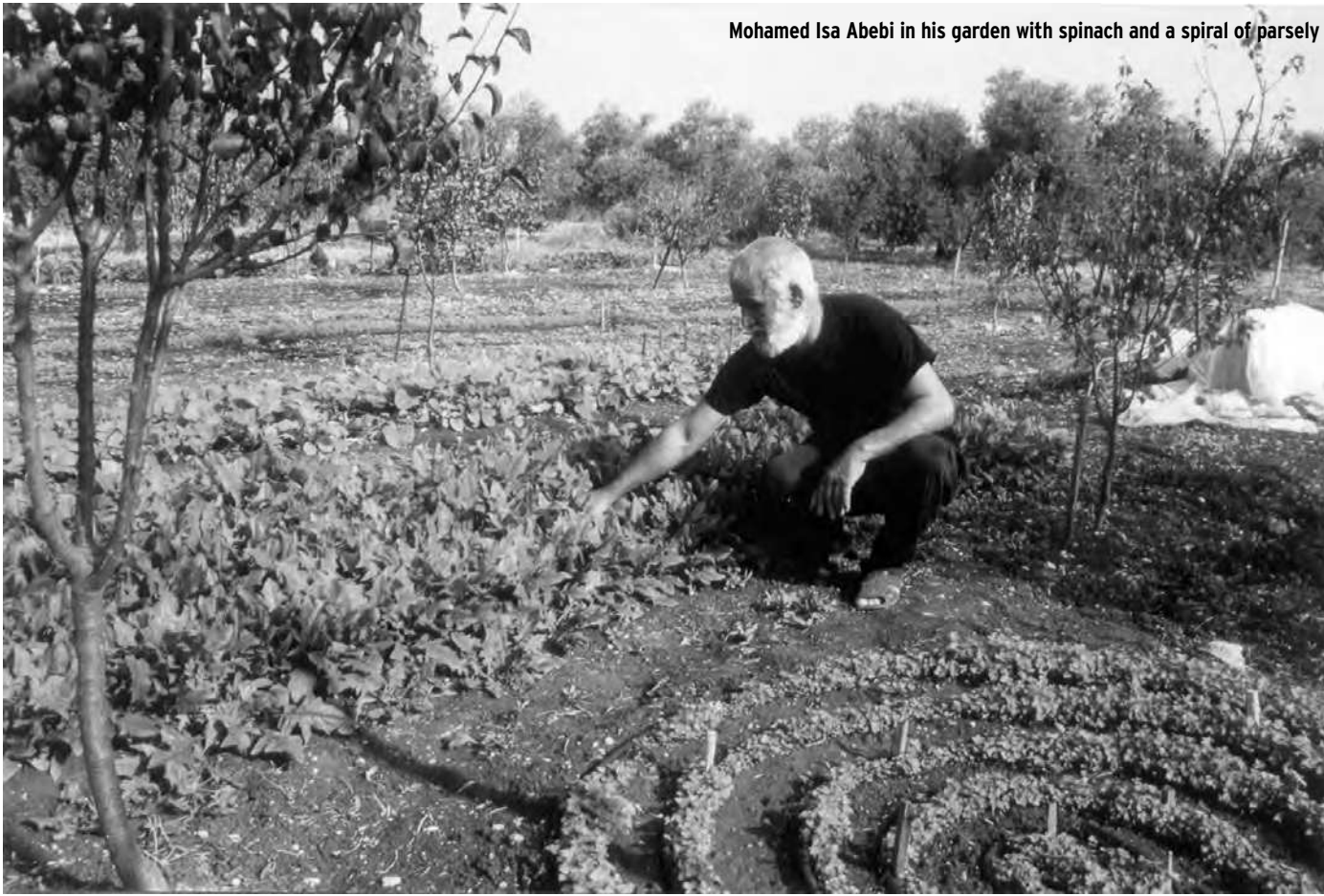


Mohamed Isa Abebi in his garden with spinach and a spiral of parsley



ONE SIDE OF THE FENCE

Scenes from farm life on the West Bank STORY & PHOTOS BY KATE ROGERS GESSERT

Mohamed Isa Abebi and his two brothers farm 20 acres among orchards and rocky hills near Zbouba village, in one of the most fertile areas of the West Bank. Four generations of his family have lived on this land. Their main cash crops are olives and almonds. The Abebis sell olive oil locally and have a contract with a European company for this year's almonds.

