

Narratives Under Siege (19): “I still cannot farm my own land”



Abu Jihad Shaheen can only farm 20 donumms of his 86 donumms of farmland in eastern Gaza, because of continuing Israeli intimidation towards farmers living near the border with Israel.

New Abasan village in South Eastern Gaza looks, and feels, almost haunted. Every third or fourth house is a mound of rubble, or else has been partially destroyed, and the village streets are dusty and devoid of life. Many local Palestinians have been driven out of New Abasan by relentless Israeli incursions into the village. The Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) have bulldozed huge tracts of land in and around New Abasan, and demolished dozens of local houses.

Beyond the village itself are hundred more donumms of rich agricultural farmland (a donumm is the equivalent of 1,000 square metres) lying near Gaza’s eastern border with Israel. Abu Jihad Shaheen is a local farmer who owns a farm about a kilometer outside New Abasan village, nearby the border. He used to live on his farm with his family, but after years of Israeli invasions of his land, was finally forced to leave when the IOF demolished his water well earlier this year. When he and his family left the farm the IOF destroyed their farmhouse.

Now Abu Jihad and his family live in New Abasan village. “My brother, Yousef, and I own our farm together,” he says, as we stand at the beginning of his land, gazing towards the border. “We own 86 donumms of land, but we can only farm the 20 donumms furthest from the border – it is too dangerous for us to work on the rest of our land.” Twenty donumms of fresh parsley surround us, ripe for hand-picking - but beyond that stretch another 66 donumms of dry, yellow dry earth leading right up to the border. We walk to the far end of the parsley fields. Now we are standing 450 metres from the border

with Israel, and Abu Jihad will go no further. When he points out the ruin of his house just a couple of hundred metres ahead, there are tears in his eyes. “Yousef and I have lost more than \$300,000 because we can’t farm our land any more” he says. “We had almond, olive and citrus trees, and we exported fruit and vegetables to the West Bank and Jordan, and to Israel. Now we will be lucky to make \$300 from selling the parsley.”

The most striking thing about the expanse of farmland along the south eastern Gaza border is the almost total absence of people: apart from Abu Jihad, his brother, Yousef and a local farm-worker who’s come to help them pick the parsley, there is no-one to be seen. The Shaheen brothers, who now have to pipe water from a nearby house to their parsley fields, say dozens of local farming families have been driven from the area, leaving fields and farmhouses empty. Abu Jihad says the *Tahdiya* or “period of calm” that came into force on 19 June has made no difference to his access to his own land. “I still cannot farm my land” he says. His brother agrees. “They [the Israelis] still open fire every day” says Yousef. “They fire warning shots into the air, and we see drones and helicopters circling in the sky above us. We do not feel safe here on our land.”

At the beginning of the Second Intifada, in September 2000, a 150 metre buffer zone was established either side of the Gaza / Israel border. Over the last few years the IOF have unilaterally extended the buffer zone to more than 300 metres, whilst at the same time continuing to deliberately destroy thousands of dunums of Gazan farmland, including farmland way beyond the buffer zone. A 400 metre buffer zone around the border of the Gaza represents a net loss of at least 20 square kilometres of fertile farmland. But this year alone, 3,400 dunums of farmland inside Gaza have been bulldozed by IOF, the vast majority of it along the south eastern border, including farms that stood 2.5 kilometres from the border with Israel.

The deliberate destruction of civilian property is illegal under international human rights and humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention [articles 33 and 53]. Although IOF has stopped bulldozing Gazan farmland since 19 June, many farmers living near the border remain frightened of returning to their own land.

Abu Jihad takes us to meet another local farmer. Yunis Khalil Abu Latifa is 56, and owns fifty dunums of local land. We sit under the olive trees outside his house, and eat fresh, sweet figs from his garden. “I had ten dunums of fruit trees just behind my house” he tells us, “but the Israelis bulldozed them. Our land is fertile, but we cannot farm here anymore.” Regarding the *Tahdiya*, Abu Latifa says he thinks it has made some difference. “My family feels more personally secure in this area now that they [the Israelis] are not shooting and invading [our area] every day” he says. “But I still can’t work on my land”

One week before the *Tahdiya* started, an IOF rocket struck Abu Latifa’s house. No-one was injured, but the family home was badly damaged. Abu Latifa is adamant no rockets had been fired by Palestinians. “We are all farmers here” he says, “and we just want to farm.” He suddenly gestures in the direction of the border. “I have forty dunums of good land up there” he says. ‘It is just 800 metres away, and I could walk there in ten

minutes. But if anyone goes onto their land [near the border] they will be shot, even now. I haven't been able to farm those 40 donumms for more than four years.”