LIVING WITH SETTLERS

by Thomas Mandal
Ecumenical Accompanier in Yanoun

Second Edition

Interviews with Yanoun villagers by participants in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI): Ursula Gelis, Ella Eriksen, Vivienne Jackson, Karin Huber, Thomas Mandal, Renate Leiprecht and Arne Essén.

The second edition includes information from more recent Ecumenical Accompaniers, named within the text.

Published by Norwegian Church Aid and EAPPI © 2011
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Yanoun is one of the smallest villages in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). But it is remarkable that it is still a village at all. For over a decade, extremist settlers based at outposts of the illegal Israeli settlement of Itamar have been persistently harassing the villagers, using means including firearms. The aim appears to be ‘transfer by stealth’: settlers forcibly seizing land from local farmers who rely on farming for a living.

Tonight, Yanoun farmers and their families will sleep again under bright spotlights on hilltops barely 400m from their homes. Since 1996, residents have been beaten up, their sheep mutilated, and their land seized. They are now unable to farm the majority of their land. They say that reaching it is simply too risky.

On October 18th 2002, nearly all Yanoun’s residents evacuated the village, feeling that the level of harassment by settlers made it too dangerous for them to remain. But the next day, the villagers began returning. They were able to do so because they were accompanied by Israeli and international activists, of several faith backgrounds, who were outraged at the situation faced by the villagers. Ever since this time, a house in the village has been home to a permanent, voluntary international presence. Since June 2003, that presence has been provided by the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI).

This book tells the story of Yanoun through the words of residents themselves and media reports. Villagers, children and teachers in Yanoun explain how life has changed in the village since the settlers arrived. They talk about their experience of trying to find help.
from those legally charged with protecting them – the occupying authorities, in the form of the Israeli Army and Border Police. Finally, they talk about the role of the international presence in Yanoun.

Ideally there would be no need for internationals in Yanoun. But law enforcement against settler crime within the occupied territories is severely lacking. The residents of Yanoun say the presence of internationals deters attackers.

Ecumenical Accompaniers witness, record and report on events in the village. The story of Yanoun illustrates all too clearly that international pressure is needed to compel Israeli officials to protect Palestinians living under occupation, in line with their international commitments under the Geneva Conventions.

This book talks of hopes that within a short period of time the situation will change for the better and that the people of Yanoun will one day be able to live in their village without an international presence. Unfortunately, there has been little positive change since the first edition of this book was published in 2006. An international presence is still needed for the villagers to continue to live in their homes. In June 2010, when settlers again came into the village just before midnight, the children gathered outside the international house because that was where they felt safe. The lights in the windows indicated international presence, and the settlers left without causing any problems.

During the last years, physical attacks by settlers on Yanoun locals have ceased. Nevertheless, vandalism continues, armed settlers still make intimidating visits to the village, and the outposts are increasing in size on Yanoun’s land. Even during the settlement “freeze” that started in the autumn of 2009, settlers extended one of the houses on the ridge overlooking Yanoun from the east, within clear sight of an army watchtower. The settlers have now started to make use of a buffer zone of land, belonging to Yanoun, that the authorities decreed should not be used by either the Yanoun villagers or the settlers. As far as EAPPI has been able to ascertain, the Israeli authorities have done nothing to prevent or punish this. Nor have the residents of Yanoun been given back any of the land that has been taken from them.

One can still see the fear in the eyes of the villagers when the settlers are entering the village. Unfortunately the protection provided by the Israeli army is minimal. Ecumenical Accompanier Doris Richards reported in April 2010:

Settlers still regularly walk through Yanoun, but locals say they are reassured by the presence of EAPPI accompaniers. (Photo: Oliver Wnuck / EAPPI)
“Today 19 young settlers came into the village. Two of them were armed. They went to the well and about six of them went down into the well to swim. [My fellow EA] Tor and I stayed with them at the well trying to explain to them that they were swimming in someone else’s drinking water. They were very rude to us but we stayed with them until they moved. After a while three military vehicles arrived. We followed them down to the well to explain what had happened. The officer who seemed to be in charge first told us to go away, and when we explained how they had gone down into the well to swim, he characterized the settlers as ‘brave kids’. They left after about half an hour.”

Despite the media focus on Israel and the oPt, stories such as Yanoun’s rarely make it into news bulletins. The grueling daily process of trying to live a rural life, watched over by vigilantes with more resources, arms, and backed by the Israeli army, is not a headline-grabbing story. EAs have met several Israelis who are shocked and dismayed to hear about settler’s activities, such as Omer, from Tel Aviv:

“We never hear about this. This is terrible,” he said.

But throughout the oPt, in violation of local’s basic human rights and at a great economic and social cost, Yanoun’s experience of land expropriation has been replicated.

The year 2012 marks 10 years of international presence in Yanoun. Today, nothing indicates that settlers will withdraw. Indeed, more of Yanoun’s land was confiscated as the second edition of this book was being produced. The settlers continue their threats and harassment. Yanoun remains a microcosm of Israel’s settlement project, which has grown exponentially since the early 1970s in clear violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The situation that continues in this small village on the eastern edge of the Nablus governorate is replicated, in various ways, throughout the West Bank. Yanoun’s experience exposes the injustice of the settlement enterprise - an injustice that must end in order for a just peace to be established in the region.
“They came with dogs and guns, every Saturday at night. They beat men in front of their children. One Saturday they said that they didn’t want to see anyone here next Saturday, and that we should move to Aqraba. The whole village left that week.”

Around the fire in front of one of the old stone houses in Yanoun, Rashid Murrar, the chairman of the village council, recalls what happened when Jewish settlers connected to the West Bank settlement of Itamar entered the village.

It is October 2002, the 18th of the month. The last six families leave the upper part of Yanoun, and the little village of one hundred people is briefly to become famous. First come Israeli peace activists from Ta’ayush, then the United Nations Civilian Mission, then international solidarity groups, and then the media: BBC from Britain, CBC from Canada, National Public Radio from USA and Belgian TV. Israeli and international newspapers come. They report that this is the first time in living memory in which harassment by Jewish settlers in the West Bank had emptied an entire Palestinian community. They draw parallels to the refugees created in the 1948 war.

The news agency Associated Press was on the spot when the villagers abandoned Yanoun, and described the atmosphere: “In Yanoun, the men cried as they got into two cars to leave for the nearby village of Aqraba, where they believe there will be safety. They’ll live with relatives there or move into rented apartments. “Death would be easier than leaving,” Kamal Sobih said, describing his attachment to the land where generations
of his family have lived. “But there is no choice.” He said he often spent nights keeping watch for attackers from his window. “It was not easy to leave after seven generations of village life, but the welfare of the children was at stake. One of my sons would cry and hold me in fear, and I had to get up with him at night and take his hand just to go to the bathroom. No one can accept living like this”.

Kamal’s brother, the then chairman of the village council, Abdel Latif Bani Jaber, told the British newspaper The Guardian: “It took five years of continuous attacks to force us to leave. They would shoot at us, at our sheep, our cattle. Then they started coming to the outskirts of the village and throwing rocks at the doors. I have been beaten up in my house in front of my family.”

The whole community of Upper Yanoun left, except two brothers, Khaleb Bani Jaber and Fyak Mahmoud Bani Jaber, and their families. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) Khaleb said: “I am the owner of this land for 200 years from our grandfathers. We are determined to stay in our houses and the village, and we are not going to leave our houses forever, even if they slay us”.

On October 27th, Jacov Hayman, a spokesman for the settlement of Itamar, said to British newspaper The Guardian that he had no sympathy for the villagers of Yanoun. “If anyone is being terrorized it is us. Arabs have to learn that if they continue to be violent they can’t live here. There is all this talk of Arab olives, what about Jewish blood?”

Abdel Latif rejected his view. “No one from Yanoun has ever harmed them, and they began their intimidation five years ago, long before anyone from Itamar was killed in the Intifada. Do they think they will get peace by kicking people off their land?”

The village chairman and many of the other villagers had high hopes of returning. Abdel Latif stated to journalist Joel Greenberg that “this is our land and we can’t surrender it to them under any conditions. We hope that if the situation calms down, we’ll be able to return with the children”. Inshallah, he added, meaning “God willing”.

Peace groups would see to it that their prayers were heard. The Israeli peace group Ta’ayush wrote a newsletter headed “Help the Yanoun villagers return home!” It read:
“After years of unrelenting harassment, destruction of the infrastructure (water and electricity), armed patrols and threats of shooting, the settlers achieved their goal: the primary school of Yanoun closed down. Another abandoned Palestinian village appeared on the map. This is the moment of truth: We must not let this quiet, unheralded deportation sneak past us!”

From Sunday October 20th, Ta’ayush activists maintained a constant presence in Yanoun in order to enable the villagers to return home. And the villagers came back, little by little. The Nimr family - a father, his wife and their eight children - had left the village and taken with them their sheep. Two days later, the mother returned with three of her children. To the Israeli daily newspaper Ha’aretz she said: “We came back when we heard that people came back to protect us. We felt a bit of security. I have to convince my little son that the Hebrew speakers around him are not settlers”.