I visited Mohamed with my son Joe and his wife, Liv, who were working with the International Solidarity Movement — volunteers committed to nonviolence who accompany Palestinians to checkpoints, protests, work and hospitals. Together we visited

farmers in the northern West Bank near the Separation Wall.

Mohamed welcomed us with solemn friendliness, and his wife brought us cups of strong Arabic coffee as we sat talking in the dooryard. Mohamed told us that he grows most of his family's vegetables and raises sheep for meat, cheese and yogurt. Apricots, figs, and grapes are for family use and the village market. He gardens organically, using sheep manure for fertilizer, and as a member of a farmers' bee cooperative, he also raises honeybees.

In his big vegetable garden, Mohamed showed us snapped-together pieces of plastic

irrigation pipe with holes every six inches. He plants seeds beside the holes so each plant receives exactly the water it needs. He relies on olive and almond trees because they need no irrigation.

West Bank rainfall is sparse, and the summers are long and hot. In 1967 the Israelis took control of all West Bank aquifers and retained control under the Oslo accord. Israel and the settlements now use 83 percent of the water from West Bank aquifers, Palestinians use 17 percent. Many Palestinian villages and towns buy West Bank water from Mekharot, the Israeli water company. Shortages are ongoing.

Scattered through his orchards, Mohamed

has built three concrete catchments to harvest rainwater, about 20 inches a year. He irrigates with stored water from May until July, then buys water until the rains begin in mid-fall. Tank trucks used to deliver water, but Israeli bulldozers blocked the roads with boulders. Now Mohamed and other farmers drive tractors cross-country to carry water in small, wheeled tanks.

In November, Mohamed plants garbanzo beans and wheat, and fodder crops between rows of olive trees. He plants fava beans, lettuce, onions, garlic and cauliflower in rainy December. In May he plants cucumbers, tomatoes, melons, green beans, okra, zucchini, eggplants and peppers.

Mohamed and his brothers have 11 sons and their wives who help work the land. Five sons are in jail, a common predicament for Palestinian families. The sons' sentences (for "security reasons and acting against the occupation," according to Mohamed) range from two to eight years. The remaining family members do the farm work and support the young children of the men in jail.

Joe, Liv and I also visited the Turkmans, a family of 31 Bedouin Palestinians living on a 50-acre farm near Jenin. The Turkmans bought this land in 1948, after they fled from Haifa. The soil is dry and rocky, with groves of native pines and extensive orchards. The Turkmans raise olives, sheep, goats and cows. They sometimes sell lambs, and the matriarch and her donkey take sheep's cheese to sell in Jenin, a mile away. The family raises grapes, apricots, apples, figs, lemons and plums for home use. Like Mohamed, the Turkmans have rainwater catchments and bring water by tractor during the dry season.

The Turkmans' dwellings cluster on a hilltop overlooking Qaddim, an Israeli settlement that was built in the 1980s on a slope facing the Turkmans' land. In the beginning, Russian settlers from Qaddim used to buy Turkman cheese and come over for dinner, and the children played together. But the settlement needed water for its shade trees and 70 houses, and the Turkmans' wells went dry. Last summer the Israelis posted demolition notices for all five houses, built before building permits were required.

In September, Israeli soldiers in Humvees, tanks and bulldozers gave the Turkmans five minutes to vacate two of the houses, then

In the background of West Bank landscapes, I often saw the path of the Separation Wall (the Security Fence, the Apartheid Wall, depending on who you are talking to) as a wide, pale strip crossing distant hillsides.

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