



# The Grapes of Wrath: A Case for Boycotting Israeli Wines from Occupied Territories

By Farah Manji



*"Our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of Palestinians." - Nelson Mandela*

**Bethlehem, 2013:** On Christmas Eve, I was among the crowds flocking to Bethlehem, the Palestinian city known as the birthplace of Jesus. Following festivities in the city's famous Manger Square, I embarked to see how the Israeli occupation is still alive, away from the throngs of tourists. I headed to the separation wall, which encloses the West Bank in concrete, and is covered with vivid graffiti in protest. This segment of the wall houses some of Banksy's famous works of art, and in 2018, a mural of Ahd Tamimi, the Palestinian teen who has become the [face of resistance to the Israeli occupation](#), also cemented its place on it.

**Nairobi, 2018:** Wandering around the *Bizarre Bazaar* craft fair in Nairobi's Karura Forest, one particular vendor caught my attention: [Baraka Israel](#). Their booth was teeming with people sampling wines against a bold backdrop that read "Golan Heights Winery". The sourcing of wines from a region under illegal occupation by Israel wasn't new to me - my graduate work focused on the history and politics of the Middle East- but seeing these grapes being sold in my backyard was disturbing. And it didn't stop there; Eliad olive oil was also being sold. Christmas was soon approaching and in keeping with the spirit and Biblical symbolism, wine and olives "from the holy land" were intended to entice. Barely holding my breath while pondering which olive groves this oil

was sourced from, I was transported to a passage from Susan Abulhawa's novel, *Mornings in Jenin*:

*"As the dark sky gave way to light, the sounds of reaping that noble fruit rose from the sun-bleached hills of Palestine. The thumps of farmers' sticks striking branches, the shuddering of the leaves, the plop of fruit falling onto the old tarps and blankets that had been lain beneath the trees. As they toiled, women sang the ballads of centuries past and small children played and were chided by their mothers when they got in the way."*

My foraging revealed that Eliad olive oil also originates from the occupied Golan Heights. This becomes more unsettling in the context of the occupied territories, where violence by Israeli settlers increasingly includes attacks on olive groves and farmers. In 2016, more than 1,500 Palestinian olive trees in the West Bank were damaged or uprooted by settlers; this was in addition to the 2.5 million trees uprooted since 1967.

Research carried out by the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) uncovered a shift towards agricultural and price tag attacks by settlers that involve destroying property and vandalism, including racist graffiti. An Israeli soldier's 2013 testimony from Hebron, recorded by the Israeli NGO [Breaking the Silence](#), uncovered how these attacks are carried out:

*"There was one incident where already the night prior, they said a 'price tag' action was going to be carried out. And the next morning, a whole grove of olive trees was discovered chopped down. To chop down 60 trees you'd need something like eight hours of work and three saws...I don't believe that the military, with all its observation points on an olive grove located on the main road, didn't see that taking place."*

The decision to buy unethically sourced products, which are increasingly making their way to our shelves, is a topic worth discussing as a nation. [The Profiteers](#), the investigative documentary unearthing Kenya's role in contributing to the conflict in South Sudan, jumpstarted conversations about how Kenya was being used to commit atrocities beyond its borders. A segment of activists and concerned citizens took to the streets, calling for greater accountability in how the Kenyan government and financial institutions facilitate the transfer of arms and resources used to wage war on civilians.

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And the support of many Kenyan activists, writers, and well-wishers to the Ugandan musician-turned-politician, Bobi Wine, during his detention is another example of conditions being ripe for a discussion on what it takes for Kenyans to be on the right side of history. The consciousness to do better by all peoples, regardless of nationality, is critical. We can no longer pretend that events outside our borders have no bearing on our lives or are unworthy of our attention and solidarity. Edward Said captured this well when he said, *"Humanism is the only - I would go so far as saying the final— resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history."*

Resisting the force of politics of money from outweighing principles of humanity and justice needs to be sustained. Our government may be succumbing easily to foreign money, but we need to safeguard our interests and public assets, and ensure that our moral compass is not lost. This may

be a struggle when also faced with the large military-industrial complexes of today. And you don't have to look far to see how big money is behind war. Despite its size, Israel is believed to be the eighth biggest arms exporter in the world and the largest one per capita. Kenya is among the growing African nations using Israeli-manufactured weapons, especially aircraft, artillery, and communications equipment.

