



UNRWA

Case Study

West Bank Wall/Fence

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Up Against the Wall: The Story of a Qalqilya Farm Family



Abdel Rahman (right), his son Saleh and brother Maamun working with cucumber plants

QALQILYA - The day the wall went up, Abdel Rahman Abu Saleh's farm business ground to a halt.

The once-prosperous farm, producing a variety of fruits and vegetables for shops and markets in Qalqilya and in Israel, kept Saleh and his extended family-- a total of 10 adults and 25 children -- in profit. With the wall in place, the pattern of many years changed abruptly.

One day last summer, armoured Israeli bulldozers flattened and scraped a wide swathe from east to west about a hundred metres south of Saleh's nylon-covered greenhouses. Workers uncoiled spools of razor wire, dug a trench, put up an electronic fence, connected closed-circuit television cameras, built a military patrol road and, finally, installed a steel gate painted canary yellow. When the work was done, four dunums of the Saleh family's 40 dunums of farmland were visible but strictly off limits -- still in the West Bank but on the other side of the fence.

'Your land has been confiscated,' soldiers at the gate told Abdel Rahman and Maamun, one of his four brothers. 'If you try to come in here, we will shoot. If you object, you can go to the Military Court.' When the Salehs -- UNRWA-registered refugees -- learned that a court action could cost in excess of NIS 250,000 (more than USD 56,000) and that they would forfeit legal fees if they lost, they decided against the move. They continued tending the remaining land, growing cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplant, cauliflower, guava and lemons.

During the three years of the *intifada* Saleh's profits had already dwindled with the disruptions of near-daily curfews, closures and Israeli military operations. Once Israel's south Qalqilya barrier was complete and the farm was cut off from Hable village three kilometres to the south and from markets in Israel, sales of his produce plummeted. 'To minus zero,' as Saleh put it.

Saleh's plight is part of a larger picture. The rich, dark land of the fruit farms and potato fields feed Qalqilya and numerous villages along the Green Line and to the east. Qalqilya depends on agriculture, local business and the resulting trade. Palestinians from Qalqilya worked in Israel; Israelis and foreign workers on Israeli farms shopped in Qalqilya. Today, that traffic has stopped and both sides feel the economic squeeze.

Qalqilya and adjacent villages now are nearly enclosed by the barrier -- a wall of concrete slabs in some places, electronic fence in others. Individual farmers have lost varying amounts of land but say that a total of 400 dunums are now inaccessible on the other side of the wall. Also isolated and unusable to Palestinian farmers are about 12 of Qalqilya's 70 or so deep water wells.

Although Saleh lost four dunums, he still can work most of his land. But the market for his produce has shrunk. For Qalqilya area farmers, it has been a painful chain reaction of negative economics. Commercial traffic between this part of the West Bank and Israel has slowed to a trickle. Unemployment has risen sharply, shops have closed, prices of vegetables and fruit have fallen, fertilizer and equipment-maintenance costs have either stayed the same or gone up.

One morning in November, Abdel Rahman and Maamun Saleh sorted and boxed ripe cucumbers and sweet guavas and loaded them on a donkey cart. Abdel Rahman's 13-year-old son drove the cart into Qalqilya, hoping to sell them on the town's market, which is now a fraction of its former size because of the economic decline. They would be lucky, Saleh said, if the half-dozen boxes fetched NIS 200, a third of what they would have brought a year ago. Sitting with cups of coffee outside their greenhouses, Abdel Rahman and Maamun fretted that the produce would not sell at all and would have to be given away or dumped. There was considerable relief when the youngster returned with an empty cart and NIS 200.

A walk around the orchards and greenhouses offers a quick lesson in the cost of farming. The nylon roofing for the two greenhouses lasts about two years and costs NIS 2,000 to replace. There are steady expenses for diesel fuel, irrigation pipe and fittings, fertilizer, insecticide and plant seedlings. And there is water.

