperature to be 70 degrees Celsius. In Such cases, the olive oil will not get the certificates. All of these details attest to the central role of the PSI in the certification process (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

### **3.4 THE GOVERNMENT: THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE (MOA)**

Governmental institutions which have a role in the certification process include the Ministry of National Economy, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of the Environment. However, as the main institution responsible for agriculture in Palestine, the MoA has the most important public role in the olive oil sector, including the certification and export processes. Ramez Obaid, who is the Director General of the Olive Oil Department in the Ministry, stated that after the Second Intifada crisis in olive oil production discussed above, the MoA made many interventions in the olive oil sector to introduce more modernized methods in olive oil production, which they did with the support of international organizations that work in the field of agricultural development. Obaid explained that this period was followed by an increase in certification and accreditation around Fair Trade and organic farming standards (Interview with Ramez Obaid 2022). Further, as Shehada mentioned, the MoA is also a member in the National Committee of Certification which drafts the national agricultural certificates in line with international standards (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

Overall, Palestinian olive oil producers who were interviewed for this research believed that the MoA does not implement enough policies to secure stability for them and their products; they all agreed that if the Ministry guaranteed fair practices in the local market, exporting Palestinian olive oil would not be a priority in the same way that it is for them now. Further, al-Ziben stated that in the early 1990s, when the Palestinian Authority was established, olive oil traders had been exploiting local producers, sometimes by buying their oil and mixing it with other oil of lesser quality, and other times by importing foreign olive

oil and disrupting the local market. At the time, many fallahin addressed the MoA with their problem and nothing was done. It was PARC and the Farmers' Association that tried to solve the problem (Interview with Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef 2022). Additionally, Abu Ghazaleh mentioned that there is no existing legal framework to protect the certification labels in Palestine, which is required to avoid any misuse of the related labels by non-certified producers – a policy which is yet to be put forward by the Ministry (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022).

Hence, as the interviewed producers stressed, the priority of the MoA should be reoriented towards fixing the existing problems within the local olive oil economy (throughout the production process) and to ensure fairness for the fallahin who need government support. If that was done, certification and export would be a genuine choice rather than an escape mechanism from the unfair reality imposed on the Palestinian olive oil market. As in any other country in the world, the role of governmental institutions is imperative for the success in agriculture and, in Palestine, the ministry should play an integral role in the certification process. However, I observed during my fieldwork that what the Ministry does for the olive oil sector neither matches its expected role nor the huge sums of development aid that it receives from foreign donors.

### **3.5 INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION BODIES**

The role of international standardization bodies, such as the IOC, in the certification process is perhaps the clearest amongst all actors; they are simply responsible for setting the international standards in olive oil production which must be followed at the local level. When I asked Shehada about the relationship between the local and the international standardization bodies, she mentioned that the PSI relies on the guidelines set by the IOC in setting the national standards for olive oil production. The IOC sets its own international standards, and only communicates with the ISO to update its examination techniques (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022).

As for Palestinian certification standards, they are set according to the IOC guidelines, while the methods of olive oil testing and examination are based on both the IOC and ISO standards. There are additional certification bodies which are involved in the process. This includes, as Abu Ghazaleh mentioned, the WFOT, whose standards must be followed if an

olive oil producer wants to certify their product within the Fair Trade label (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022). Here, it is worth mentioning that the relationship between national and international standardization bodies is not ideal.

As mentioned above, Palestine tried for years to become a member at the IOC but could not get the organization's approval until 2017 when Palestine became an observer member of the UN. Even afterwards, there were states within the IOC who remained against Palestine's membership even afterwards, namely Germany and the United Kingdom, fearing that such membership could 'disrupt the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians' (Interview with Taghreed Shehada 2022). This shows the degree to which geopolitics governs the power relations within standardization and certification bodies, especially between global north and the global south countries. Furthermore, as al-Qadi mentioned, the process of adopting international standards on the national level is both costly and time consuming (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022).