Today the villagers can look back on what happened. It took Kamal almost two years before he felt safe to return with his family. They came back in July 2004. Those October days are imprinted in the family’s memory forever, as the settlers marched from door to door looking for people. “My son stood in the doorway when a settler pointed a gun to his face. He wasn’t able to stand on his feet for half an hour afterwards because he was shaking with fear”, Kamal says, surrounded by his wife and his youngest children. Their youngest child, four year-old Taghreed, was so afraid during the flight to Aqraba that she still has problems with internationals, unfamiliar faces, coming to Yanoun.

Rashid returned with his wife and three small children after eight months. He recalls how he saw the settlers walk from house to house. “They even entered houses where there were no men present. In one of the houses there was only a woman with her daughter. They had to flee to the roof. But the settlers followed them, took the woman by her neck and threatened her”.

It also took Rashid’s brother, Yasser Murrar, several months before he returned back with his family.

“When we returned from Aqraba all the houses in the village had broken windows and everything inside was smashed and destroyed”, he says. Yasser’s sister and her family have just recently returned, in the beginning of
November 2005, after being away for four years.

Munther Bani Jaber, the oldest son in the Nimr family, remembers how the settlers broke into the houses: “I saw how men armed with guns entered my uncle’s house and destroyed furniture.”

Because of the international presence, the villagers returned home to Yanoun. Najeh Murrar, who came back with his family after three days, says he felt safer with the internationals there: “During this difficult period the village got help from the [Israeli] army. The soldiers knew that if they did not come, the internationals would inform the media”.

But the media had left. Yanoun had had its days of fame. The ‘story’ was over. The villagers had returned home, and the internationals stayed with them. But the settlers’ terror continued. They kept coming down the hillsides and into the village. The beatings and the death threats continued. When internationals physically stood in their way, settlers beat them as well. The attacks and the terror continue to shape the lives of the villagers even now. The Canaanites used to call the village “Yanouh” many hundreds of years ago. It means “quiet and calm”. Today, fear has a more dominant position in the little community.
In Yanoun today there are several caves. According to Yanoun’s school headmaster Fouzi Bani Jaber, the Canaanites and the Romans lived in these caves. But the story of Yanoun goes further back in time, and is linked to a little hill three hundred meters east of Lower Yanoun that is today used for recreation and picnics. The hill is called Nabi Nun. Ecumenical Accompagner Arne Essén from Norway learnt in the spring of 2005 the importance the site has for both Jews and Muslims. One day while out walking, he met a settler family – a man and his wife, and their ten children – on this hilltop. The man said that they had come to honour the burial site of Nun, the father of Joshua, known to be the second person, after Moses, to lead the Jewish people in their early history. But Muslims also see Nun as a prophet. Today one can see stone remains on the top of the hill that the villagers say used to be a mosque. In Arabic, Nabinun means ‘the grave of Nun’.

The earliest known people in Palestine were the Canaanites. Some historians regard them as part of a wave of migration of Semitic-speaking peoples out of the Arabian Peninsula, while others suggest that they had been there ever since the original Semitic emigration from Africa. Later, the Israelites, possibly descendants of a Canaanite group, appeared. According to the Bible they returned there following the Exodus from ancient Egypt, conquering and absorbing the tribes they found there and reclaiming the land it is said God promised them. Successive waves of migration brought other groups onto the scene. Around 1200 BC the Hittite empire was conquered by allied tribes from the north. The northern, coastal Canaanites were temporarily displaced, but returned when
the invading tribes showed no inclination to settle. The Egyptians called the horde that swept across Asia Minor and the Mediterranean the Sea Peoples. The early Philistines are thought to have been among them. The region in which they settled is known as Philistia. (Read more about the Canaanites in “Canaanites,” J. N. Tubb, University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

The end of the 19th century was an important period in the history of Yanoun. It is believed that around this time around fifty Bosniaks, Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina, came to Yanoun. Bosnia and Herzegovina were taken from the Ottoman Empire and given to Austria-Hungary following the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid gave the migrants a large part of the village. According to the villagers of Yanoun, these are the owners of the village land, and today’s farmers of Yanoun are their descendants.

The Israeli daily newspaper Ha’aretz claims that the immigrants were Muslim soldiers who were brought to Palestine to reinforce the Turkish army at the end of the 19th century and who settled in various places in the country, including in Yanoun. Although they were not originally from one family, they adopted a common surname, Bushnak, which attests to their extraction. When they moved to Nablus from Yanoun, they leased their land to the residents of Aqraba, who gradually began to leave their own village and settle in the wadi, the plateau and the hill of Yanoun. Payment for leasing the land could be made in the form of wheat, olive oil or cash. About three quarters of Yanoun’s 16,000 dunams (4000 acres) of land is leased. The Bushnak family today lives in Nablus, and is still leasing the fields to residents of Aqraba and Yanoun.

During the 20th century, the population of Yanoun remained at around 150. Most income came from the products of the village’s olive trees. Some of the villagers also kept sheep or cows, and grew other products like nuts, figs and grapes. A mixed school was established in Lower Yanoun in 1971. After the attacks from the settlers started in 1996, it became dangerous for children from Upper Yanoun to reach the school in Lower Yanoun, and in 2001 a new school in the upper part of the village was opened. The establishment of a new school was just one of many changes that the villagers had to make after the settlers came to the area.
Map of West Bank, showing Yanoun

Based on maps by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) - www.ochaopt.org. Used with permission.
Chapter 3: Living with settlers

The only road leading to Yanoun today is through Aqraba from the south. You can see the settlement outposts before you reach Lower Yanoun. Upper Yanoun is not easy to spot, with its concrete and stone houses between the outposts up in the valley. As you make your way up the valley, you get a clearer view of the outposts: on the hilltop to the east is a water tank, plus a watchtower and some electricity poles. On the hilltop to the north west are two large animal farms (containing sheep, goats, cows and chickens), another watchtower and a caravan. The outposts on the latter hill are only about 400 metres away from the houses in Yanoun. From the village you can clearly see the settlers as they walk to and from their farms, and when they move their sheep around. The villagers living at the edge of Yanoun are afraid to go just thirty metres beyond their own houses. The outposts around Yanoun are connected with a road around the valley to the north, which surrounds the village in a semicircle.

In years after the first attacks on Yanoun, driving towards the village, you could have met Ahmed Sobih Murrar, an elderly resident of Yanoun, blind in one eye.* Even in his old age and weak health he still took his daily walk through the village, dressed in his well-worn sandals, his long dress, the traditional Arab headscarf, and with his wooden stick in his hand. With him the story of life with the settlers begins.

In 1985 fundamentalist religious Zionists came to the hills west of Yanoun. They settled there, 10 kilometres away from the village, and called the settlement Itamar. Itamar’s own homepage on the internet states that in the very beginning

*Ahmed Sobih Murrar passed away in late 2008.
Israeli outposts. Photo: Thomas Mandal
the settlement “consisted of two tiny blocks of pre-fabricated concrete match-box houses, like parallel rows of white dots on a black domino”. They settled here because they are convinced that they have a God-given right to the land. “Money was always short, but walking across the new fields gave a rich sense of ownership and pride. The hills were calling, ‘come and claim me, come and take me’. We couldn’t get enough of them. It was a kind of matrimony with the Land,” writes Leah Goldsmith, one of the leading figures of the settlement.

They expanded their territory, and in 1996 the villagers of Yanoun could see constructions being established on the hills around the village. With M-16 automatic rifles on their backs, and with one of the most powerful military forces in the world protecting them, settlers engaged in what they call “the competition over land”:

“To a great extent, this wild, agricultural type of settlement is a certain adaptation by the younger generation of the rules of the game as played by the Arabs, one closely connected to the struggle over land. The way in which they settle on the hills of Yitzhar and Itamar doesn’t require big budgets or a lot of people. All you need to do is what the Arabs do - put up two shacks, graze a flock of sheep, and plant trees. This is how borders are established and it provides a new challenge in the competition over land. Contrary to the public image, they’re not involved here with revenge and redemption of blood, but with redemption of land”, the homepage states.

But redemption of blood it was. And old Ahmed Sobih was the first to bleed.

One day in 1996, he was tending his sheep on the hillside in the village. When a stranger approached he mistook the man for someone from a neighbouring Arab village and went over to offer him a handshake and a cigarette. But the man was a settler. Ahmed Sobih was beaten up with his own walking stick, several bones in his body were broken and he was left blind in his left eye.

From this moment onwards, the lives of the villagers of Yanoun would change. The threat from the hills would affect them physically and psychologically. Men would be beaten up in front of their children. Women and children would be threatened. Guns would be pointed at children. Armed strangers would enter the houses to destroy and steal. Sheep would be stabbed and their entrails torn out. Electricity and water would
be sabotaged. Most of Yanoun’s land would be seized and the olive trees stolen. A new phrase became usual. The fear they felt had a name. Shouted, spoken and whispered. *Mustawteneen.* Settlers.

