

Palestinian permaculture reconnecting people with their land

by Tom Blanx

Farming in the Occupied Territories is not easy. Land confiscation aside, Palestinians face restricted access to water; sporadic land ownership; overworked and polluted soil; and even sabotage. This all contributes to many leaving their land in search of easier ways to make money.

When I recently travelled to Palestine, I was surprised to learn how dependent Palestinians have become on Israel to survive. With a lack of work and an aid-reliant economy close to collapse, occupation has normalised. With no strong resistance movement, making enough money to survive is the battle. Of those that qualify for the hard to get work permits, many thousands of Palestinians make the journey into Israel for work, some even working on the construction of the separation walls and settlements that rob them of their land.

Murad Al Khuffash challenges this set of circumstances however: "Permaculture has a lot of benefits for Palestinians living under the occupation" he says, "If everyone starts to grow their own food in their garden or backyard then they won't have to work in Israel or abroad. They will have their own food."

After escaping the violence during the second intifada, Murad travelled to the US, working for several years in the fast food industry and agriculture. He returned to his homeland in 2006 to inherit his fathers land and begin his permaculture adventure. The farm, not more than a dunam (1 km²) in size, dwells directly beneath the hilltop settlement of Ari'el, in the ancient West Bank village of Marda.

Initially, the site had only 12 olive trees and some almonds. Less than 10 years later, the farm is a colour-wheel of plants and living things. A network of winding paths and spiralling beds take you into a microcosm of fruit trees and veg patches, herbs and flowers, bees, insects, chickens and pigeons, all working together for the farm, ticking every box of organicity and biodiversity.

Everything in the farm has been designed around a single principle: Working with nature not against it. "Permaculture is returning to the roots, to our forefathers knowledge and wisdom" Murad explains, "If you give to the land, the land will give to you." This is evident at the farm as nothing is wasted. Weeds and organic waste are used to mulch beds and feed chickens; scrap wood and branches are used as apparatus to support plants; and food waste and manure are collected to make compost. The compost, together with nitrogen-making companion plants are then used to fertilise the beds for planting. Similar plants and crops are introduced to produce organic pesticides, attract pest-controlling wildlife and others to help pollination. Its these tactics that are helping Murad to operate chemical-free and at low cost while growing and selling healthy produce.

The long term goal is to be completely self-sufficient. Organic seeds and seedlings are, at present outsourced, but locally, and while able to save and reuse some of his own seeds, Murad hopes to one day get his own seed dryer, increasing self reliance and sustainability. "Seeds are native. That's important." Murad explains as he stores new seeds into the ever-

growing collection in an old fridge. "Soon I will have all the seeds I need and can start drying them".

The ambition doesn't stop there however. Murad hopes to also add aquaponics to the farm as well as some goats and a cow.

The farm of course needs lots of water with the climate here being so hot. Water however is very expensive. Israel limits the amount of water Palestinians can well and the depths it can drill for it, in some cases forbidding it altogether. Meanwhile, there are no such restrictions on Israel. With its healthy resources, Israel collects most of the meaningful water supplies and sells it back to the Palestinians at full price. To tackle this insecurity, Murad has created his own water supply. Last year the farm was awarded funding from the EU to build a 30m³ cistern on the farm. The tank supplies nearly all the water the farm needs and can be filled up when connected to the village's ancient spring. The cistern also forms the foundation for the yet to be built volunteer guest house and learning centre, although more funding is needed for that.

With funding and scholarships from such organisations as The Danish Permaculture Institute, the farm now offers permaculture design courses with aims at promoting Permaculture as an alternative method of farming. With many agricultural and environmental engineers already attending the course at Marda Permaculture farm, plans are underway of extending these courses and the project to the local community through educational workshops for both children and adults, all of it aimed at promoting food sovereignty, healthy living and empowerment.

Marda Permaculture Farm is the model and centre for sustainable agriculture in the occupied territories and attracts international volunteers and solidarity activists for its non-violent resistance through permaculture.

This summer, on his first visit to the UK, Murad will be attending the IPCUK12 conference to talk about his work.

If you'd like to learn more about permaculture in palestine, click on the links below:

<http://mardafarm.com>

<http://www.lovevolunteers.org>

<http://permaculturenews.org/2012/08/23/permaculture-in-palestine-a-green-revolution>

<https://youtu.be/d6ZDJizwcW8>