Thus, even though Palestine follows the internationally set guidelines and synchronizes its certification processes with the relevant international bodies, its position as a country under occupation, lacking sovereignty and power, keeps it in a weak position compared to the rest of the oil producing world.

### **3.6 CONSUMERS**

As Grabher, Ibert, and Flohr state (2008), consumers are often considered passive recipients of products at the end of economic processes. They are thought to simply buy goods which they consume without much innovation or interaction with producers. However, as they also argue, commodity chains are neither linear nor passive and products actively constitute social relations. Taking this concept further, in the case of Palestinian olive oil consumption, the product is a constituent of a political relation; each drop of olive oil from Palestine carries the struggles of Palestinians who suffer throughout the year to get the oil from the tree to the bottle which travels to international markets. As Anne Meneley rightfully says, a bottle of Palestinian extra virgin olive oil travels through difficult obstacles set by the Israeli occupation before it can reach the foreign consumers; a bottle of Palestinian olive oil is thus a bottle of blood (Meneley 2008).

Indeed, as al-Qadi mentioned, for the bottle of Palestinian extra virgin olive oil to reach the European market with an acidity level that meets international standards (which is 0.8 grams per 100 grams), the journey must start with less acidity, usually around 0.6, given that Israel deliberately delays the exported olive oil, often in broad sunlight, with bad storing conditions (Interview with Mahmoud al-Qadi 2022). After all the struggles of certification and meeting standards, even the journey of Palestinian olive oil towards international markets is full of struggles and obstacles resulting from Israel's policies. As Abu Ghazaleh said, "we train, we invest, we put so much effort [in the certification process], but this will mean nothing if Israel suddenly decides to close the borders" (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022). Here, one could see why the role of an informed consumers in the process of certification and export of Palestinian olive oil is as important as any other actor in this process.

**Figure 9 : Photo of a Palestinian woman collecting olives besides the Separation Wall.**

*Source: Middle East Eye (MEE 2020)*



Further, when asked about consumers' roles and responsibilities, Abu Ghazaleh stressed that Palestinian olive oil producers who work with Al Reef strictly follow standards in olive oil production not only to sell their oil and achieve economic gains, but also because they are aware of the responsibility attached to exporting their products; "being a food product means zero error" (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022). Here, one could see that

Palestinian olive oil producers who export their products are aware of the power of the consumer and thus they want to export olive oil of the highest quality. This, as members of the Bani Zaid Cooperative explained, is also part of the political message they want to send with their organic olive oil: their olive oil *should* be a political weapon and it should be one of the best taste and highest quality.

To conclude, consuming Palestinian olive oil outside Palestine must not perpetuate the cycle of violence which Israel entrenched in the lives of all Palestinians, including olive farmers. While everyday Israel uproots, vandalizes, and burns Palestinian olive trees, consuming Palestinian olive oil should be a political act, with the pain of Palestinians remembered with each consumed oil drop. Otherwise, as Lila Sharif says, one would be a mainstream consumer of a commodity without any thought; only “salivating over, chewing, and digesting” Palestinian olive oil, “without the added ingredient of pain and violence” (Sharif 2014).

## IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE OLIVE OIL SECTOR IN PALESTINE FROM TRADITIONS TO MODERNITY

As highlighted throughout this thesis, the olive harvest season in Palestine is central in many aspects. For Palestinians, olive oil is a *green gold*, and for decades, olive harvest has been a profitable season around which Palestinians planned major life events. Socially, as this thesis illustrates, several valuable traditions revolved around olive harvest and the production of olive oil; the stories told, the songs chanted, and the strong sense of collective work and solidarity which Palestinians cherished and preserved for decades. With that in mind, Israel's attacks on Palestinians, their olive trees, and the memory around olive harvest make such traditions even more important for the Palestinian; the more obstacles the Israeli occupier creates between the Palestinians and their olive trees, the greater are Palestinians' steadfastness and determination to harvest their olives, an annual celebration of heritage, memory, and the right to resist and exist.