“Before the settlers came in 1996, the life in Yanoun was very good.” Khaleb, the brother of Ahmed Sobih, looks back on the peaceful life they once enjoyed in Yanoun. He was born in one of the caves in Yanoun and has lived all his life in the village. He has had eight daughters and seven sons. Three of them have died. Now, in his late 60’s, he has 51 grandchildren.

“More than 200 people used to live here and there were big herds of sheep, cows and horses. It all changed. In the period from 1996 settlers came to the village, threatening and destroying. I have myself been threatened many times and once got hurt by a stone hitting my shoulder.”

Hamdah Abu-Haneia lives in Lower Yanoun. She explains the fear that people feel. “After the settlers came it became a dangerous place. People feel afraid. It is difficult for anyone to stay too long here, and that is the reason I have married my daughters outside of Yanoun.”

The villagers of Yanoun learned to recognise the settler. The man dressed in long, wide, light clothes, often with a long, black beard. In his hand the automatic M-16 rifle. On his head the kippah, the skullcap observant Jews wear to remind them of their relationship with God. The woman in a long dress and a scarf around her head. The children would often hold guns, too young to be prosecuted. The youths would ride their motocross bikes. The men would ride in their open four-wheel drives, or in jeeps. Most of the time they would come down from the hills by foot, always carrying their M-16 rifles. The villagers started to recognise a pattern. They would mostly operate on Saturdays, which is known as Shabbat, the holiest day of the week in Judaism – the day of rest. They spent their days off terrorising the villagers of Yanoun. And from the children of Yanoun, the question was always: “When will it be Saturday again?”

The settlers would beat up the men of the village and declare the fields of Yanoun their own. At first, the villagers filed complaints to the police about the assaults. This was done at the Israeli Civil Administration base in Huwarah just south of Nablus.

“We saw that there was no point in complaining. No one came to our aid”, said Abdel Latif to Ha’aretz (ibid).

Settlers’ attacks on Palestinians often fall into a legal ‘grey’ area, with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the police and the military civil administration in the Occupied Territories all involved to varying degrees. An IDF spokesman, who wished to remain anonymous, told the Associated Press just after the evacuation of the village in October 2002 that soldiers try to prevent conflict between settlers and Palestinians, but that forces are primarily in the area to protect Israelis from attacks by Palestinian militants. However, the Fourth Geneva Convention, an internationally accepted treaty governing armed conflicts, clearly states that an occupying power is responsible for the security and civil rights of the people living on the occupied land.

While some parts of the Occupied Territories today are under full Palestinian control, the upper part of Yanoun is situated in Area C, which is under the full security and administrative responsibility of Israel. The villagers feel they have never been offered any protection by anyone except their international visitors and Israeli peace activists.

“The settlers want our land, and the army does what the settlers want them to do,” says Rashid, who has been the chairman of the village council since the former chairman Abdel Latif fell ill and had to move to a nursing home. He adds that it can be difficult to distinguish the army from the settlers.

“[In August 2004] settlers made a checkpoint between Upper and Lower Yanoun. They were dressed in army uniforms, had dogs with them, and wore black camouflage colour in their faces”.

The villagers’ main income is from sheep and olive trees. Yanoun has around 2000 dunams planted with olive trees, and another 500 dunams with nuts, figs and grape trees. Settler harassment prevents Yanoun’s residents from reaching many of their trees except during harvest time, when the army allows them to pick in the areas closer to the

Rashid Murrar (left) talking to a visitor while his children playing.  
Photo: Thomas Mandal
outposts. The lack of care means the trees bear very poor crops. Yanoun’s farmers also report that the settlers’ goats often eat the olives before they can be picked.

Yasser says that the army is always on the settlers’ side.

“When the settlers call the army, they come immediately. When we call the army it takes a long, long time before they arrive. The soldiers ask ‘where are the settlers?’ long after they have left, and when they hear they have left, then they leave too without doing anything”.

In September 2000 the Al-Aqsa Intifada, also known as the Second Intifada, broke out. For the villagers of Yanoun, this meant an escalation of the settlers’ terror. In an interview with The Guardian on October 27, 2002, chairman Abdel Latif said: “After the Intifada in 2000, it got much worse. I have been beaten up in my house in front of my family, in the courtyard and out in the fields”.

The Alternative Information Center (AIC) is a joint Palestinian-Israeli organisation that prioritises political advocacy, critical analysis and information sharing about Palestinian and Israeli society and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. AIC has recorded several attacks from the settlers of Itamar. Two of them took place in late 2001.

November 4, 2001: Thirty settlers, some armed, attacked houses in Yanoun. Abdel Latif was seriously beaten and his eye damaged. From his hospital bed, he told the AIC that this was not the first act of violence committed by settlers in Yanoun (Source: AIC Report XXXII).

December 26, 2001: Settlers from Itamar started to level land belonging to the village of Yanoun. “Tens of settlers, some armed, arrived with tractors with the expressed purpose of damaging our agricultural land. This has happened many times before”, Abdel Latif said. 100 dunams of land planted with olive trees in an area called Bab il-Waqf were rendered unusable. The land belongs to brothers Yusef, Zuhdi and Fahmi Zbeh and to the Atha Nimr family. The current situation in practise curtails any possible development of the village (Source: AIC Report XXXV).

Events came to a head on April 17, 2002, when settlers, in the middle of the night, burnt
down the electricity generator donated by the United Nations Development Programme. The generator provided electricity to the village and to a pump that filled water reservoirs situated above the village and connected to the households with pipes. The repair would cost $17,000 (Ha’aretz 25.10.2002), and it was made clear to the residents that a new generator would also be destroyed. The villagers were left without electricity or running water. They had to go down to the village spring to fill jerry cans with water. Three large water tanks were also upturned and damaged.

On June 20, 2002, a Palestinian gunman attacked the Itamar settlement. Five settlers were killed and eight injured before the gunman was shot dead. Palestinian attacks on Itamar during the second Intifada have resulted in the deaths of eleven people. The residents of Yanoun have not been linked to these deaths, nor to any other violence against settlers. Nevertheless, outpost settlers took their anger out on the villagers of Yanoun, and the habitual violence escalated again during the summer and autumn of 2002.

The violence continued as groups of masked and unmasked settlers entered the village, coming night and day, often with dogs and sometimes riding horses. They hurled stones through windows and beat men with fists and rifle butts. At the end of July, the settlers upturned the two large water tanks that were formerly connected to the ruined generator. Increasing numbers of families started to leave Yanoun, most of them to live with relatives in Aqraba. Of the 150 inhabitants, only half remained.

On October 6, a few young people from neighboring Aqraba had gone to pick olives near Lower Yanoun. A group of armed settlers showed up and, from a distance, opened fire. One of the farmers, Hani Beni Maniyeh (24), was killed. The people of Yanoun were still having to carry water in jerry cans from the local well. One day they were astonished to find three settlers bathing themselves and their dogs in the drinking water. The settlers came every Saturday. On Saturday October 12, the settlers again raided the village. This time the message was clear: “We do not want to see you here next Saturday. Leave the village! Go to Aqraba!”

The following Thursday, the headmaster of the small school bade farewell to his last students. The terror had become unbearable. The next day the last six families left Upper Yanoun.

The people of Yanoun make their living from farming, making access to their land a matter of necessity. Land confiscation for settlement growth hits rural Palestinian livelihoods hard, and it is a major factor pushing Palestinians to leave villages like Yanoun. (Photo: EAPPI).
Only the two old brothers with their families stayed behind. For the first time since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967, harassment from Jewish settlers had emptied an entire Palestinian community. That which we know as ‘transfer’, such as when the Palestinians were expelled in 1947 and 1948 from what was to become the State of Israel, and following the 1967 war, was about to happen again. On November 15, 2002, Ta’ayush wrote the following in a comment in Ha’aretz about the event in Yanoun:

“Transfer isn’t necessarily a dramatic moment, a moment when people are expelled and flee their towns and villages. It is not necessarily a planned and well-organised move with buses and trucks loaded with people, such as happened in Qalqilyah in 1967. Transfer is a deeper process, a creeping process that is hidden from view. It is not captured on film, is hardly documented, and it is going on right in front of our eyes. Anyone who is waiting for a dramatic moment is liable to miss it as it happens”. 
The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing since the start of large-scale Zionist immigration to Palestine in the late 19th century. While many factors have fanned its flames, at its heart it is a political struggle over land, not a war between religions. Core issues that must be resolved include sovereignty over Jerusalem and the holy sites within it, resettlement of the Palestinian refugees, control over water sources, Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, location of the border, and security for both Israel and Palestine.

Zionism began as a nationalist movement that sought to find a safe home for Jews fleeing European anti-Semitism. The founding of Israel in 1948 was seen by most Jews as the culmination of a 2000-year-old dream of returning to their historic homeland. Most Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, see Zionism as a colonialist movement and 1948 as a Nakba or "catastrophe", which led to their dispossession, turning hundreds of thousands into refugees.