### ***Settler colonialism is not dead***

2017 marked half a century of Israel's illegal occupation of the Palestinian Territories, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as the Golan Heights, which was grabbed from Syria. Much light has been shed on the expansion of Israeli settlements— the cities, towns, and villages built on occupied land. In 2017, Israel began building the first new settlements in two decades, moving further into the heart of what is legally Palestine. At least 160 government-approved settlements and 100 unofficial outposts are home to more than half a million Israelis living in colonies beyond the recognised borders of their state. And the population of Jewish settlers in the West Bank has grown four times faster than Israel's itself since 1995. Although settlements violate international humanitarian law (under the Fourth Geneva Convention, an occupying power cannot transfer parts of its own population into the territory it occupies), they are authorised and [subsidised by the Israeli Government](#).

This disturbing development has historic parallels closer to home: Advertisements by the British colonial government also sought to entice settlers to move to Kenya, and thousands responded.

*“Settle in Kenya, Britain's youngest and most attractive colony. Low prices at present for fertile areas. Its valuable crops give high yields due to the high fertility of the soil, adequate rainfall, and abundant sunshine. Secure the advantage of native labour to supplement your own effort.”* - From *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* by Caroline Elkins

While Israeli settlers live in fenced and gated communities, Palestinians are effectively barred from staying in them. Palestinians' movement is further restricted by roadblocks, checkpoints, and settler-only roads. Some of these discriminatory policies, as well as the exploitation of land and resources by a settler movement, are reminiscent of Kenya's experiences under British colonial rule. Kenyans moving around segregated cities [were required to wear an identity pass](#) around their necks, which were designed to keep Africans out of European and Asian areas. Fast forward today and Palestinians in the occupied territories must carry their ID cards for internal travel between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and into East Jerusalem and Israel. These ID cards are colour-coded depending on where Palestinians reside and they affect everything from freedom of movement to family unity.

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In colonial Kenya, many Africans were moved to free up fertile land for colonial plantations. The [Jordan Valley and the northern part of the Dead Sea are among the most fertile areas in the West Bank](#); 40 per cent of the dates produced in the occupied Jordan Valley settlements are exported to the European Union, and Israeli companies generate around \$3 billion annually from the sale of Dead Sea minerals. Contrast this with the discrimination leveled against Palestinians in the provision

of water and other resources: More than 70 per cent of Palestinian villages in Area C of the West Bank, which is under full Israeli civilian and security control and home to most of the settlements, are not connected to the water network.

In Kenya, as explained by Caroline Elkins in her book *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, the British settlers' self-interest was "based on a perception of profound racial superiority, and the foundation of the settler community was the alienation of African land. Seeking to expand their numbers and increase the value of their land, they pushed for continued immigration into the colony." Today, Israel continues to fund Birthright tours and to encourage the immigration of Jews into the country. However, the initial refusal to allow a group of Ugandan Abayudaya Jews to visit Israel on a Birthright tour showcased that not all Jews are equal in Israel's eyes. Examples of the racial prejudice documented against Africans by the state of Israel are ubiquitous. In 2018, Israel was forced to backtrack on a plan to [expel thousands of African migrants](#) to Rwanda and Uganda. And ironically, though rejected, Britain's proposal in 1903 allocated land for a Jewish state in the British East African Protectorate.

### ***Colonisation in connection to wine***

[The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#), a non-violent movement founded in 2005 to pressure Israel to comply with international law and end its occupation and human rights abuses, was inspired by international sanctions imposed on the apartheid regime in South Africa. Given that settlements thrive on economic exploitation at the expense of the natives, the movement calls for a global boycott on settlement products. Airbnb, bowing to pressure, recently announced that it would [remove properties in Israeli settlements built on occupied Palestinian territories](#) in the West Bank.