In light of this reality, the production of olive oil in Palestine has gone through major technological transformations since the late-twentieth century, moving towards more modernized forms of production. With this advancement, and despite Israel's destructive policies against Palestinians and their agriculture, Palestinian olive oil has been increasingly entering the global economy of certifications and standards, which allowed more Palestinians to export their olive oil to international markets. As discussed in the analysis throughout the thesis, this was driven by economic and political motives, namely the disruption in the local markets — which came as a result of the Israeli occupation — and Palestinians' willingness to utilize their exported products as tools of resistance, raising the name of Palestine with every bottle of olive oil sold.

In that cycle, which begins with the Palestinian fallah and ends with the customer, several actors are involved. As the thesis further highlights, this includes organizations at different levels, i.e., government institutions, NGOs, the private sector, and international bodies. In the overall cycle of production-certification-export-consumption, and within the discussed actors themselves, many structures of power exist. In Palestine, tensions arise between government and non-government institutions, and the local olive oil producer is often stuck in between. On the international level, the power dynamics that usually determine Palestine's

position as an occupied country without real sovereignty also play a role in thwarting Palestinians' attempts to send their certified olive oil out to the world. Within all these complications, Israel tirelessly continues to disrupt any normality in the lives of Palestinians, and the cycle of olive oil production is not an exception.

While the Palestinian olive oil economy benefits from technological advancements and standardization, many of the valued social traditions around the olive harvest have been fading away. In this regard, the discussions during the interviews and the reflections of the interviewees revealed conflicting opinions, between those who follow traditions and refuse international standards, and others who accept advancement in technology and profits without looking at the past.

When I asked some of the interviewees to recall traditional songs that they used to sing during the olive harvest season, they couldn't, and they expressed this with regret. They agreed that it is very rare to find people who sing while working in the harvest: "everyone now wants to finish, press the olives and go back home to rest so they can continue the next day", one of the farmers at Bani Zeid al Sharqiya said. Moreover, *al-Owneh*, by which many hands helped the fallah in picking the olives and pressing the oil, is slowly being replaced by daily laborers whom, as Jaber mentioned, do not care about the trees as much as they care about their wages. Year after year, more Palestinians are growing farther away from their lands and traditions.

Those involved in the technical aspects of olive oil production, certification, and marketing, had different impressions. They focus their attention on the increasing economic benefits of modernized olive oil production and standardization, without much care to the shifts in social norms that accompany the advancements in technology. As Abu Ghazaleh stressed throughout his interview, "if the olive oil we produce is not within the international standards and certificates, then we will not have as Palestinians this opportunity to be visible in competing markets" (Interview with Salim Abu Ghazaleh 2022). For the technical people, traditional practices that fail to meet the international standards are backwards, unnecessary, and should be changed. But should they?

As Shehada says, there are many traditional agricultural practices which are correct practices, and if they are maintained throughout the life cycle of olive oil, they can make a difference in the production. This is what Aqrbawi also thought when he said that he has

had stable olive oil production rates for the past three years, despite doing everything in the old way: “I follow my own standards, and I know they are correct, and you can tell from the quality of my olive oil and the stability I have in the production”(Interview with Hamza Aqrabawi 2022). Aqrabawi, whose attachment to his heritage is truly inspiring, keeps the traditions alive; songs and poems around olives that he wants to see rooted in the Palestinian identity, heritage, and memory. Every year in the olive harvest season, Aqrabawi opens his land for young volunteers from around Palestine to come and help in collecting the olives. Not only the young attend, he said, but also many elderly people join them as well. They cook, sing, and tell stories together, and the olive harvest becomes a ceremony to celebrate the generosity of the olive tree.

In many villages in Palestine, one can find annual voluntary youth initiatives to help in the olive harvest, believing in the importance collective work. Similarly, in Birzeit University in Palestine, students cannot obtain their diplomas without completing 120 hours of voluntary work, a practice that was first established in the 1980s to have more young people participate in the olive harvest season (Interview with Rabah Jaber 2022). Here, the political nature of the olive season in Palestine becomes very clear, where protecting the land and attending to the duty of the olive harvest is a resistance tool, and everyone has a role.

