The annual olive harvest is a key economic, social and cultural event for Palestinians. About half the agricultural land of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) is planted with some 8 million olive trees, most of which are located in the West Bank. Olive oil accounts for 14% of the oPt’s agricultural income supporting the livelihoods of approximately 80,000 families, including Palestine refugees.¹

### Settler attacks against refugee livelihoods in Nablus Governorate

In the West Bank, settler attacks on olive groves are undermining this age-old agricultural custom and important source of livelihood. In the first six months of 2013, over 6,830 Palestinian-owned trees and saplings were vandalized by Israeli settlers.²

In particular, there have been numerous attacks on refugee-owned groves in a number of villages located south of Nablus city, next to Yitzhar and Bracha settlements.² Around 4,000 Palestine refugee-owned olive trees live in this area, with significant populations in villages such as Burin, ‘Iraq Burin and Asira al-Qibliya.³

Since January 2013, UNRWA has documented the burning, poisoning, and uprooting of around 900 Palestine refugee-owned olive trees in the vicinity of Yitzhar and Bracha settlements. Furthermore, over 280 dunums of agricultural and grazing-land have been burned by settlers in the area. Together, these attacks have resulted in an estimated loss of approximately USD 70,000 per year for Palestine refugees in these rural communities. With olive trees being damaged or destroyed on an on-going basis throughout the year, refugees suffering losses say that year-round protection for their property is as important as protection during the olive harvest season.

### Loss of livelihood and self-reliance

Access by Palestinians to the areas near settlements in which their olive groves are located is restricted by Israeli authorities, who grant access only once or twice a year upon prior coordination. Limiting access to their olive groves leaves trees unprotected and vulnerable to damage or destruction by settlers. Furthermore farmers are unable to regularly tend to their trees, thereby reducing the potential yield and income derived from their crop.

For Palestine refugee families reliant on olive cultivation for their livelihoods, the loss of crops and assets, and limited or lost access to olive groves near settlements, reduces the capacity for families to maintain economic self-reliance. As such, losing income from the land can increase refugee reliance on humanitarian support and leave them with little choice but to leave their communities in search of alternative economic opportunities.

### A lack of accountability and rule of law

Under international law, the Israeli authorities have a duty to ensure and maintain public order and safety in the West Bank and to protect Palestinians and their property from violence. However, Israeli NGO Yesh Din states that since 2005, only 8.5 per cent of Israeli police investigations in the West Bank relating to suspected attacks by Israelis on Palestinians or their property have resulted in an indictment, while 84 per cent were closed due to police investigatory failures. Moreover, these numbers do not reflect the numerous cases of settler violence that are not reported to the Israeli police due to a lack of faith that proper law enforcement action will be taken.⁴ Indeed, in a number of cases documented by UNRWA in the Burin Cluster, Palestine refugees have stated that they do not file complaints with the Israeli police for this very reason.

On the eve of this year’s olive harvest, the Israeli authorities must make every effort to ensure the protection of Palestine refugees and their property, to thoroughly investigate any attacks and to hold responsible parties to account. Ultimately, the rule of law and defence of crucial agricultural assets must continue year-round to ensure the protection of Palestine refugees, including their land and their property, the cornerstones of many Palestine refugee livelihoods.

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3. Settlements in the oPt are illegal under international law. Article 49(6) of the GCIV provides that “the Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” Furthermore, see International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 9 July 2004, at para. 120. ⁴
4. PCBS 2007

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Case study: settler attacks on refugee livelihood in Burin village

Abu Salim is a Palestine refugee from Burin village. In 1948, he was displaced from his original home near Beer Sheva when he was just five years old. He is the grandfather of a family of thirty, who live under one roof and benefit from the olive trees he bought, planted and nurtured on Burin land. In 2012, Abu Salim had 125 olive trees capable of generating close to USD 10,000 per year. In recent years, however, his olive grove has been repeatedly attacked by settlers, damaging over half his trees.

Abu Salim explains, “By 2012, I had 125 olive trees in my grove, but in that year 16 were destroyed by settler arson. In January 2013, settlers again came and vandalised a further 25 trees causing more than 20,000 shekels (c. USD 5,600) worth of damage. I went with Israeli soldiers to show them the damage and the footprints in the snow clearly running between the damaged olive trees and Bracha settlement. I also reported the crime to the Israeli police but the experience was time-consuming and humiliating. No one was arrested for this attack and it did not prevent the next one. In August this year another 24 of my olive trees were vandalised by settlers. Why would I bother with a police report again?”

Despite Abu Salim’s scepticism regarding the effectiveness of filing complaints with the Israeli police, he continues to do so in the hope of holding those responsible accountable for their crimes.