

# THE DATES

*How a fruit can symbolize sumood*

BY LAURA O'CONNOR AND JANA AMIN

**A**maney has much to grieve: dismembered loved ones pulled from underneath the rubble, her home in Deir al Balah bombed into oblivion, the view of Gaza's coastline from her favorite cafe. Mere months after she and her family fled Gaza for Egypt, Amaney recounts horror after horror with frightening composure; she feels it is her duty to tell the world Gaza's story.

Asked what she finds difficult to talk about, Amaney turns away and whispers. البلح. The dates.

On her phone, Amaney pulls up a YouTube series on Gazan Hayani dates she helped create, jointly developed by the NAWA for Culture and Arts Association and UNESCO. She watches as elderly women in Deir al Balah make date molasses, grill dates, and churn date paste, scenes that had filled her childhood.

Amaney's silence as she watches is eerie.

Israeli bombardment has martyred many of the women featured in the YouTube series. Few, if any, date palms remain standing.

As though grasping for ghosts, Amaney's hands unwittingly pick, sift, and sort imaginary dates as we speak. "They used to protect us in a way," she tells me. "The date palms? They too were elders."

There are images of destruction throughout Deir al Balah. Hollowed houses stand next to slain trees. In one image, steamrolled red-ish brown dates are indistinguishable from human blood. Tents fill now flattened expanses of land.

In August, the number of Gazans sheltering in Deir al Balah exploded; families unable to find food scavenged the area for beaten-up packages of food aid. The irony was clear. In what had once been a thriving center for the production and distribution of dates, a symbol of divine sustenance in Islam, children were now facing famine and starvation.

In the ribs of a single fallen date tree sits a destroyed Palestinian ecosystem. Mothers are traditionally given date paste to help them produce more milk for their newborns; now they experience lactation insufficiency from the trauma of constant bombardment, lethal when coupled with the shortage of formula across the strip.

For two centuries, dates have been central to Deir al Balah's identity. In the 19th century, Deir al Balah (which translates to the monastery of dates) was named after the groves of date palms found to its west. Located in the central Gaza Strip, the city has since absorbed the smallest of Gaza's refugee camps while continuing to hold onto the cultural heritage - despite increasing destruction - of date production.

Over time, dates became a symbol of Deir al Balah's tenacity. Even amid Israel's siege of Gaza, dates have remained a lifeline. As women sorted through freshly harvested dates, they told stories of the Nakba, or Palestinian catastrophe of 1948. As they carefully placed each date into a thick clay oven for grilling, they sang songs of remembrance and joy. There was a sense that cultivated dates, which have existed in Palestine for 5,000 years, remained rooted in their land, like the Palestinians who cared for them.

In Jericho, cut off by Israeli checkpoints and an apartheid wall, there are fields of medjool dates that have been under threat and occupation for decades. Farmers in Jericho - historically crucial to the Palestinian economy - face near-constant harassment, intimidation, and violence from ever-encroaching Israeli settlers, as do Palestinians throughout the West Bank. "Palestinian farmers aren't able to access their date crops, their land. This is all a manipulation tactic," says Zahra, a young Palestinian woman between Qatar and the West Bank, who took a job at an organization working to support date farmers in Palestine after her graduation.

As settlements have continued to grow unchecked, Palestinian date groves have been confiscated

in droves, fueling Israel's own export of dates. In 2022, Israel brought in \$300 million from date sales in the U.S. As of January 2023, at least 40 percent of Israeli dates were produced on settlements illegal under international law.

Misinformation from Israeli exports produced on illegal settlements is commonplace, but dates are particularly confusing: many are intentionally marketed to mislead buyers by obscuring where they come from, with labels routinely touting dates from the "Jordan Valley" or "packaged in Turkey."

Taher Herzallah, director of organizing and grassroots outreach at American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), says the confusion is the point.

"The question of re-branding Israeli dates has been constant to avoid the boycott. We're getting smarter about identifying Israeli dates ... if it doesn't have a place of origin on the label, it's likely they're hiding that [they're from Israel]," Herzallah says.

A sense of intentionality is at play: dates, a cornerstone of Ramadan celebrations (when it's Sunnah to break one's fast with dates), are widely consumed by Muslim diaspora communities, most of whom in the U.S. oppose Israel's settler colonies in Palestine. Not only is Israel appropriating Palestinian dates, but they're also appropriating Palestinian branding to intentionally subvert consumers from looking into their violent production histories.

"Dates is a genius way of approaching the settler colonial narrative. When you produce these dates and market them in a way that doesn't show people it's coming from Israel, you take advantage of

Muslims around the world that, especially during Ramadan, are always going to buy dates," says Zahra.

In 2012, AMP launched a National Boycott of Israeli Dates, recognizing the influence the American Muslim community had on the American date market.

"Considering that AMP works with the Muslim community, we have incredible influence and leverage. We realized we can organize a campaign to target Israeli dates that are profiting from the occupation, settler colonization, from the suffering of our people," says Herzallah. And the campaign has been working. Herzallah co-wrote a 2020 article detailing how date boycotts were gaining traction. Throughout the past year, the boycott has only multiplied in growth, need, and attention.

"Boycotts give power to the people. This is where real solidarity comes from," says Zahra. "Last year, before everything began, people were funding the settler colony and supporting capitalism of the Israeli settler colony and didn't know it."

Indeed, dates have become a focus of Palestinian erasure, alongside more well-known symbols like olive trees and Yaffa oranges. Palestine has always been fertile ground, and Gaza was once known for its grapes and grape leaves, berries, lemons, figs, and pomegranates. Israeli date companies like Mehadrin describe their dates as "Israeli prestigious Medjoul," while Hadiklaim describes their "Israeli dates" as being produced "since biblical times." Hadiklaim, in the same paragraph, notes that they were founded in 1982. Other Israeli date producers mirror this language, prefacing products with "Israeli" in both geography and heritage.

"It's humiliating. It puts us into this life where people have to be dependent on their colonizer and prove ourselves to the international community," Zahra says.

While Jericho remains increasingly surrounded by Israeli presence, boycotts are a glimmer of hope, divesting in Israel's colonial outputs. Zahra says, "After everything we've been through this past year, it's crucial that people immerse themselves in this liberation and anti-colonial movement. Unconditional solidarity is crucial to dismantling the settler colony."

Boycotts continue to serve as a thread linking America to Deir al Balah and Jericho, to women like Amaney and Zahra, who continue to lose livelihoods to Israeli date production.

