

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN FAMILY COUNTERS HARASSMENT WITH OPENNESS

By Emma Halgren ()*

"A land is nothing without people, and people are nothing without a land." That's the maxim followed by Palestinian farmer Daoud Nassar. And when he speaks of the intimate connection between people and their land, he is talking from hard-won experience.

Nassar, a Palestinian Christian, lives with his family on 42 hectares (100 acres) of fertile land west of Bethlehem. His grandfather bought the land in 1916, and the Nassar family has farmed there ever since, growing olives, almonds, grapes, pears and figs.

In 1991, Daoud Nassar learned that the Israeli authorities were planning to confiscate three quarters of his land – a practice that is illegal under international law, but nonetheless widespread on the West Bank.

Since then, the family has been locked in a costly legal battle with the Israeli government, despite possessing all the land registration documents and other paperwork necessary to prove their ownership of the land, Daoud Nassar told a visiting ecumenical delegation on 10 March.

The ecumenical delegation – a [Living Letters](#) team travelling on behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC) – visited the Nassar farm along with ecumenical organizations, church leaders and civil society groups in Israel and Palestine in March.

Amid the legal battles and harassment from surrounding Israeli settlers, the Nassar family has chosen a path of peace. It has opened up its land to locals and people from around the world to participate in educational and peace building activities.

The Nassar farm is part of a parcel of land, including eight nearby Palestinian farming villages, that Israeli authorities hope to annex in order to expand the Gush Etzion settlements, whose population is around 50,000.

Many West Bank families do not have the official documentation required to prove ownership of their land, let alone the resources to be able to fight lengthy court battles.

Since their first court appearance in 1991 to challenge the confiscation order, the Nassars have surprised the courts not only with the thoroughness of their documentation, but with their persistence. Daoud Nassar estimates that the family and supporters of the project have spent around 145,000 US dollars in legal and other fees, and attended numerous court hearings – with the result that, for now, the land is safe.

"We refuse to be enemies"

The Nassar farm is already surrounded by Israeli settlements, and like many Palestinians, the Nassars have endured harassment, threats and attacks from nearby settlers. In one such attack, Daoud Nassar's mother was threatened with a gun. In another, settlers uprooted 250 olive trees from the property.

It is acts like this, Nassar says, that can easily fuel violence among Palestinians. For many others, the only possible options seem to be to resign themselves to the situation, or to emigrate.

The Nassar family decided there should be another option – to refuse to be enemies. So they established on their land a project called the [Tent of Nations](#). Its overarching aims are to build bridges between people of different backgrounds, and between people and land.

"We wanted to move away from a circle of blame, and channel our frustration into something positive," Daoud Nassar told the Living Letters team.

The Israeli authorities have forbidden any permanent infrastructure development on the site, as well as access to the electricity grid and public water, so the Nassars have refurbished seven underground caves, painting them, fitting them out with comfortable rugs and cushions and connecting them to electricity from a generator so that they could be used for meetings and other gatherings. There are now plans to install solar panels and build wind turbines on the farm.

Since the establishment of the project in 2000, the Nassars have garnered significant local and global support. Children from Bethlehem are given the opportunity to reconnect with the land through tree planting and helping with the grape and olive harvest.

A women's project equips women from the nearby village of Nahalin with English, computer and craft skills. Restrictive permit systems prevent many women from leaving the village for education or work, so the women's project provides a rare opportunity for women to pursue an education.

Each year, the Nassars run a tree planting campaign on the farm. In 2009, the goal is to plant 1000 trees on the land, with the help of the hundreds of people – including local Palestinians, Israeli peace activists and international supporters – who visit the site.

Volunteers also visit the farm throughout the year to help with the grape, almond, fig and olive harvests, and to take part in artistic projects.

Building bridges

In a show of solidarity, members of European Jews for a Just Peace visited the property in 2003 and planted 250 olive trees to replace those ripped out by settlers.

At the local level, Nassar says, the activities of the Tent of Nations have gone at least some way towards promoting understanding between Palestinian and Israeli people. In early 2008, a woman from a visiting group of peace activists invited her friend from a nearby Israeli settlement to come and visit the Tent of Nations. The woman had been living in the settlement for nine years but was not aware that there were Palestinians living in the surrounding areas. The visit gave her a powerful insight into the living conditions of the Palestinians in the region.

Actions like these may not change the reality of the Occupation, but they are a small step towards better relationships between these deeply divided groups, said Daoud Nassar.

He hopes that his project will encourage other Palestinians not to see themselves as victims, but rather to look at the future with some hope. "What we are trying to do here, in a simple way, is to motivate our people, and show them there is a future," he said.

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