In the war of June 1967, Israel took control of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Some Israeli leaders at the time warned against establishing settlements in those areas, but ideological settlement movements driven by a dream of "Greater Israel" came to dominate the political discourse in Israel. Today around half a million settlers live in settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Almost all international legal scholars, and the World Council of Churches, view the settlements as a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states that "the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies" (Article 49).
In recent years, both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority have been officially committed to achieving a two-state solution. The continuing presence and growth of settlements, however, is seen as a major obstacle to peace. The case of Yanoun demonstrates that the settlement issue, as well as being a crucial political stumbling-block, is inescapably about human rights.

**A short history of settlements**

From the late 1970s onwards, it has been Israeli government policy to establish settlements in the areas Israel occupied following the Six Day War of 1967: the West Bank, the Gaza strip and the Syrian Golan Heights. These settlements violate international law: Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention forbids an Occupying Power from “transfer[ing] parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”

However, around 500,000 settlers now live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, in 133 settlements recognised by Israel as “communities,” as well as over 100 unrecognised “outposts” like those surrounding Yanoun.

Settlers working on an outpost on the hill opposite upper Yanoun, September 2010 (Photo: R Christensen).
During the first decade of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip the Israeli government justified the seizure of land in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the establishment of settlements to fulfil military needs. This policy was successfully challenged before the Israeli Supreme Court in 1979, where Israeli settlers argued that the reason for establishing settlements was ideological, and not military necessity.

Subsequently Israel declared approximately 40 per cent of the West Bank as “state land”, which can only be used by Israeli Jews - a clear violation of the principle of non-discrimination. During the years of the Oslo peace process, between 1993 and 2000, the number of Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories increased from about 240,000 to about 380,000 - an increase of more than 50 percent. In the same periods Israel built an extensive network of roads (commonly referred to as ‘bypass roads’) in the Occupied Territories to connect the settlements to each other and to Israel, seizing and destroying large tracts of Palestinian agricultural and pastoral land for this purpose.

In 2005, the government of Ariel Sharon ordered the Israeli army to dismantle all the settlements in the Gaza Strip, evacuate the settlers to Israel, and withdraw all military forces. Israel then declared it was no longer responsible for the safety and well-being of the residents there. A senior Israeli official, Dov Weisglass, declared that the plan was intended to “freeze” the peace process and ensure there would not be a Palestinian state or discussion on refugees, borders or Jerusalem. (Sources: BBC website, Haaretz)

Although Israel no longer had soldiers within the Strip, it retained control over its borders, and imposed tight restrictions on the movement of goods in and out of the territory.

In June 2007, the militant Palestinian group Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. Israel further tightened its control of the crossings. Since then, it imposed various measures of collective punishment, including reducing the supply of electricity and fuel to the Strip. In late 2009, in response to militants firing home-made rockets from Gaza towards Israeli towns, Israel launched an aerial and ground invasion it called “Operation Cast Lead.” Around 1300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis died in the fighting.

Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3720176.stm
West Bank settlements and outposts

Throughout this time, the settlements in the West Bank continued to grow. From the mid 1990s onwards, settlers began to populate land not authorised by Israeli governments. According to the Sasson Report, an official Israeli government report published in March 2005, the establishment of these illegal outposts adjacent to settlements began after new construction was frozen by the Rabin Administration in 1993:

“Building in settlements was still approved, but the approval rate fell as the negotiations with the Palestinian representatives accelerated. The unauthorized outposts phenomenon began expanding, in light of the government’s position opposing the authorizing of the building of settlements in the territories. In fact, the unauthorized outposts phenomenon is a continuation of the settlement enterprise in the territories.”

Whereas previous Israeli governments had officially encouraged the settlement enterprise, a change took place in the early 1990s. Governments were no longer officially involved in establishing new settlements. However, public authorities and individual politicians both tacitly and actively supported the establishment of unauthorized outposts. But politicians tacitly and in some cases actively supported the outposts.

“The outposts are mostly established by bypassing procedure and violating the law, displaying false pretense towards some of the State authorities, and enjoying the co-operation of other authorities in violation of the law,” reported Sasson.

The report cited several ways in which outposts are established. In some cases, settlers ask for an antenna to be placed on the hilltop. Then there is a request for electricity, for the antenna. Next, a guard is employed, who is given a cabin for shelter, an it is connected to the Israeli electricity network. Finally, a road is paved to the place, a number of caravans arrive there, and an outpost is established.

The story of Itamar

Itamar was founded in 1984 by fundamentalist settlers who justify their presence in religious terms. The population was 557 in early 2004 (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics). This number does not include the outposts, as they are considered even under Israeli law. The settlement has all the public facilities that are characteristic to a normal town. The settlers make a living by farming and raising livestock. The settlement has a website with an English section, which argues that “The Shomron [Samaria] community of Itamar has become a target of choice for Arab terrorists.”

In one section of the site, “Life on Itamar,” Leah Goldsmith writes:

“Before the recent intifada AlAksa, some curious Tel-Avivers would drive out in their 4x4’s to catch the breath of this land that reaches beyond time and space. That has stopped now. We, the local settlers, are inquisitive about any vehicle that is not a bullet-proof bus on these roads. At times, life on the yishuv seems like that of a hermit, with the stillness of the night sometimes so out of the ordinary. But, all of the time you can feel the overshadowed existence of the local natives, much like the Canaani, the Perizzi and the Chitti, running parallel with your own but on a completely different plane. You can’t help but wonder, when will this end?”

The Itamar settlement has been asked the following questions via e-mail:

- The villagers of Yanoun have suffered violent attacks from settlers during the last nine years. Why have Itamar settlers regularly entered Yanoun?
- Is this the work of a specific group or does the whole settlement support such action?
- Do you feel threatened by the residents of Yanoun?
- How can Israelis and Palestinians live in peace on the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river?

There has been no response to these questions.

*http://www.shechem.org/itamar

Settlers outside the International House in Yanoun, January 2010. Photo: Karen Chalk.
The Geneva Conventions place the onus for protecting Palestinian civilians on the occupying power - the Israeli Government. In practice, the people of Yanoun have no such protection, but have been helped in a different way. Following their flight from the village, they were briefly under the spotlight of the international and Israeli media.

International and Israeli peace activists moved in. Ta’ayush maintained a constant presence in the village the first days. A number of humanitarian groups, such as International Women’s Peace Service and International Solidarity Movement (ISM), visited Yanoun repeatedly, providing an international presence and showing solidarity with the residents. These groups, volunteers from all corners of the world, did good work where bodies like the United Nations and state governments failed.

Despite the international presence, the violence from the settlers didn’t stop, and the internationals were not spared. Only a week after the abandonment of Yanoun, Itamar settlers attacked again. “Five people were injured Sunday, when settlers from Itamar attacked activists and Palestinian olive-pickers from the village of Yanoun”, Ha’aretz reported on October 27, 2002. The farmers, aided by peace activists from Israel and the United States, were harvesting the crop of olives. The settlers, numbering between five and seven, threw stones at the olive pickers and activists, and beat them with their guns. The injured were, according to the newspaper, taken to a private clinic in Aqraba. Security forces did not come to the scene to investigate.
Justin Huggler, a journalist from The Independent newspaper, found the victims in Yanoun. James Delaplain, a 74-year-old from Wisconsin, was so badly beaten that he found it painful to stand up. Mary Hughes-Thompson, 68, from Los Angeles, had her left arm covered in black bruises. Two other activists, an Israeli and an Irishman, were also beaten. When the settlers began threatening them, the peace activists said, it was agreed they would go back to the village with the Palestinian farmers.

The Palestinians left first, so the volunteers would be between them and the settlers. “I remember saying just a few days before, ‘What can they do to me, they won’t attack me at my age’,” Ms Hughes-Thompson explained. She saw the settlers attack Mr Delaplain. “I was very afraid for James, I thought I’d got away. Suddenly a young guy stepped in front of me. I was going to say something but, before I could, he hit me. Two others came up and hit me, in the ribs. The first guy kept saying ‘You want to be dead? You want to be dead?’”*

On January 30, 2003, two International Solidarity Movement (ISM) activists, one from the UK and one from Japan, were assaulted by Itamar settlers. The incident began, according to the ISM, when the two volunteers were informed by Palestinians that settlers from Itamar had moved tractors onto Palestinian farmland. The activists went to observe the situation, and were approached by two armed settlers who demanded to see their passports. When the activists refused, an altercation took place, and the settlers called in reinforcements from Itamar.

Twenty minutes later, three armed settlers arrived, and the activists decided to retreat. They were overtaken by the settlers who attacked them and confiscated their phone and camera. The activists’ jackets, shoes, socks, wallets and passports were taken, and they were forced to lie face-down on the ground while the settlers kicked them, walked on them, and trod on their fingers. After about 30 minutes of abuse, the activists were marched towards the Itamar settlement. At the fence separating the farmland from the settlement, the settlers got a phone-call and halted, making their prisoners lie face-down on the ground again, and again kicking and treading on them. This continued for another 20 minutes until the Israeli army arrived. The troops set the activists free, and returned their property—except their phone and camera. The activists returned to

*Source: http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/article126084.ece.
**Source: http://www.ww4report.com/71.html.
Yanoun, but were arrested ten minutes later by the army. They were then taken to Ariel settlement and charged with trespassing on settler property.**

A few days later, on February 2, the two volunteers together with an Israeli Ta’ayush member, obtained permission from the army to visit the farmland where the attack took place. The Palestinian owners of the farm had been too frightened to visit it since the incident. Shortly after the activists arrived at the farm, a group of soldiers arrived. Three settlers arrived a few minutes later. Victor Avery, one of the leaders of the Itamar settlement, shouted at the Ta’ayush activist in Hebrew, “You’re here to put us in jail. We’re going to kill you!” He then hit the activist in the face with his assault rifle, breaking his nose. The army did not restrain Avery and has not sought his arrest (ibid).

