

# An emergency call to international civil society for advocating with the threatened "Tent of Nations" Peace Project near Bethlehem

Dear Sirs and Madams,

With this request we would like to inform you about the dramatic situation of the private peace project *Tent of Nations*, which is increasingly threatened in its existence. The concern here is to ask you to personally stand up for its preservation according to your possibilities.

The following is intended to explain in more detail what is involved and why it is so urgent to protect this awe-inspiring flagship project from unlawful access.

## What is the "Tent of Nations"?

For three generations – over 100 years – the Christian Palestinian Nassar family has owned a sustainably managed organic farm ("Dahers Vineyard"), a 42-hectare plot of land located a few kilometers southwest of the city of Bethlehem in the West Bank, which has been under military occupation since 1967, on a hilltop 950 meters above sea level.

Over the years, under the motto: *"We refuse to be enemies,"* the Nassar family has transformed the farm into a center where *"people from many different countries come together to learn, share, and build bridges of understanding and hope. They run empowerment programs for women and children in the area. In the summer, they offer dozens of Bethlehem children, Christian and Muslim alike, from the city or a refugee camp, a break from the dreary daily routine: through mosaic and music classes, through theater and nature experiences."*

The governments of Germany and France honored this peace project with their Human Rights Award in 2017. Family member Daoud Nassar (Daoud Arab. for David) was awarded the *Michael Sattler Peace Prize* in 2007. In his youth, he studied at Bethlehem University, in Bielefeld and in Linz on the Danube, while also spending a year at the Bible School at Schloss Klaus in Upper Austria.

The Nassars host international volunteers who help maintain and develop the farm. Their presence also provides important protection against provocation by the surrounding settled colonists and provides important global attention to their situation. However, COVID barriers have prevented international visitors from visiting and staying at the farm, significantly increasing the family's vulnerability.

(Listen to Daher and Daoud Nassar in 4-min.-Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeZIOiu3Y\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeZIOiu3Y_0))

## The background of a 30-year legal battle

In 1991, the Israeli authorities had declared the farm and the surrounding Palestinian territory as (Israeli) "state land". Since then, the Nassar family has defended their land before the Israeli military court and finally before the Supreme Court against the confiscation and demolition of the farm buildings, water cisterns and tents at great legal and financial cost.

In 1994, the division of the West Bank under the Oslo Accords assigned the land to the C Area, which is completely under Israeli administrative and security control.

Gradually, more and more Jewish-Israeli colonies (settlements) have been established around the vineyard on Palestinian territory. These are intended to be grouped together in the *Gush Etzion* block, which now has several tens of thousands of religious-nationalist and ultra-Orthodox inhabitants. According to the recent annexation intentions (which are currently only postponed), this block is to be annexed also *de jure* to the southern greater Jerusalem area.



Amal Nassar at the trilingual stone inscription: "We refuse to be enemies".



Vehicles park where the access road to the Tent of Nations farm is blocked



Tent of Nations farm and Palestinian village of Nahalin surrounded by five Jewish settler colonies

## The filibustering of the legal process

In 2006, the Supreme Court decided to initiate a re-registration process of the agricultural property instead of recognizing the due ownership rights, although the family was able to provide all the necessary title deeds from the British Mandate period (1924) and, most importantly, the deed of sale from 1916, as well as the evidence that their ancestors had paid taxes for the entire area in Ottoman, British and Jordanian times. Since then, the Nassars have been stuck in this imposed re-registration process and have had to re-initiate the procedure several times, for example because the Israeli authorities had misplaced the Nassars' application.

Finally, in 2019, the Nassars received confirmation that their application was complete for their entire lands, but they are still waiting for the long overdue response from the Israeli authorities. In order to receive the response, the Nassars will likely have to petition the Supreme Court. Completion of the land reclassification would mean that the Israeli authorities recognize the Nassars as private owners of this land. Therefore, it is crucial that the process of re-registering the Nassars' land be completed without further delay and that no eviction orders be issued during the process.

Official copy of the 1924 land deeds

## Breach of agreements

The long delay in the land rezoning process continues to expose the Nassars' farm to risks. In 2019, for example, Israeli authorities again ordered the family to be evicted from a large portion of the land and to demolish two water cisterns (while refusing to connect them to a water supply and sewage system, as well as electric power), claiming that the land is "state land." This order was issued despite an agreement with the authorities in 2018 to suspend such orders until the process of re-registering the land is completed. The Nassars have appealed to the Supreme Court.

## Vandalism

Recently, on May 21, 2021, unknown persons set fire to agricultural crops on their property and destroyed about 1000 trees, including hundreds of olive trees. On June 9, 2021, Israeli military vehicles and bulldozers entered the Nassars' private property without advance notice, allegedly to reach the neighboring property, created a path of destruction and cut down approximately 50 olive trees.

## Cui bono – whom does it serve?

The Nassar family is convinced after 30 years of legal struggle and repeated settler violence: Everything serves the goal of expanding the nearby settlements.

## Conclusion and appeal

The Nassars and their farm urgently need international support to protect themselves and their land. It is crucial that the process of re-registering their land proceeds without further delay.

They are in a situation where the Israeli authorities are delaying this process.

Please use all your means and power including spreading this message that the process of re-registration, so important for the preservation of the plot of land, will be completed.

Thank you for your concern and action on behalf of the Nassar family!

*Fritz Weber, with Friends of the "Tent of Nations" in Austria, August 2021*

(Photo credit: Daniel Silas Adamson, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27883685>)

Please also read the article by journalist and Middle East travel guide Johannes Zang (<https://jerusalem.info>) in: „Die Tagespost“ No. 27 on July 8, 2021:

*„Der Friedensvisionär.*

*Arbeiten an einer besseren Zukunft für Palästina: Ein Besuch bei Daoud Nassar“.*

<https://www.die-tagespost.de/gesellschaft/aus-aller-welt/wir-weigern-uns-feinde-zu-sein;art309,219482>