Unsurprisingly, there is a countermovement that includes Israeli wineries "proudly" displaying the Israeli flag on their products. The BDS Wine Club, for instance, features wines from "Judea and Samaria" (what we know as the occupied West Bank) and their retail selection also includes wines from the Golan Heights Winery—the source of wines imported and sold in Kenya by Baraka Israel. The company brazenly markets this winery and its products as "Israel's finest". They have a noticeable presence at Nairobi's wine-tasting events, as well as in restaurants and bars. *Yummy* magazine, Nairobi's food and drink guide, featured Baraka Israel's entry into the Kenyan market in 2017. It announced that "Israel has been a wine-making country over the last 3,000 years...and the diversity of Israel's terroir makes it suitable to grow a variety of grapes." Any further elaboration or exploration of the origins of their wines was conveniently or perhaps unknowingly omitted.

According to a [2015 UN General Assembly resolution](#), Syrians in the occupied Golan, the majority of whom are Druze, depend heavily on agricultural income but are disadvantaged by restricted water supplies and fewer economic opportunities. They also face [throttled land access, building restrictions, and property destruction](#). The UN's displeasure has not stopped Israel from building settlements, wineries, and even a ski resort in this territory. The region is strategically significant, agriculturally rich, and draws millions of tourists. And the Israeli wine industry, which benefits from accessible land, tax benefits, and other government incentives, is catching on. Settlers have discovered that the wine industry is a tourist magnet, bringing in additional income while normalising the settlement enterprise.

Over ten Israeli wineries, mostly founded between the late 1990s and early 2000s, are based in settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan and produce their wine from grapes grown in the occupied territory. In Kenya, the most common wines from this region are those produced by the Golan Heights Winery under the labels Yarden, Gamla, and Golan. [The oldest of the wineries based in the occupied Golan](#), the Golan Heights Winery, was founded in 1983 in the settlement of Katzerin where it operates to this day. Owned by four *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* (agricultural and cooperative

communities), it produces around 5.4 million bottles of wine annually.

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### ***Planting the seeds of BDS***

The BDS movement made headlines again after Ilhan Omar, the recently elected U.S. Congresswoman who spent some of her childhood in a refugee camp in Kenya, voiced her support for the movement. On home soil, although BDS campaigns have yet to be established, there is a solidarity movement, *Kenya na Palestine*, which raises awareness of the movement and promotes educational activities during the global [Israeli Apartheid Week](#).

They may seem innocuous, but profits from millions of dollars' worth of settlement products exported internationally, including to Kenya, sustain the discriminatory policy of settlements, which also unlawfully appropriate natural resources. Common exports from Israeli settlements include cosmetics, fruits and vegetables, honey, olive oil, and wine. Israel's wine industry is part and parcel of the settlement and colonisation project, and this is raising eyebrows worldwide: Yarden, Gamla, and Golan wines featured on lists of products boycotted by student groups at UK universities, for instance, and a major department store in Japan cancelled the participation of an importer specialising in wine from the Golan Heights at a wine fair last year.

Israel continues to face censure from its trading partners. For instance, while short of a boycott, European Union members can mark products coming from Israeli settlements. South Africa also adopted regulations to prevent the labelling of goods from settlements as being produced in Israel given that this misleads consumers. Thus, there is a growing sentiment that business activity in settlements entrenches discriminatory systems. If the Government of Kenya won't ban settlement products for fear of jeopardising bilateral relationships, as citizens we should boycott these products and advocate that they be labeled correctly. Israeli wine, olive oil, and other such products being sold by Baraka Israel are highly substitutable by the Kenyan consumer even when it comes to quality. Further, these products are not integrated into value chains in the country and can be easily replaced.

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### ***Israel is joining the scramble for Africa***

From a diplomatic perspective, Israeli-Kenyan ties have been growing stronger over recent years and are centred on security, religious and development cooperation. Two recent visits by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu represent a push to improve ties with Kenya, among other African countries, and to open up markets to Israeli products.

These economic efforts are also intended to improve Israel's diplomatic position by getting African countries to stop voting against Israel in international forums. In late 2018, upon recommendations

by the UN's Special Political and Decolonization Committee, the General Assembly voted in favour of nine resolutions on Palestine and the Syrian Golan Heights, urging an end to settlement construction. Kenya voted in favour of all resolutions and it is this voting record at the UN that Israel is hoping to sway.

However, Kenya did not participate in the UN vote that rejected U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The official reason given was the closure of the Kenyan mission for the holidays, but this may have been tactical given President Donald Trump's threat to cut aid to countries that voted against the U.S. Despite international condemnation, Kenyan diplomats were among representatives from 33 countries that nonetheless attended the opening of the U.S embassy in Jerusalem in May 2018.