The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) became involved in Yanoun in June 2003, initially on an intermittent basis. The first task for the Ecumenical Accompaniers (EA) was specifically to accompany workers employed in installing electricity to the village, a project which commenced mid-August and was completed by the end of September. Since September 2003, and up until today, the organisation has maintained a consistent and permanent presence in the village. The accompaniers live in a house that has been set aside by the village for their use. During that time, settlers have threatened Ecumenical Accompaniers with guns, spat at them and verbally abused them. No one has yet been physically harmed. Marianne Solheim from Norway never thought she would be threatened with assault rifles. Yet on Saturday December 27, 2003, a Shabbat, she was. Two settlers came down the hillside to Yanoun, pointing M-16 rifles at the people and threatening to kill them.

“My colleague Christine [Cannon from the UK] and I were in another part of the village at the time, we were picked up in a car and driven at full speed to Upper Yanoun where the settlers were walking around threatening the people. When we arrived, the settlers were making their way down through the village. But when they noticed our presence, they pointed their guns at us and told us to leave the village, screaming “Yalla, yalla” (come on, come on). It was a very frightening experience, although I knew that they would never try to kill us since that would cause too many problems for them. Harming an international comes with a price for the settlers, whereas, unfortunately, doing the same to a Palestinian usually has no repercussions. I have never had a gun pointed at me before but I know that the villagers have experienced this many times.”
Teams consisting of two to four Ecumenical Accompaniers are stationed in Yanoun, and each team is replaced by a new one every three months. The main task for the Ecumenical Accompaniers is to simply be present and visible, so that the settlers know that there are internationals in the village who will document and report on any violence. Other tasks can be to accompany shepherds to their fields or farmland, help school children with homework or simply talk with the residents about their situation. The most tense time of year for settler incursions seems to be during the olive harvest in October.

Olives are an ancient pillar of the Palestinian economy. Palestinian olives produce some of the best oil in the world, and the 10 million or so olive trees in the occupied Palestinian territories can potentially produce 32,000 – 35,000 metric tons of oil a year. Olives are also used for pickles, table olives, and soap. Up to 100,000 families depend upon the olive harvest for their livelihoods to some extent.*

Yanoun has 2000 dunams planted with olive trees. Some of the trees are estimated to be several hundred years old. The olive fruit is pressed to make olive oil. It is also cooked to make a soap that is good for both skin and hair. The olive cores are crushed into small pieces and used as firewood. Before the latest Intifada, olive products from Yanoun were being sold in markets in Nablus, in other cities in the West Bank and in Jordan. Today the olive farmers are not allowed to export their products out of the West Bank. This has led to a drop in the price of olive products. The olive tree has an indisputable status in Yanoun, as it has in other Palestinian communities and in the whole of the Middle East. Not only is it a source of income – it is also a symbol of connection with the land. For Palestinians, it embodies the lasting roots of the people on this land.

Most of Yanoun’s olive groves have been taken by the settlers. If the farmers try to prune or harvest from the trees in these areas, they are likely to be attacked and beaten up.

“It is the most difficult time of the year,” Munther, 24, says about the time when the farmers are harvesting. He was born in Saudi Arabia and has nine brothers and sisters.

In 2001 the family moved back to the family farm in Yanoun. He studied in Nablus to become a teacher, and is now teaching in the school in Upper Yanoun.

“Then the settlers attack us, beat people to prevent the harvest. On one of these occasions a settler said to me “my people planted these trees 2000 years ago, that is why this is our land.”

This is concurrent with what is stated on the Itamar website. Leah Goldsmith writes:

“’We came here to LIVE and revive the land THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN OURS…. why do you think the Arabs are willing to blow themselves up? Because they know that the end is very near, the sands in Ishmael’s hourglass have just run out.’”

Today the residents of Yanoun are left only with the land close to their houses. But even in these areas they are not allowed to cultivate their land freely. The areas closest to the settlers’ outposts are declared a “security zone” and are out of bounds for the villagers. In these areas they need military protection to harvest. The farmers complain: olive trees need to be cared for and maintained by cutting their branches, and they need just two weeks to harvest the olives. Instead they are given eight to ten days a year to harvest. Rashid estimates that 90 per cent of his land has been stolen from him.

“My family had fields in Lower Yanoun, but now they are all taken. I have now four thousand olive trees, but no time to harvest them all. In the Yanoun valley we need the protection of the army, and they only give us one single day to harvest. The trees also need maintenance, such as cutting. Since we can’t work our lands the trees get damaged. The settlers want our land, and the army do what the settlers want them to do.”

There are numerous examples of attacks from the settlers during olive harvest. Ecumenical Accompanier Erik Mohlin from Sweden reported his experience from October 7, 2004, a day of harvest that began peacefully and ended in violence. He and his fellow Ecumenical Accompanier and countrywoman Ella Eriksen were engaged in picking olives with a number of people from Yanoun. The work was only interrupted by tea breaks and the sharing of candy, vegetables, and fruit in the shadow of the olive trees:
“Time passes by and as 3pm approaches, I think to myself that it has been a good day in every way. Shortly thereafter, I am drastically reminded of the everyday problems and dangers facing the villagers in Yanoun and the reason for the international presence there. Two Israeli settlers emerge from the trees together with some Israeli soldiers.

Totally unprovoked, one of the settlers starts beating one of the Palestinian farmers and he even fires some rounds with his automatic gun close to the feet of the farmer. At the same time, the other settler fires a few rounds in the air to keep people away. The screaming and crying of children and the elderly follows a second after the deafening shots from the settlers’ guns. The settlers force the farmer down to the ground and tie his hands behind his back. The soldiers do nothing to protect the farmer, seemingly only interested in keeping the crowd at bay. The soldiers declare that this olive grove is off limits to the Palestinian farmers, even though they are the rightful owners - something about the army not being able to provide protection from the settlers in this area. The farmer is finally released at about 5:30pm when some members of the Israeli peace organisation Ta’ayush arrive and intervene on his behalf. Fortunately, none of the shots hit anyone.”

Given the lack of protection from police and the IDF, Israeli civilians and organisations such as Ta’ayush and Rabbis for Human Rights are making considerable efforts to provide a sense of security for the Palestinians during the annual olive harvest. Rabbis for Human Rights is an organisation made up of Israeli Rabbis working for human rights in the occupied territories. Ecumenical Accompanier Arne Essén met one of them, Beny Gefen, 78, in the fields of Yanoun in early April 2005. He fought for Israel in the 1948 war, has lived many years in a kibbutz, and was working as an agricultural supervisor for the Israeli state before he retired.

“There is terrorism here, but the terrorists live in the settler colonies. Too many settlers are pure criminals. The Palestinians in the West Bank get no protection against criminal settlers. The IDF and the police are obliged to give these people protection, but they don’t. That is why I come here, to try to prevent violence and injustice when my country refuses to do it. I reach so little, but somebody has to protect them. That is why I intend to dedicate the last years of my life to show people that not all Israelis are like these settlers. I am ashamed of Israel, this country that I at the same time love so much.”
The settlers’ violence continues. Today, every resident in Yanoun has a family member who has been physically beaten or threatened.

At the end of March 2005, two leading figures from Itamar attacked Khader Abu-Haneia from Lower Yanoun as he was ploughing his fields. The usual arrangement is that the District Coordinating Officer (DCO) gives the farmers permission through the village council to plough their land in the Yanoun Valley. The permit is given to guarantee protection from the settlers. When the permit is given, police officers patrol and guard the area. Both EAPPI and the Israeli group Yesh Din - Volunteers for Human Rights reported the incident, and took a statement from Khader.

“On the morning of March 20, 2005, the day the DCO gave us permission, we went to plough our land. Three or four police patrol cars were on guard in various places. I was working with a tractor and at about 9am. I saw four settlers coming down towards us from the direction of Itamar. I saw they were chasing my friend Amar and he was running away from the settlers and running towards me. When they were about 20 metres away from me, the settlers caught Amar, lay him on the ground and beat him on the head. The settlers left Amar on the ground after wounding him and cutting his head open. He was bleeding a lot into the ground.

“When I saw what was happening I turned off the tractor’s motor. Then the settlers came to me. They cut the tractor’s electricity and diesel wires. One of the settlers aimed a gun to shoot, and then I went over to him and asked: ‘Why? Why this way?’ Then he started beating me up with his hands and the others hit me too and wounded me in the nose. They beat me a lot and I bled a lot from my nose. Later it turned out they broke my nose.”

