

Yasouf Village Terrorised by Tapuah Illegal Settlers

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The illegal Israeli Tapuah settlement has been causing endless problems for the Palestinian village of Yasouf, located east of the town of Salfit. In Hebrew, I am told, 'Tapuah' means an 'apple', a benign name for the place which has been creating so much misery. The settlement is built on Yasouf land just above the massive junction which colonisers call Tapuah Junction and Palestinians Zatarah.

Yasouf village of 2,000 people is about three kilometres away from Zatarah and less than that from the illegal colony. In fact, the distance between the Tapuah illegal settlement and Yasouf village is getting smaller, as the settlers continue to grab more and more of Yasouf's land and expand towards it. This is done by the so called 'outposts' made up of temporary caravan homes brought in from Israel, which are soon replaced by the permanent brick and mortar houses. The plunder of Yasouf land started with the building of Tapuah Junction and the settlement in the 70s when vast chunks of land were taken without permission from the village. The land was 'cleared' of hundreds of olive trees and villagers never fail to mention that.

Up until a year or so ago, Zatarah was one of the largest Israeli checkpoints north of Ramallah. This is where for years many Palestinians travelling to work were held, denied passage or humiliated, by the occupying soldiers.

Last time I was in the West Bank two and a half years ago, I got into a community taxi (Palestinians call servees) at night with three of my IWPS colleagues. The servees was full of tired Palestinian labourers on their way home from the north of the West Bank. The soldier stopped us at Zatarah and asked all Palestinians to get out of the servees and then asked us if we were kidnapped by them! We were all allowed through, in spite of what we replied to the soldier. Palestinians told us that many times they were turned back from Zatarah and were unable to get the night's rest in their homes. They were sure that that was exactly what would have happened that night if we, the foreigners, had not been in the servees.

Now Zatarah checkpoint has been mostly dismantled, but temporary checkpoints appear frequently. Star of David flags are still high on the masts and the Israeli Occupation Force (IOF) jeeps are always parked in what looks like a small army base. There are settlers to be protected, hundreds of thousands of them. This is where they wait for their settler only busses and hitchhike to the almost completely occupied Jordan Valley.

We visited the Mayor of Yasouf Abu Noor last Monday and he summarised the problems they have in a few sentences. Tapuah settlement with the newer extension Tapuah B, are in the middle of Yasouf land. Village land now encircles the settlement and there is hardly anybody in the village who does not have to farm dangerously near the settlement barbed wire.

Also, Tapuah settlers 'are like no others', said the Mayor. 'They are members of Kahan Chai', he said. This organisation, together with the Katch party, was banned in Israel in the 80s for its racism and then declared a terrorist organisation in 1994. Infamous mass murderer Dr Baruch Goldstein who shot 29 worshippers in the Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque, was a Kach supporter. 'They hate Arabs and they want to

kill us all', said Abu Noor. The history of settler violence against Yasouf indicates that his fears are not exaggerated. Only a few months ago, at the end of September occupation soldiers entered the village and made sure the Yasouf inhabitants were inside their homes, while dozens of settlers descended to the village firing from their automatic guns. Three Palestinians ended up needing a hospital treatment for tear gas inhalation.

The Mayor showed us the picture of the burned village mosque which settlers torched two years ago. The worst damaged was the library and many religious books went up in flames, but the most ominous were the graffiti messages which intruders left. 'We will retaliate with fire', said one. And they did exactly that, both before the burning of the mosque and many times after. 'We have big problems with the settlers all the time', said Abu Noor. 'They come to the village as often as they like and throw stones at the houses, attack people and burn cars'.

In Yasouf there is an area called Janein, which is fertile and rich in springs and underground waters. The place is covered with citrus and other fruit trees which, when we visited, were laden with fruits. Sadly, this is where settlers like to come frequently, unannounced, and their visits are never peaceful.

Mahmoud, who also works in the Yasouf Town Hall, told us that recently settlers uprooted and stole 26 olive trees from his father's land. He reported it to the Israelis. He even had the registration number of the settlers' car. But the thieves suffered no consequences. 'We often report crimes but there has never once been a case that anything was done about it. More than 500 trees and many goats and sheep were stolen from us like this in the last few years', he said.

Mahmoud showed us another nearby illegal settlement called Rahil, which also has a history of settler violence. A few years ago a 15 years old Palestinian boy was shot in the arm by a settler.

We asked Mahmoud about this year's olive harvest and he told us that access to the land is a major problem for the farmers. The IOF and the settlers erected a barrier and blocked the road villagers used to reach their olive groves and they have to use a significantly longer roundabout route just to get to their trees. 'Many Yasouf farmers have land near the settlement and they can only pick olives with IOF permission.' said Mahmoud. Because nothing can be easy for the occupied Palestinians, the IOF usually issues permissions for five day periods, while many people need two weeks or more to complete the harvest. Even more upsetting for the Yasouf villagers is the fact that hundreds of olive trees belonging to them were cut to build the Junction and the settlement and the trees that survived the Junction cull, villagers are banned from harvesting.