All of this highlights that in the context of olive oil production in Palestine, tensions between modernity and traditions, the native and the foreign technologies, the local and the international, is something that must be further studied. This is one of the suggestions for future works that emerged from this research. Another suggestion would be to conduct (one or more) comparative studies that bring together different olive-oil-producing countries, to see how different economic and political contexts could determine the impacts of standardization on agriculture and societies. A third idea that stems from this thesis is to closely examine the dynamics at work between national and international certification/standardization bodies, which are subject to many power relations, as the case of Palestine exemplifies.

The continuation of this research would not simply be a venue by which to address the shifting characteristics of agriculture in Palestine, but also an opportunity to examine, through the roots of one of its most valuable agricultural and cultural mainstays, the dynamic ways that Palestine is changing in the face of oppression. In the end, I choose to

conclude with a quote from Hamza Aqrabawi, whose words I will always remember every time I see an olive tree uprooted by a Zionist settler and another planted by a Palestinian hand:

“There is an unwritten rule between the fallah and their lands: nobody knows the land more than its owner. This connection can’t be explained into words. When my tree gets sick, I know how to get her back to life again. There are no rules, the land is my main teacher. I listen to it, I observe it, and feel it, just like a human”.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

- Al-Hajja Jazeela, an old Palestinian woman from al-Zawya village in Salfit, who until today perseveres with traditional methods of olive oil production, pressing the olive oil by hand and stone, making her one of the few people who still do this in Palestine. The stories she told and the songs she chanted opened a window to the past, where one could better appreciate the different transformations that occurred in producing olive oil in Palestine.
- Hamza Aqrabawi, an olive oil producer, historian, and a storyteller, whose aim is to keep traditions alive through his agricultural methods in general and in particular his treatment of his olive trees; I was lucky to taste his precious olive oil, which was as green as the olive tree.
- Rabah Jaber, an olive oil producer from Jenin in the north of the West Bank who lives in Ramallah. We delved together into his childhood memories, and he described to me the current reality of olive oil production and his longing for the traditional methods in producing olive oil.
- Mahmoud al-Qadi, the Ramallah branch director in the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC), which is one of the leading community-based organizations in Palestine. Being an olive oil producer himself, al-Qadi's interview contributed greatly to this study.
- Hatem Mis'ef, Abdel-Rahman al-Ziben, and Samir Mis'ef, four olive oil producers whom I interviewed in the village of Mazare' al-Noubani. With Mahmoud al-Qadi, they co-founded one of the main olive oil agricultural cooperatives in Ramallah. I had the chance to speak to those men while we sat under the shades of their olive trees, as they remembered the past, discussed the present, and expressed their hopes for a better future for their olive oil production.
- Abu Ya'qoub al-Rantisi, the owner of an olive press in the old town of Ramallah. I interviewed him and another woman who was there to buy olive oil soap. We spoke

about traditions and modernity in olive oil pressing, and they reflected on the present of olive oil production in Palestine.

- Taghreed Shehada, the director of the Transformative Industries Unit in the department of Quality and Rehabilitation at the Palestine Standards Institution (PSI). Shehada is one of the few female Palestinian experts in evaluating and tasting olive oil, including the characteristics that follow certain international standards. She is a brilliant woman and I will never forget the conversations we had and the remarkable olive oil that we tasted together.
- Ramez Obaid, the director general of the olive oil unit in the Palestinian Ministry of Agricultural, with whom I discussed the governmental policies toward olive oil production in Palestine.
- Salim Abu Ghazaleh, the director general of Al Reef Fairtrade, which is the company that exports the olive oil of many Palestinian producers, including the Bani Zaid Cooperative, to Europe and North America. Abu Ghazaleh is considered an expert in the standardization and marketing of olive oil