“While they were hitting me the police were between one and one-and-a-half kilometres away from us and were not present. The settler who broke my nose said to me: ‘Don’t tell the police what happened. I am Avri, and if I have any kind of problem, you better watch it, because I will come to your house and hurt you.’”

“The settlers stayed there with us and when Rashid from the council came by Avri threatened him too: ‘You are not allowed to be here.’ Rashid moved 20-30 metres away. I couldn’t call the police because there was no phone reception where we were.”
“Meanwhile a group from Rabbis for Human Rights was patrolling around there, including Rabbi Arik Ascherman. He passed by and when he saw me he called the police. At about 11am the police arrived. When the settlers saw the police were coming to us they warned us not to tell the police, ‘because later we will slaughter you.’ A guy named Hussein Awadallah from Aqraba who came to plough with us and knows Hebrew very well, translated what they said for us. He was with us but the settlers did not hurt him, maybe because he is older.

David Nir, an Israeli activist with Ta’ayush, was in the area that day with Rabbi Arik Ascherman.

“The police blocked us from approaching [the site of the attack]. Nevertheless we managed to sneak to a point from where we could take some photographs with a good zoom lens,” he wrote in an email.

“Then we were forced to leave the area, but later on the police who suspected we may have taken some photos called Asherman and demanded the memory chip from his camera. We were pretty sure that they would have released Ran without charges if there was no evidence of the event. Asherman gave them the chip the next day so they couldn’t release Ran once again as was the custom. He had too many half cooked assault cases with the police...”

Khader continued in his statement:

“The [three or four] policemen who came took the settlers in a police van, and Amar and I went with the police in another car to the Ariel police. When we got to Ariel they asked us who hit us. The settlers were sitting in another room at the police station. I pointed at Avri Ran, whom I know for a long time because he has been coming to Yanoun for a long time and harassing people. When I pointed at him Ran said I started with him. He told the police that the area is his and we are not allowed to be in it. I have not heard from the police since. Meanwhile I fixed my tractor and continue ploughing my land.”

Only two weeks later, on Saturday April 2, assaults happened again. Three settlers approached an Aqraba farmer on his tractor near the hill of Nabi Nun. They took his
ID and his phone. The farmer became frightened and he ran away to find help. Assisted
by the police he returned to get his tractor back. All of the tires were flat and someone
had tried to set it on fire by pouring diesel over it.

Until recently the sheep farmers have taken their sheep halfway up the hillsides in
Yanoun valley. On September 14, two settler cars came down into the village. The
settlers threatened to hurt all the villagers if anyone walked on either side of the
valley. IDF officers were standing next to the settlers when the threats were made,
and did not appear to have any objections.

The 2005 olive harvest was also marked by violence from the settlers, and on several
occasions they forced the villagers to leave their fields. On Tuesday November 8,
Khaleel Rabea Bani Jaber (48) from Lower Yanoun was going to pick olives with his
son Feraz (25) from their olive trees on a hill between Upper and Lower Yanoun. The
trees are situated only a few hundred meters from the fence that the settlers have put up
around the outpost west of Yanoun. They had asked the DCO if they could harvest in
that area, and the DCO had assured them that they would be protected.

Khaleel and Feraz had only been picking for around fifteen minutes when an armed
settler approached them. According to Feraz, the settler asked what they were doing
there. “Picking my olives,” the father replied. Then an argument started about who of
them owned the land. Feraz stayed in the background, 20 meters away. Then suddenly
the settler hit Khaleel in the face with his M16. Khaleel fell to the ground. The settler
then pointed the gun at Feraz. His father, lying on the ground, signalled that he should
stay away. When Feraz picked up the phone to call the village council and the police,
the settler ran away.

Feraz got his father down to the village. There they waited for the army and the police
to show up. It took them around 45 minutes to come, and when they finally came
one of the soldiers did first aid on Khaleels face injury. He was then taken to hospital
in Nablus where they found out that his jawbone had been broken in four different
places on the right side of his face. He was operated on at the hospital and had to stay
there for more than a week. Feraz was taken to the police station to be questioned. He
knows the settler well from before and could easily pick him out on photos that the
police had in their archives.
By the end of 2005, only one settler has been legally prosecuted for assaults on the villagers of Yanoun. After being caught attacking Yanoun residents in March, Avri Ran, Victor Avery and a third settler were placed under house arrest. Ran escaped.

Israeli news media reported on August 31 2005, that the police had caught Ran while on a holiday with his family by the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. Ha’aretz called him ‘a fugitive leader of the ‘hilltop youth’ right-wing extremists’, and reported:

“Ran is considered one of the most prominent members of the extreme right, who police have defined as a fleeing criminal. He will be brought for investigation by the Ariel police. Until recently Ran lived in an outpost near the West Bank settlement of Itamar. Police put him under house arrest after he was accused of beating a Palestinian during a quarrel, but Ran fled from his detention.”

Ran was held in prison for six months but eventually acquitted. His trial was a clear example of what rights organisations say is a systematic lack of law enforcement against settlers.

“Law enforcement agencies display repeated failure to conduct proper investigations [into violent attacks by settlers]. When convictions are made, Israeli citizens involved in such violent acts are handed light sentences,” says Yesh Din, a human rights group.

David Nir attended Ran’s trial over the assault of Amer and Khader. Nir had been with Rabbi Arik Aschermann in the area on the day of the assault and had himself been attacked by Ran, who hit him in the face with a rifle, and said the judge was deeply biased against both the Palestinians and the Israeli peace activists.

“It was a comedy, not a trial,” he said. “The judge’s hatred of Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, was quite obvious.”

Nir says the judge labeled the Palestinian plaintiffs “eels” and other derogatory terms. Throughout the trial, the defence attorneys mocked the only Palestinian victim who had been summoned to attend.

“Neither the prosecutor, from the Ariel police, who was rather acting as a defence attorney, nor the judge Nava Bechor ever tried to check their continual abuse. This kind of trial is
always a farce.”

One of the 4 attorneys - David Rotem - later became a Knesset member in the far right Yisrael Beitenu party headed by Foreign Minister Avigdor Liebermann. For a time he headed the Law Commitee. At the time of writing, he also lives in a settlement.

Did Avri Ran learn from his experience? There are rumours that after being released, the notorious settler suffered “some kind of breakdown” and “changed his ways.” There were no further reports of his involvement in attacks.

However, Ran still lives on land belonging to Yanoun, and there is an odd twist to his story. When peace talks restarted in 2010, the settler leadership swung into action against what they called the “delegitimisation” of the settlements. Part of this campaign was to take Israeli journalists and other prominent public figures on guided tours in the West Bank in a bid to improve the image of settlers. These included visits to wine cellars, cheese making factories and olive presses. One result was that in late November 2010, Avri Ran’s chicken farm was featured on Israeli television. It seems that the man who terrorised Yanoun for years has become Israel’s top producer of organic eggs.
The light from one of the watchtowers sweeps, as it often does, over Yanoun. This happens several times a week, and sometimes every day. It is early evening, and darkness has just fallen. It is a bright, starry evening, but the stars are not easy to make out thanks to the light from the watchtower. One light to the east, one to the west. The light lingers on one of the houses for a while, before sweeping over the fields. What is he looking for, the settler up there in the tower? What does he hope he will see?

He will see three or four small fires lit outside houses, where villagers gather to tell stories and talk of the day’s events. He will see children playing football in the narrow streets, even though it is now too dark to see properly. He can even hear them. The older children are inside doing their homework or making tea or coffee. Some are asked to help father or mother give the sheep their last feed for the day. Two Ecumenical Accompaniers are on their way over to one of the families, having accepted an invitation to dinner. He can’t see the wild dogs in the valley, but he can hear them. The flock of deer are both silent and invisible. He doesn’t hear the woman, serving her finest food to her family and the visiting Ecumenical Accompaniers, when she says, “They see everything we do. They know everything about us”.

None of the residents of Yanoun have ever, since the Jewish settlers came to the neighbourhood, harmed the settlers in any way. Still, the settlers see it as their right to monitor their neighbours with searchlights, and the Israeli authorities allow them to do it, day and night.
The day starts early in Yanoun. The cockerel announces the new day at six, and the international visitors can’t not take notice, given that the sound originates from a pen about four metres away from their bedroom. A couple of the women are soon to be seen making their way to the village oven, along with some of the youngest children. The bread is lowered into a pit of hot coals, slightly below ground level, and left to bake in the traditional way.

The older children are waiting for the local school to start at eight. The school bus takes the oldest children to school in Aqraba. Some of the shepherds are already out in the fields with their sheep. They know they cannot take them too far up the hillsides where the outposts have been placed. If they cross the invisible border to the ‘security zone’, they know there will be trouble. From the hills they can see Aqraba, five kilometres distant, and on a clear day the view stretches all the way to the Jordan Valley. They can see the old road from Lower Yanoun to Nablus. It used to take them fifteen minutes by car into the city. Now the road is closed. It comes too close to the settlement of Itamar. Only settlers are allowed to use it.