### ***The arms trade***

Israel's weapons trade in 2016 included a 70 per cent jump in sales to Africa. In 2017, its defence exports reached a record \$9.2 billion, mostly comprising military hardware, such as missiles and aerial defence weapons.

Though details often remain opaque, it is no secret that security and intelligence cooperation between Israel and Kenya remains strong. This has grown in the aftermath of terror attacks, including the targeting of Israeli tourists at the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa and the attempt to down an Israeli airliner taking off from the coastal city in 2002. And in the wake of the 2013 Westgate mall attack, there were local and foreign media reports of Israeli advisers and security personnel assisting Kenyan security forces in their operation to end the siege.

[Israel has been among the top 15 arms exporters for decades](#), according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Arms sales are integral to the Israeli economy, accounting for possibly as much as 8 per cent of GDP. Israel's occupation has also gone global: Revelations emerged that Israel was sending weapons to Myanmar in defiance of a U.S. and European arms embargo, thereby abetting the persecution and massacre of the Muslim-minority Rohingya, who have also been subjected to ["apartheid-like conditions"](#) in Rakhine, as detailed by Amnesty International.

Israel has also been selling weapons and military services to human rights violators on the continent. A 2015 UN report found that Israeli arms were fuelling the civil war in South Sudan, and a retired IDF General was recently found to have used an agricultural company as cover for the sale of weapons to the government. Kenya is not lagging behind: From 2006 onwards, [Kenya transferred large quantities of arms](#), including T-72 tanks from Ukraine, to South Sudan. These transfers only became public when [Somali pirates hijacked a ship carrying some of the tanks in 2008](#). In 2013, the South Sudanese government used the tanks to quell protests and destroy homes.

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Netanyahu has now befriended Chadian President Idriss Deby, one of Africa's longest-serving leaders. Security sources say the country has acquired Israeli equipment to help battle rebels in the country's north. Kenya too uses Israeli-manufactured weapons and is a recipient of military training and counterterrorism support. [Inside Kenya's Death Squads](#), an investigative film by Al Jazeera, found Israel complicit in the perpetration of extrajudicial killings in Kenya by counterterrorism police through its intelligence and training of the General Service Unit to eliminate suspects. And in

keeping with its approach of building walls and barriers in the name of security, Israel has pledged to help [Kenya speed up the construction of a wall](#) along its border with Somalia.

### ***A growing tribe: The ethically-conscious consumer***

The rise of a consumerism culture in Kenya may present economic opportunities but it is also fraught with challenges. There is a market in Kenya for fair-trade products, as well as ethically and sustainably sourced products, including those that don't harm the environment, animals, and I would add to this list, human beings. Consumers are rightly demanding more transparency from businesses and companies, and the latter are slowly responding. [Green Spoon](#), the online store in Kenya targeting consumers "who care about what they eat", stocks products and brands supporting local producers and communities. These include unadulterated pork from farms near Mount Kenya, free-range chickens from the highlands of Tigoni, and craft-beer made from 100 per cent spring water. Their philosophy emanates from the need to no longer worry about the "source of the food, how it was made, who made it, and what went into it". It may come as a surprise that Baraka Israel is among their featured producers, "bringing Israel's finest quality products to Kenya". Whether this is aligned with their philosophy is a question they and their consumers need to contend with.

Information about supply chains can be an inspiring part of a brand, but this information can also be hidden and spun. Yesterday Romans made slaves crush grapes by foot; today Baraka Israel will selectively educate you about their ancient wine-making culture, playing to the ignorance of many. As citizens we have voiced our indignation about the mercury-laden sugar we have been consuming and the poor quality tilapia imported from China. As we advocate for quality products that don't poison us, we should likewise refuse to consume products that explicitly harm others.

Mandela's words, alluding to the collective importance of achieving freedom for the Palestinians, serve as a reminder to fight discriminatory and unjust systems at home and abroad. And this resistance can begin in the pantry or cellar. Wine and food lovers may have revelled in the innocence of consuming these products but these products' sinister history and continued tainting is inching upwards from the vines, blossoming, and will soon be harvesting on your tongue. Will you be ready?

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