The deep wells that remain on the Qalqilya side of the barrier are Palestinian-owned but strictly regulated by Israeli authorities. Usage quotas are set and the wells are metered. A farmer who exceeds his quota risks a fine or having the well shut down. Farmers are not allowed to service the wells without Israeli permission, and are not allowed to drill the wells deeper.

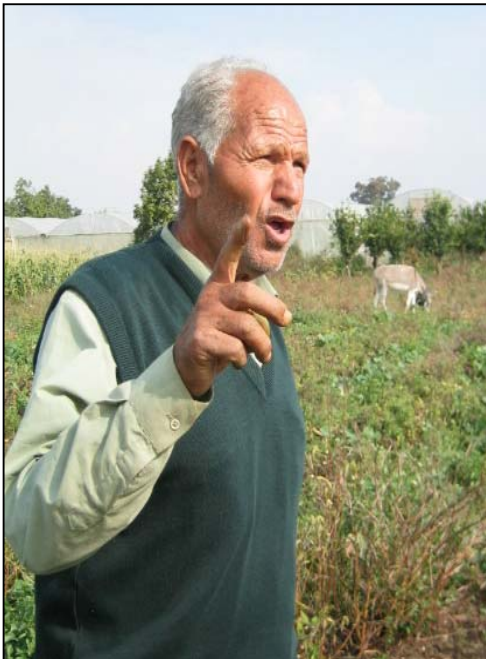
Saleh said that he and his brothers pay about NIS 2,000 a month for water to irrigate their crops. On top of that are the other expenses. In a good month Saleh may take in NIS 2,000 from the sale of fruit and vegetables. 'We work just to eat,' Saleh said, gesturing toward his mouth. 'But we stay in the red'.

One expense that Saleh was forced to eliminate was wages for workers. Hired hands have been let go except for a few who stay on simply to have something to do and who are paid in fruit and vegetables. One of these, a cheerful man in his mid-forties, said he once earned NIS 250 a day in Israel. He hasn't been able to find salaried work for the past three years and feeds his family on donated vegetables and staples from UNRWA food distributions.

For this man's brother, the economic pressure was too much and he moved away to seek work. Other Qalqilya residents also are said to be leaving. Sometimes the move is on paper. They hope that by changing the home address on identity documents, they can circumvent Israeli travel restrictions. Thus a man might actually live in Qalqilya but display his address as Funduq.

With all this trouble and living hand-to-mouth in a farming area withering in the shadow of the wall, why doesn't Saleh move on and try to rebuild a life somewhere else? Why stay?

'To hold the land,' he said, gesturing out over rows of eggplant and a guava orchard. 'This is the conflict between us and the other side. I am happy when I work my land. I am free.'



QALQILYA - Straightening his back after picking a handful of small green tomatoes out of an overgrown end-of-the-season field, Ahmed Atiya recounted some milestones in his working life. For a 65-year-old Palestinian farmer, it is a grim history.

'Before 1948, we used to have 40 dunums of land here,' he said, talking about his parents and sweeping his hand beyond where the Israeli 'security' barrier now stands south of Qalqilya. 'In 1948 we lost 15 dunums on the Green Line. 'In 1951 they [the Israeli authorities] took the remaining 25 dunums.

'In 1967 my brothers and I bought 12 dunums near the same place. Then the Israelis put a road through it and tried to make me sign a paper saying I agreed with that. I wouldn't sign.

'I still own that land, but with the intifada it is hard to use it. I could grow things on it but because of the closures I cannot get the vegetables out to any market. It is not worth the expense. It is as though I do not own that land.

'Then my brothers and I bought another four dunums,' he said, pointing across the new electronic fence. 'Last year they chased us off that land and forbid us to use it. They would not even allow me to harvest my cauliflower.

'Now I have nothing else, and I work for another farmer here for a share of the vegetables.

'By God, I say that I have not exaggerated anything. And three-quarters of the people here are in the same situation'.