In Lower Yanoun, the smallest children are playing football in the street, not bothered by their older brothers and sisters who are in school. In the school building in Upper Yanoun the pupils are normally hard at work – but not at the moment. The time is 10.20 and they are running past the international house towards the sweet shop next door. The long break has started, when the intense consumption of crisps, caramel and chocolate can begin. The teachers drink their tea, and can hear the call to prayer from the mosque in Lower Yanoun. The building was built recently, ready for Ramadan in October 2004. The money for its construction was donated by an anonymous benefactor from the Ramallah area. The donation included wages for the villagers, who built the mosque themselves.

After 2002, Yanoun has undergone several types of development: two new water reservoirs have been built, an electricity network has been installed, the road between Lower Yanoun and Aqraba has been paved, and the road between Upper and Lower Yanoun has been enlarged and improved, and finally paved in mid October 2005. A school bus between Yanoun and Aqraba has been sponsored by a Catalonian organisation, so that the pupils no longer have to walk a potentially dangerous road to school.
Upper Yanoun is located in what the Oslo Agreement refers to as ‘Area C’. This area is under the full security and administrative responsibility of Israel. Since 1992, the Israeli Civil Administration has forbidden any construction in the area. While extremist Jews have settled on the hilltops around Yanoun, the villagers themselves have not been able to build any new buildings on their own land. Several of Yanoun’s young men have lately expressed a wish to build a house and establish a family in their village, but have had their request denied. This happened to one of Khaleb’s sons. He had almost finished building a new house for his wife and himself beside his father’s house, when a bulldozer from the Israeli army demolished it. The damaged building, still standing on the property of Abu Hani, is a sad reminder of the stranglehold the Israeli authorities exert upon all Palestinian development.

This ban against building new houses and the threat posed by the settlers are the two main difficulties the villagers of Yanoun face today. Yet the villagers have learned to appreciate the improvements that have been made to the town since 2002.

“Compared to some years ago, we are in a good condition now. Before, the settlers made problems, no one knew about our problems, and no one cared about these things. Now if there are small problems, everyone come to help. Many projects have made it better to live in Yanoun; new electricity, the paved road, and the school bus”, Samira Bani Jaber says. Her son Munther also appreciates the developments that have made village life easier.

“Sometimes I am sceptical about the current situation in Yanoun, with the settlers around us. But then I think of these projects that have been done to improve the quality of people’s lives in Yanoun”, he says. “Before we had no concrete road and no electricity, but life was peaceful. Later the settlers came down to our village and made problems. After the internationals came the problems became less,” Kamal concludes.

“Without the settlers, Yanoun is more beautiful and better than every other place,” says Yasser.

Adnan Abu-Haneia, 33, lives with his wife and son in Lower Yanoun. Born in Yanoun, he studied chemical engineering in Jordan for five years, and today works for the Ministry of National Economy in Nablus. He says he will never leave Yanoun, and points to his father’s
experience in 1948 when he had to leave his village in what was to become the state of Israel.

“Until this day my father speaks about his village, Ajoor. He can talk about it for hours. If I leave my village I will face similar difficulties in the future. I will not leave Yanoun, and I hope we can develop here”, he says.

Najeh, 51, was also born in Yanoun. He studied in Aqraba and in Nablus. In 1977 he left Yanoun and moved to Kuwait where he lived for 14 years. He says that life in Yanoun is good but not without difficulty. It is a daily struggle to reach work, which is outside the village, due to current travel restrictions.

“I am very disappointed about the Palestinian Government because it does not give any money to the people in Yanoun. If I want to get to my work near Nablus, first I have to go on foot to Aqraba then take the bus and pass two checkpoints where I often have to wait for more than an hour”, he says.

Manal Bani Jaber lives in Lower Yanoun with her husband and their six children. Her husband was released from prison in April 2005. He spent 12 months on so-called ‘administrative detention’ – arbitrary imprisonment without trial or conviction. She says she would prefer to live in Yanoun than in Aqraba, even if Yanoun was without electricity.

“The people here are very nice. There is no noise here, the air is good and I love the nature and agriculture. Most of the villagers are here because of the sheep. We used to have sheep, but not any more, it was too much when my husband was in prison. Life in general is hard in Yanoun. A farmer’s life is hard everywhere, but here it is especially difficult because of the settlers. Sometimes I am afraid to go to the well and I always look to see where my children are. You are automatically afraid when you see people with weapons”.

Today, every resident in Yanoun has been affected by the presence of the settlers. Asked if they have had any positive experiences with the settlers, the villagers say no. Their encounters with settlers have been exclusively negative. Many of the women are afraid and angry, and see no improvement in the relationship between the villagers and the settlers.
“My first feeling when I see them is fear. I hate them from the deepest part of my heart because one of them shot at me when I was picking olives in Nabi Nun, a year ago. I was with some of my children. When I escaped, the settler ran after us. Another time, I was with my husband and daughter Rada working. A journalist from Egypt was there, and when he went, a settler said to us: ‘We’ll kill you if you stay here’,” says Hamdah Abu-Haneia from Lower Yanoun. She can’t see any way Palestinians and settlers can live in peace.

“It’s impossible to make peace with this small group, because settlers see what their government does. The government kills Palestinians and makes war. How can you make peace with people who steal your land?”

Her neighbour in Lower Yanoun, Manal, says she has no positive experiences with settlers whatsoever.

“They destroy a lot of things and scare the children. I would never talk to settlers. When I see one, I run away. Settlers are like the wolf in the fairy tale ‘Red Riding Hood’: First they talk very nicely and then they eat you. There will be peace when settlers want peace, because we want to have peace.”

Samira says she has a feeling of injustice.

“If you were a Palestinian, and someone took your land and your house, how would you feel? The settlers should not have guns and weapons. And they should live in Israel, because we can’t live on our land. They should end the apartheid between Palestinians and settlers. There is no problem [from the authorities] for settlers to build houses on this land, but it is forbidden for Palestinians even if it is our land.”

Despite having endured nine years of terror, there is no urge for revenge among the people of Yanoun. The general attitude among the villagers is that, if they were only able to farm their fields and graze sheep on their land, there would be no problem with having settlers as neighbours. But the villagers of Yanoun have very little hope of changing the nature of the settlers and the attitude of the Israeli government.

Fawzi, the school’s headmaster, remembers November 2002. Thirty or forty settlers
armed with automatic guns entered the village. They entered the house of Khader Abu Morad; and he and his wife and Fawzi’s father were injured. Khader was taken to the hospital.

“We only want to live in peace. The settlers make the problems. They have taken our land and left just a small part of it to us. What can we do?” asks Fawzi.

Kamal’s children were traumatised after settlers came to their house in October 2002.

“If we can go freely to our fields and feed the sheep, we can live together with the settlers. Now our fields are closed for us,” he said.

Rashid says the same. The settlers have stolen his family’s fields in Lower Yanoun. He has five children to feed.

“We can live in peace if they let us have our land. I am a peaceful man.”

When Yasser fled to Aqraba with his family, settlers killed their chickens. When they returned after several months, the windows of their house had been broken and everything inside was smashed.

“The settlers want to have the whole valley for themselves so that they can build new houses. I cannot see how we can live peacefully side by side with the settlers.”

Despite having lost around 100 dunams (25 acres) of land to the settlers, Khaleb does not feel bitterness or anger.

“We only want to live in peace. Then we will have a very good life here in Yanoun,” he says.

Since Upper Yanoun is located in Area C, the villagers’ security is the responsibility of the Israeli administration. Under the Geneva Conventions, civilian residents of an occupied territory have protected status. The people of Yanoun do not feel they have the legal or physical protection of any government. They have not been actively harmed by the Israeli army or the Israeli police, but neither do they receive the
protection that is their right and which they so desperately need.

“When the settlers come, there is nothing we can do. Rashid can call the army but they are of no help. They are here to protect the settlers”, says Fawzi.

“When the Israeli army does show up in Yanoun, the soldiers clearly want to give the impression that they support the villagers and are trying to help. Yet their actions show that they side with the settlers. When, at harvest time, the Palestinians prepare for the olive picking, the army asks the settlers if the Palestinians can pick the olives or not. If they say no, the army says no”, says Samira.

On January 13, 2005, two police cars and two army jeeps drew up outside Rashid’s house. A police officer questioned Rashid and took note of his answers. The police were there because seven settlers had been in the village an hour before. The settlers had climbed on top of the house of the Khaleb family. The family ran into the house when they saw them. From the roof the settlers screamed and waved their weapons, before they made their way across the fields and out of sight. While Ecumenical Accompaniers Karin Huber from Switzerland and Thomas Mandal from Norway observed the officer questioning Rashid, Yasser came up to them. “The police spend a lot of time here now. It is because they see that you are here. Before, when we called them, they would just come and ask where the settlers were, and when we told them that they had just gone, they would leave, and we never heard anything from them”.

Also Najeh stresses the importance of an international presence in the village. He and his family fled to Aqraba in October 2002, but returned after three days because they felt safer with the peace activists in the village.

“During this difficult period the village received help from the army. We knew that if they didn’t help us, the internationals would inform media and press,” he says.

According to Adnan, the army gives no protection to Yanoun’s residents.

“They are here to protect the settlers,” he says. “If the internationals leave, the villagers will leave soon after.”
Since the incident in October during which the villagers had to flee from their homes, there have been international observers in Yanoun. Ecumenical Accompaniers have been there every single day since September 2003 apart from brief breaks when volunteers from Project Hope in Nablus have provided cover. They live, work, eat, drink, cry and laugh together with the villagers.

Young men and women with western, urban backgrounds can find it difficult to adjust to life in a tiny Islamic village society where cultural and religious norms are so different to what they are used to. Palestinians also sometimes find it difficult to accept the way foreigners behave in their village, such as when unmarried men and women live in the same house. Nevertheless, the villagers have shown a remarkable tolerance of these differences. The vast majority of the accompaniers who have lived in Yanoun have left the village with new friends and an urge to return again. Many stay in contact with the villagers by phone, even from abroad.

“I am glad the internationals are here. They can observe the truth and can give a kind of protection”, Fawzi says.

“People feel good about them because they represent a kind of protection. They make people stay. This feeling is particularly strong in Upper Yanoun,” Adnan says.

“Now I know that my children are safe. I can go to Nablus knowing that they are safe when there are internationals in the village,” Rashid says.

But the international presence in Yanoun cannot continue indefinitely. Both the villagers and the EAPPI are aware of this. What will happen when the internationals leave? Yanoun’s villagers are convinced that the settlers will attack the village once more, with the same intensity as they did in the months before the villagers fled in October 2002.

“If the internationals leave, it would only take half an hour before the settlers come down. They watch everything we do, every movement. They know everything about us,” Rashid says.
“The settlers would come more regularly, and there would be a lot more problems. I would be more afraid, especially during the olive harvest,” Manal says.

“In my opinion, the internationals are supportive and friendly. If they moved away, the army would not come to help us when we need help”, Munther says.

“Without the internationals, the problems would start again and the children would be afraid again,” Kamal says.

Some are convinced that the settlers’ violence would become unbearable, and that they would be forced to leave their homes again.

“I would move to Nablus if the internationals left,” Hamdah says.

Adnan is worried about the fact that the village has become dependent upon the internationals. “We have to realize that they will not be here forever, and try to find solutions. Which solutions, I don’t know,” he says.

The West Bank has been under military occupation since 1967. How can Israelis and Palestinians resolve this conflict?

“Without occupation or settlements,” Samira says.

Hamdah also stresses the need to dismantle the settlements, and to remove the wall that is currently under construction. She believes the Palestinian refugees who were expelled in 1947 and 1948 must be allowed to return to their homes.

“To have peace, everyone must return to their homeland. Some refugees have the keys to their houses. Before the first Intifada, my father would take his children to a village called Ajoor and show them their land. Then a large number of settlers went into the village and made their marks on stones, water wells and other things that belonged to Palestinians. Once I went there with my brother, and the settlers threw stones at us,” she says.

Yasser believes that peace with Israel would be possible if Israel were to withdraw to

Olive grove. Photo: Thomas Mandal
the borders of 1967. Rashid agrees. “It has to be a two-state solution with the borders from 1967. We can’t have one state. A border would be the safest. The two peoples have to be separated. I am a peaceful man – it is the settlers who are the terrorists.” Manal also believes in a peaceful solution. “The Israeli government must forbid the settlers from behaving as they are doing. Then peace is possible – even in one state. When the Israelis stop harassing us, then peace will be possible.”

There is hope for a peaceful solution in Yanoun, but if the Israeli authorities do not dismantle the illegal outposts, the village’s future is questionable. For most of the inhabitants, there is no other solution. A few villagers – mostly the younger generation – are at least partially optimistic. Adnan has just started working with bees, which supplements the income he receives from his chickens.

“You have to accept the fact that the settlers are here, and try to look forward and enjoy your life. So many things are better than before. I have my job, there is electricity, and a paved road - and I have my projects”.

When he has finished his studies, Munther wants to live in Yanoun. “I would like to complete my studies at the University of Nablus and gain a Masters degree in Arabic. I like my village and I want to stay here in the future,” he says.

“Yanoun used to be a very good place to live. There were cows and goats and a family could have more than 400 sheep. Yanoun was called ‘The Jewel of the mountain’. Now the future seems dark. No one is allowed to build a new house in the village. The young people have to move out. The fear of harassment by the settlers is always there. Knowing that you are fenced in on three sides with only one way out is a burden,” Fawzi says.

Ta’ayush on the future of Yanoun

Ta’ayush describes itself as a ‘grassroots movement of Arabs and Jews working to break down the walls of racism and segregation by constructing a true Arab-Jewish partnership’. Ta’ayush activists were among the first to come to the villagers’ aid in Yanoun in October 2002 when the villagers had to flee from their homes. Ta’ayush representative Gadi Algazi has been deeply involved in the situation in Yanoun. In his opinion the
villagers of Yanoun can depend on no one but themselves in the future. The best way to help the villagers is by providing infrastructure, communication and attention.

“Our basic position is that the struggle to stay on one’s land is basically a Palestinian one. Others can help, but it remains basically a Palestinian struggle. We therefore decided very early not to institutionalise a continual presence in Yanoun. We know very well how dangerous the Itamar settlers are and how isolated, topographically, Yanoun is. Even our activists, privileged as they are with Israeli citizenship, have had their share of the settler violence. But our idea was to avoid a situation in which the life of the village depends on the presence of outsiders.”

“We therefore focused (within a broad alliance involving many groups) on infrastructure (the road to Aqraba), communication and attention (a sort of safety shield: no other single village in the West Bank has become as well known as Yanoun), and make the plight of the village visible within Palestinian society in order to draw on its energy and solidarity. This does not guarantee, of course, that the people of Yanoun will stay, but the chances are good, given their admirable determination and the fact that they are not alone. One should not forget that many other small, Palestinian communities face similar, though not identical, pressures from settlers and the army.”
In December 2003, two young men, roughly 17 and 20 years of age, walked through Upper Yanoun carrying M-16 rifles. The rifles were not slung over their backs, but in their hands, ready to be fired. They threatened the villagers, trying to force the men into their houses. The women and children had already withdrawn to safety. The intruders had a close look at the well before they walked across the valley and started up the track to the house of Khaleb Bani Jaber. His family ran inside but the old man continued to sit outside. The settlers walked through the yard, rifles in their hands. Khaleb rose and followed them as they moved across his property and out onto the hillside. “Tea?”, he asked. “Please sit down and have some tea”.

The non-violent actions and attitudes of the villagers of Yanoun are admirable. For the last nine years they have been living in constant fear of their neighbours who believe that the land is theirs, given to them by God. Their encounters with the villagers have shown that they are not willing to communicate. Instead, they allow their M-16 machine guns to do the talking, a form of communication that has no place in civilized society. Every individual, of whatever faith, culture or background, who finds his way to the village of Yanoun will meet people who are willing to listen to, and to respect, his views and standpoints, to discuss them, to agree or to disagree. In Itamar, if you do not share the faith of the settlers, your e-mails and phone calls will remain unanswered.

Since 2002, Israeli peace activists have travelled deep into the West Bank, to areas that most Israelis consider to be dangerous for Jews. Areas where most Israelis are convinced they will be slaughtered by Palestinian gunmen. The peace activists have found partners for peace in the villagers of Yanoun. They have found each other, and, together with voluntary international observers and activists, are carrying out good work where the United Nations and the international community have failed.
The Israeli settlements and their outposts in the West Bank are illegal according to International Law. Only the outposts are illegal according to Israeli law. Thousands of Palestinians are liable to become displaced or, indeed, find themselves as refugees in the West Bank as these outposts continue to grow. People like the villagers of Yanoun have no legal protection from any authority. Of all the violent incidents, and the theft of large areas of land and hundreds of olive trees, only one individual from the Itamar settlement has been held responsible and legally prosecuted.

None of the villagers of Yanoun has ever attacked the settlers. Their lives continue under harsh conditions: all development in the village is blocked, the ‘security zones’ around the outposts prevent them from tending their olive trees, and the threat of violence from the settlers is constant. The spotlights on the hills and the potential for violence have been ever-present factors in the childhoods of many of the children of Yanoun. If the Israeli government were to dismantle all illegal outposts in the Occupied Territories, these children and their parents would be able to live normal lives, and tea drinking would once again triumph over the use of guns.
Acknowledgements:

We wish to thank: Arik Ascherman (Rabbis For Human Rights), David Nir (Ta’ayush), Johannes Noord (Ecumenical Accompanier in Yanoun), Gaie Delap (Ecumenical Accompanier in Yanoun), and Team 36 of Ecumenical Accompaniers in Yanoun, particularly Rebekah Christensen for proofreading the text.

Special thanks to the villagers of Yanoun, whose openness made this book possible.

Useful information

Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI):
www.eappi.org

Itamar homepage:
www.shechem.org/itamar

http://www.hrw.org/en/node/95059/section/8

Sassan Report on settlements and outposts:
www.mideastweb.org/sassonreport.htm

Israeli human rights organisation B’Tselem:
www.btselem.org

To stay up to date with EAPPI’s advocacy work, please join our Facebook Group: