

**CREATING SAFER SPACE**  
**Pilot Projects: Innovation in Evaluation and Learning in Unarmed Civilian**  
**Protection and Accompaniment (UCP/A)**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Operazione Colomba* (Operation Dove in English, hereinafter “OC”) is a nonviolent peace corps initiative under the Italian Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII. Established in 1992 at the onset of the Balkan War, the project arose from a group of volunteers and conscientious objectors committed to nonviolent action. Their goal was to support civilians affected by the conflict through nonviolent means. This foundational experience shaped the core principles that continue to guide OC’s approach across all its projects. These principles include:

1. **Sharing:** Volunteers seek to share, as much as possible, the realities of conflict with those affected. While acknowledging the differences in their circumstances, they choose to stand alongside the victims, sharing in the fears and precarity that accompany situations of conflict.
2. **Nonviolence as a Strategic Choice:** The project emphasizes that the means used to achieve peace directly impact the outcomes, making nonviolence not just a moral stance but a strategic one.
3. **Equal Proximity to All Victims:** Operation Dove maintains impartiality by ensuring equal proximity to all victims of conflict, regardless of their creed, ethnicity, or political affiliation.
4. **Popular Participation:** The project is open to anyone of legal age who shares its core principles to contribute to its mission.

### 1.1. Operazione Colomba’s Presence in Palestine

OC expanded its efforts to Palestine in 2002 during the second Intifada. Initially, volunteers were active in the southern Gaza Strip. However, in 2004, responding to a request from the local community, the project shifted its focus to the rural town of At-Tuwani in the occupied West Bank. The reasons for this call of support are multiple and embedded in the geography of the place, as well as the development of the Israeli occupation of the area. Hence, this section provides an overview of the geography of the area and the impact of the Israeli occupation, essential for understanding the activities supported by Operation Dove volunteers over the past twenty years.

At-Tuwani, situated in the Masafer Yatta area of the South Hebron Hills, is the largest of 15 villages in this region, home to around 1,400 people. This area falls under Area C, as defined by the Oslo II Accord, meaning it is under full Israeli civil and military control. Palestinians in Area C face severe building restrictions as any construction needs to pass the approval of the Israeli military’s District Coordination Office (DCO), hence demolitions are frequent. The region also sees the presence of numerous and expanding Israeli settlements. At-Tuwani, with about 300 residents, stands out for having a school, two shops, a mosque, and a clinic, and it is the only village in the area with an approved Masterplan, allowing for basic infrastructure like electricity and water. However, many buildings, including the mosque, are under demolition orders. Other villages face even greater risks, particularly those located within "Firing Zone 918", a military training area where residents live under constant threat of forced displacement. Despite these challenges, the community of At-Tuwani has embraced the nonviolent resistance, striving to maintain their presence on the land.

As previously mentioned, Area C is where Israeli settlements are established. The settlements and outposts in the South Hebron Hills are often considered "ideological," with settlers commonly holding a "national-religious" ideology aimed at establishing the Jewish state of Israel as divinely mandated (Exodus 23:31, NIV). Significant issues have arisen from settlers in the Ma'on settlement and the Havat Ma'on outpost (also known as Hill 833, located just a few hundred meters from At-

Tuwani), the Suseya settlement (adjacent to the Palestinian village of the same name), the Karmel settlement (near the Bedouin village of Umm al Kher), and the outposts of Avigayil and Mitzpe Yair (close to the villages of Umm Fagara and Shaab el Butum).

Settler violence can be broadly categorized into two types: violence against property and violence against people, specifically Palestinians but also internationals and Israeli activists.

**Violence against property** has included the destruction of crops and olive groves, damage to structures, poisoning of water cisterns and pastures, and the theft or killing of livestock.

**Violence against Palestinians** has included threats, physical assaults, and intimidation, hindering their access to land. This has severely impacted children from Tuba and Maghayir al-Abeed, who face significant obstacles in attending school in At-Tuwani due to settler violence. Some families have withdrawn their children from school, while others are forced to use a much longer route. In 2004, following a violent attack, the Israeli government provided a daily military escort for the children, which was revoked after October 7th, 2023, and has not yet been reinstated.

In response to the outlined violence, in the late 1990s, the people of At-Tuwani and neighboring villages formed the South Hebron Hills Popular Committee, an informal group representing all villages in the area. Their aim is to resist the Israeli military and civilian occupation through nonviolent means and to expose the abuses by settlers and the Israeli army that undermine the fundamental rights of Palestinian communities. Building on the foundation laid by the Popular Committee, a new generation of Palestinian activists emerged under the banner of "Youth of Sumud." Formed in 2017, Youth of Sumud—where "Sumud" means steadfastness in Arabic, a core principle of the resistance—responded to the ongoing settler and military aggression against farmers, families, and schoolchildren in the South Hebron Hills. This group is dedicated to nonviolent resistance and has focused its efforts on the revival of the village of Sarura, near At-Tuwani. Members of Youth of Sumud work alongside their neighbors to support the community's struggle to remain on their land, demonstrating their commitment to steadfastness and nonviolent resistance through daily acts of solidarity.

In this context, OC volunteers have been actively engaging in the following activities in collaboration with Palestinian communities:

1. Living alongside Palestinian communities in the villages of the area;
2. Supporting the nonviolent popular resistance of these communities;
3. Accompanying Palestinian shepherds and families in areas at high risk of settler attacks;
4. Monitoring the daily journey of children from the villages of Tuba and Maghayir al-Abeed to school, under Israeli military escort and amid potential threats;
5. Providing on-the-ground support for advocacy and legal assistance efforts by the Popular Committee;
6. Documenting and reporting incidents of violence;
7. Supporting and promoting initiatives by the Popular Committee aimed at fostering grassroots reconciliation and raising awareness among Israelis about the occupation in the South Hebron Hills and the communities' commitment to nonviolent resistance.

## **1.2. Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of the ongoing collaboration between international volunteers from OC and the Palestinian community in the South Hebron Hills, West Bank. With Palestinian residents facing violence from Israeli settlers, particularly against schoolchildren, OC has provided crucial support through Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP). The study focuses on evaluating how this partnership has influenced safety and well-being between 2018 and 2023, particularly in relation to OC's role in fostering a sense of security and supporting the nonviolent resistance efforts of the Palestinian community.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Our implementation of the participatory evaluation and learning methodology closely adhered to the principles of participation, internal evaluation, semi-structured conversations, and ongoing reflection. All steps of the evaluation were carried out by a research group composed of individuals who were simultaneously researchers, OC volunteers, Palestinian activists, and residents of the villages in Masafer Yatta. This diverse team embodied the principle of "organization or community-internal" evaluation, as those conducting the research were deeply embedded within the community and directly connected to context. By having members who were not only researchers but also actively engaged in the daily realities of the communities being studied, the evaluation was inherently grounded in local knowledge, experiences, and perspectives, rather than relying on external evaluators. We initially planned to focus our inquiry on the period between 2019 and 2024, believing that comparing the lockdown during COVID—when international presence was restricted—with the post-COVID period would provide valuable insights into OD's impact and how the perception of safety changes with and without international accompaniment. However, as our research progressed, the outbreak of the war on Gaza significantly affected our work on the ground and impacted our data collection. This will be discussed in more detail in the reflection on the methodology section. The process was divided into four phases:

### **2.1. Identification and Guideline Design**

Following the principle of participation, Palestinian Israeli activists, along with our OC team came together to collaboratively identify potential interviewees and design the interview guidelines. This ensured the process reflected local language and context. Youth of Sumud activists played a key role in selecting interviewees and shaping the questions, ensuring the evaluation was rooted in community perspectives. By considering factors such as age, gender, and social background, we worked to create a balanced and inclusive group of participants. In the end we interviewed between 20-30 people divided between the villages of At-Tuwani, Tuba, Khallet Ad Dabeh, and Maghayr al Abeed. The exact number of participants is difficult to define because we were able to join several meetings of the Popular Committee, where our questions and OC's presence on the ground were discussed. These meetings aligned with the principle of semi-structured conversations, as they allowed for informal discussions in natural settings. However, this informal approach made it challenging to provide a precise quantitative count of the participants.

### **2.2. Data Collection**

In line with the principle of using internal evaluators, our data collection involved close collaboration with Palestinian and Israeli activists, who, along with OC volunteers, conducted semi-structured conversations. These interviews, held in Arabic with the help of a translator and informed by the cultural mediation principle approach, were guided by open-ended questions to encourage natural, flexible dialogue. Following the principle of semi-structured conversations, the interviews were conducted in settings and at times that prioritized participants' comfort. We held reflection meetings after each interview to assess progress, refine questions, and adapt our approach based on feedback, ensuring the process was continually responsive to participants' needs.

### **2.3. Analysis**

Staying true to the principles of internal evaluation and ongoing reflection, thematic analysis was conducted by those closely involved in the project. Notes taken during the data collection were used

to develop a coding scheme and identify key themes. The involvement of a Palestinian researcher was crucial in ensuring accurate translation and contextual understanding of the data. Throughout this phase, we continued to reflect on the process, ensuring that the analysis accurately captured the voices and experiences of the participants.

## **2.4. Report Writing**

The final phase involved synthesizing the insights from the evaluation into a comprehensive report, adhering to the principle of participatory methods. This report was shared with Palestinian activists for their input and validation, ensuring their perspectives were accurately represented. By involving them in the final review, we upheld the commitment to participation and reflection, making sure the report was a true reflection of the collective work.

## **2.5. Reflections on the methodology**

This section would typically address the study's limitations. However, we believe it is more relevant to reflect on the significant events that have unfolded since we applied for this grant, which have profoundly impacted various aspects of the study. Rather than viewing these as limitations, we consider them integral to the realities of conducting research within these communities and this specific context.

Initially, our focus was on the COVID-19 period, examining the differences between the lockdown, when international presence was restricted, and the resistance was solely carried out by Palestinians, versus the immediate aftermath when international presence resumed. We began preliminary data collection in August 2023, working closely with the community, Palestinian activists, and Israeli activists to assess what was feasible and meaningful. However, the events of October 7th 2023 drastically altered the situation. Following this date, both OC and international groups faced restrictions on remaining in the community, a situation that also affected Israelis. The area experienced another form of lockdown, with the Israeli military blocking key roads and access to major cities, including Yatta, the closest city to At-Tuwani. Many of these roads remain closed, making travel difficult. More critically, there was an unprecedented surge in settler violence and settlement expansion. On October 13th, a resident of At-Tuwani was shot by a settler from the Israeli settlement of Ma'on. Shortly after, Itamar Ben Gvir, National Security Minister, announced the distribution of 10,000 assault rifles to settlers in the West Bank ([Times of Israel, 2023](#)). In July 2024, the Israeli government approved the construction of 5,295 new housing units in the West Bank, marking the largest land seizure in over three decades ([Al Jazeera, 2024](#)).

The war further exacerbated the crisis, leaving Palestinian workers who relied on jobs inside Israel with revoked permits, cutting off their income sources. This ongoing situation has led to severe economic hardship. Additionally, the military's focus on Gaza has led to a less intense presence of the military in the West Bank, with settlers, armed by the National Security Minister, effectively acting as a militia. Our field experience post-October 7th has revealed a heightened level of violence against both Palestinians and internationals. In the months following October 7th, it became clear that international presence was not just unwelcome but had become a primary target. Many internationals have been arrested and forced to leave the country.

Consequently, any interviews or conversations conducted after October 7th were heavily influenced by these circumstances. As the data section will show, a recurring theme is that despite internationals being targeted, Palestinians in the area feel it is more urgent than ever to have

internationals accompany them. What we experienced in continuing our conversations post October 7th, as well as in the reflection meetings, has been that people who we were interviewing and working with were exhausted, frightened, hyper-alert, and deeply drained after enduring months of witnessing the genocide of their people in Gaza. They were acutely aware that an escalation in the West Bank was probable, faced dwindling economic resources, experienced profound uncertainty about the future, and dealt with increasing restrictions and/or violence from the occupation on a daily basis.

As researchers and volunteers, we found ourselves immersed in what Stamatopoulou-Robbins describes as a 'choppy' temporality— a disjointed and unsettling sense of time, akin to being adrift at sea without a lifeboat (Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2020). This "choppy" temporality is not just about short-term survival or tactical governance, nor is it about strategic planning for the future (ibid). Instead, it reflects a constant, unsettling disruption of time and experience (ibid). For the people of the Masafer Yatta, this choppy temporality made COVID-19 almost irrelevant, as something far more urgent and all-encompassing dominated their days and minds. Therefore, any effort to understand the impact of international presence in these communities must consider and move within this choppy temporality.

### **3. CONTEXT**

As previously outlined in the introduction, At-Tuwani is located in the Masafer Yatta area, between the city of Yatta and the 'Green Line,' the 1949 armistice line that separates Israel from the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Masafer Yatta area is home to approximately 1,400 people living in 15 villages, including At-Tuwani, a-Tuba, Um Fagarah, Maghayir al Abeed, Susiya, Qawawis, Shib al Butum, Isfey Foqa, Isfey Tihta, al-Majaz, at-Tabban, al-Fakheit, Jinba, Mirkez, and Halaweh. Our study involved conversations with people living in most of these villages, except Isfey Foqa, Isfey Tihta, al-Majaz, at-Tabban, al-Fakheit, Jinba, Mirkez, and Halaweh.

#### **3.1. Livelihood and Border Realities in the South Hebron Hills**

In many of these villages, particularly the smaller and poorer ones, families continue to live in caves carved into the stone or in tents, due to strict construction prohibitions imposed by the Israeli civil administration (DCO). The Palestinian inhabitants primarily rely on the limited pastoralism and agriculture that the semi-desert terrain allows. Large families sustain themselves by selling fresh milk, leban (a fresh or dried cheese made from goat's milk), and livestock intended for slaughter at the Yatta market. Their lifestyle is simple and deeply connected to the land, revolving around daily activities dictated by seasonal cycles, such as grazing, planting, harvesting, milk processing, olive picking, and grain milling. Most of this labor is still performed by hand, as only a few families own tractors, and many fields are located in rugged areas inaccessible to machinery.

Another possible means of sustenance for Palestinians living in the South Hebron Hills, including At-Tuwani, is seeking employment in Israel, either legally or illegally. Due to the lack of local economic opportunities, many Palestinians attempt to cross the border, which lies just ten kilometers from At-Tuwani. Although the separation wall has been completed along much of the Green Line, the southernmost border between the West Bank and Israel, near At-Tuwani, remains open, providing an access point that allows Palestinians to bypass Israeli border controls. Palestinians from the West Bank are required to obtain a permit from the Israeli government to enter Israel legally. These permits are rarely issued – as we mentioned above, now most of them have been revoked - and are typically granted only to those with a formal employment contract in Israel. However, most Palestinians do not hold steady jobs there. Instead, they are hired occasionally by Israeli construction or agricultural companies during peak periods. In such cases, the need to travel to Israel quickly prompts many to cross the border illegally. The road from Yatta to At-Tuwani and then further south toward the Green Line is frequently used by Palestinian workers traveling to or from Israel. To counter this, Israeli military checkpoints and roadblocks along this route often aim to detect vehicles transporting workers without permits. These checkpoints sometimes result in prolonged vehicle stops and extensive checks of passengers' documents, as well as sudden pursuits, vehicle seizures, and arrests in the village.

#### **3.2. Challenges and problems: occupation, settlers, IDF and environmental colonialism**

As previously outlined, the Masafer Yatta area includes a section renamed as Firing Zone 918, a military training zone established by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and covering approximately 3,000 hectares. This area, which had been inhabited by Palestinian civilians, was expropriated for military use and included the villages of a-Tuba, Um Fagarah, Maghayir al Abeed, Isfey Foqa, Isfey Tihta, al-Majaz, at-Tabban, al-Fakheit, Jinba, Mirkez, and Halaweh. Initially, the Israeli Ministry of Defense aimed to expand this military zone to cover the entire South Hebron Hills region. In November 1999, the implementation of these plans led to the forced eviction of all villages within



the zone, except for At-Tuwani, and the relocation of the population to the northern side of Bypass Road No. 317, which connects West Bank settlements. This triggered a prolonged legal battle, with the Palestinian residents challenging their displacement in the High Court of Justice (HCJ). The Israeli state consistently argued that the residents were not living there prior to the firing zone's declaration and therefore had no right to remain. In a hearing held on August 10, 2020, the state reiterated this stance, claiming that those living in the area were not permanent residents and that they were exploiting a legal injunction by building structures without permits. In an attempt to resolve the issue, the state proposed a compromise allowing the residents to live in the area for limited periods, such as during weekends or Jewish holidays when military exercises were not conducted. The residents rejected this offer, preferring to remain in their homes full-time. Although the interim injunction prevented the state from forcibly removing them, the prolonged legal process left residents in a state of uncertainty for over two decades, during which time they faced continual threats of eviction, demolition, and dispossession. Meanwhile, they were prohibited from constructing or developing infrastructure legally, leading many to build homes and essential services, such as water and power systems, without permits. The Civil Administration responded with demolition orders, and human rights organizations like B'Tselem documented the destruction of 66 residential and 32 non-residential structures since 2006 ([B'Tselem, 2022](#)). On May 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, the HCJ rejected the residents' petitions, upholding the state's arguments. The court ruled that the petitions were invalid, both because they were submitted years after the firing zone's establishment and because the petitioners had built structures without permits. The justices concluded that the military commander's authority to designate closed military zones overruled international law provisions, and since the petitioners were not considered permanent residents before the area was declared a firing zone, they had no legal grounds to remain (*ibid*). Consequently, the court's decision paved the way for the immediate expulsion of the residents and the dismantling of their communities.

The situation in Masafer Yatta highlights the stark contrast between the treatment of Palestinian residents and Israeli settlers. While Palestinians face eviction and the destruction of their homes and infrastructure, Israeli settlers are granted land to establish and expand settlements. During the first decade of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, the Israeli government seized approximately 3,100 hectares of privately-owned Palestinian land, citing military necessity as justification. However, in 1979, Israel's High Court of Justice limited the further use of private Palestinian land for settlements. In response, the Israeli government began reclassifying Palestinian land as "state land" through legal reinterpretations, enabling continued settlement expansion ([B'Tselem & Forensic Architecture, 2018](#)). Between 1979 and 1992, over 90,000 hectares were declared state land, and by the early 2000s, this figure had grown to around 120,000 hectares, or 22% of the West Bank (*ibid*). This land is under full Israeli control, primarily allocated to settlements. During this period, successive Likud governments, including coalitions with the Labor Party, established more than a hundred settlements in densely populated Palestinian areas, aiming to create conditions that would prevent future challenges to Israeli dominance (*ibid*). In the Masafer Yatta area, settlers employ various tactics to consolidate control, including agricultural land grabs. As a rural region where most Palestinians rely on farming and grazing for sustenance, settlers have adopted similar practices, grazing their flocks on Palestinian land. This method of farming enables Israel to expand its control without the need for permanent infrastructure, as it is quicker, cheaper, and less resource-intensive. This tactic not only allows settlers to gain more land but also paves the way for

establishing new outposts. As Palestinian shepherds become increasingly fearful of grazing on certain lands due to settler intimidation, settlers gain freer access, bringing in more permanent structures that develop into outposts. Though these outposts are unofficial – and illegal under both International and Israeli law – they receive government backing, including financial aid, protection, and military support. Starting as small, temporary structures – such as makeshift tents, abandoned cars, or a hay bales – they have a disproportionate impact on the area. Settlers and soldiers often employ force and intimidation to prevent Palestinians from accessing their land. A common intimidation tactic involves an armed Israeli settler grazing his flock and, upon spotting a Palestinian shepherd, either calling the army for protection, claiming to feel threatened by the Palestinian's presence, or directly approaching and threatening the Palestinian, often escalating to physical violence. Another prevalent form of intimidation is carried out "by proxy," involving the destruction of Palestinian fields through arson, crop damage—such as uprooting olive trees—or the killing and kidnapping of livestock.

As we have seen, nature is also heavily impacted by the Israeli occupation in the Masafer Yatta area. Through the construction of bypass roads that cut across the West Bank to connect settlements. It isn't just the Palestinians' freedom of movement that is restricted but also the roads' construction illustrate how space and nature are used for political purposes (Benassi, 2021). The rapid expansion of the road network has transformed the landscape, isolating communities while damaging local ecosystems. Each road requires 75 meters of land on either side to be designated as a military zone, resulting in the destruction of homes, farmland, and natural habitats (ibid). This militarized use of space increases pollution, disrupts agriculture, and degrades the environment, reinforcing Israeli control while harming the area's ecological balance. It is worth mentioning as well that Israeli policies of species protection in the area are rooted in a Zionist understanding of "original" Jewish landscape. As Braverman (2021) work on wild legalities elucidates, the management of reintroduced species has led to the removal of other animals, such as feral dogs and camels, through a biopolitical strategy that regulates which species are considered valuable or harmful based on their perceived wildness and importance to the Zionist project, ultimately controlling movement, resources, and ecosystems for both human and non-human life in the area. Along similar lines, trees, and especially the olive tree, play a symbolic role. Many Israeli initiatives, such as planting a tree for every newborn or creating memorial parks for victims of events such as the Holocaust or the Munich Olympics attack, are tied to the Zionist vision of "making the desert bloom" (Gorney 2017). A prime example is the village of At-Tuwani which sits near a forest planted by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). This forests has concealed and protected the neighbouring Israeli settlement and outpost of Ma'On and Havat Ma'On. The trees obscure any activity within the settlement, making it difficult to document illegal expansions. Additionally, they provide cover for settlers, and by the time Palestinians in At-Tuwani spot them emerging from the tree line, the settlement's proximity often makes it too late to react or prevent attacks. Ma'On also has a cherry plantation which requires vast amount of water, a topic that we will examine shortly. In contrast, in areas like the Masafer Yatta, olive trees have become central in the struggle for land control, as they are the plant most targeted by settlers' violence. They are also a plant that does not require a lot of water but does require a lot of time to grow, and on that growth depends the livelihood of many Palestinian families of the area. Palestinians, particularly women, engage in acts of resistance by replanting destroyed olive trees, a practice passed down through generations (Benassi, 2021). This

act of replanting is not just agricultural but also a form of non-violent resistance, demonstrating Palestinians' deep attachment to their land.

As previously mentioned, Ma'On's cherry plantation is a water-intensive endeavor, which highlights the broader issue of water distribution in the West Bank, particularly in Masafer Yatta. The national water network, controlled by the Israeli company Mekorot, supplies 90% of Israel's domestic and agricultural water (Benassi, 2021). However, in Area C of the West Bank, 180 Palestinian communities remain disconnected from the water network, while the 122 that are connected face daily disruptions and unreliable access. This unequal distribution leaves around 50,000 Palestinian residents with precarious water access, in stark contrast to the 400,000 settlers living in 245 settlements, who consume three to eight times more water than the entire Palestinian population of 2.9 million (Jarrar and Efrati 2019). The severe water shortages in Masafer Yatta and surrounding areas make it increasingly difficult for Palestinian farmers and shepherds to maintain their traditional livelihoods. Many have been forced to reduce or abandon livestock farming because there is not enough water to meet even basic household needs, let alone sustain their flocks, especially during the dry summer months (ibid). This denial of access undermines their way of life and threatens their economic survival. The cherry plantation of Ma'On is not just representative of the water inequality connected to the occupation but also of the normalization of it. Each year the plantation becomes the site of a cherry picking festival. Rather than being an exception, the settlements in the area host a variety of tourist events that celebrate the region's rural, authentic, and biblical lifestyle. This aligns with Braverman's observation that "making national parks into tourist attractions for American Jews who are shopping for a spiritual experience during their visit to the Holy Land is central to the normalization of the occupation" (2021, p. 17). National parks and protected natural areas are other denominations that Israel uses to gain and restrict access to the land in the name of nature preservation (Braverman, 2019). Archaeology is another tool used by the occupation to seize land and encroach on Palestinians' freedom. For example, in the village of At-Tuwani there are the alleged remains of a synagogue. In August of each year, settlers from the area organize a prayer on the alleged remains. This means that the Israeli military first secures the area of the village by means of night raids, confiscations and overall constant presence in the village, and then they escort the buses with the settlers in the heart of the Palestinian village. A similar situation unfolds just a few kilometers away in the area of Susya, which is both a Palestinian village and an Israeli settlement. This location is home to an archaeological site featuring extensive remains from the Second Temple and Byzantine periods, including the ruins of a historically significant synagogue that was converted into a mosque after the Muslim conquest in the 7th century (Werlin, 2015). In the 1830s, a Palestinian village named Susya was established near the site. However, in 1986, the Israeli Defense Ministry's Civil Administration declared the Palestinian-owned area an archaeological site (B'Tselem, 2015). This led to the Israeli Defense Forces expelling the Palestinian residents and transferring the site's management to settlers from the nearby Israeli settlement (ibid). Portions of the expropriated Palestinian land were later incorporated into the jurisdiction of the Israeli settlement, and an illegal Israeli outpost was established on the land once occupied by the Palestinian village

### **3.3. The presence of international activists: OD, ISM, CPT, Ta'ayush and Israeli groups, international Jewish groups**

The West Bank, particularly the Masafer Yatta region, has garnered significant support from international activists. This support is especially notable in connection with the work of the Popular Committee of the South Hebron Hills, which has built strong alliances with both international solidarity movements and Israeli-Jewish activists. The Popular Committee recognized early on that nonviolent resistance would be less effective without the presence of international witnesses and supporters. As outlined in the introduction, organizations such as OC have maintained an almost uninterrupted presence in the village of At-Tuwani for the past 20 years. Additionally, numerous other groups have established a presence or supported Palestinian nonviolent resistance efforts in the area over the years.

The **Community Peacemaker Team (CPT)**, formerly known as the Christian Peacemaker Team, is a grassroots, nonviolent, decolonial organization that originated in the 1980s. Similar to OC, CPT deploys teams at the request of local communities engaged in peacemaking efforts in regions experiencing violent conflict. Notably, CPT and OC supported one another, when OC first arrived in At-Tuwani in 2004. CPT had been invited to the region by the municipality of Al-Khalil/Hebron after a delegation visit in 1994, following the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre. In 1995, the first official CPT team was established in Hebron's Old City, where their activities included monitoring checkpoints and collecting testimonies from the Palestinian population. In At-Tuwani, CPT began accompanying schoolchildren from the village of Tuba to protect them from settler violence. A violent attack on CPT and OC volunteers, some of whom were American citizens, prompted the Israeli occupation forces to institute a military escort for the children. While CPT no longer maintains a presence in At-Tuwani, they continue their regular operations in Al-Khalil/Hebron, where the team is composed of local Palestinian members, reflecting CPT's partner-led organizational model.

The **International Solidarity Movement (ISM)** is a Palestinian-led organization dedicated to non-violent resistance against the longstanding and systematic oppression and dispossession faced by the Palestinian population. ISM engages in direct action to challenge the Israeli occupation, including non-violent intervention during demonstrations, support for local agricultural activities such as the olive harvest, and documenting instances of violence and human rights violations by the Israeli occupation. Recently, ISM volunteers have collaborated with the Popular Committee of the South Hebron Hills and established a presence in the village of At-Tuwani to further support local resistance efforts.

**Ta'ayush** is a grassroots movement dedicated to fostering Arab-Jewish partnership and dismantling structures of racism, segregation, and apartheid. For over a decade, the organization has been active in Area C of the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly in the South Hebron Hills, where it supports Palestinian communities in their efforts to retain their homes and agricultural lands. Through daily non-violent direct actions, Ta'ayush brings together Israelis and Palestinians, working collectively to end the Israeli occupation and promote full civil equality.

International Jewish groups and other Jewish groups are informal groups of individuals, often linked to left-wing activism, lightly organized, which propose short-time experiences of activism in the occupied Palestinian territories. These groups and individuals engage in direct action to challenge the Israeli occupation, offering a rapid response to emergencies and documenting human rights violations against Palestinian inhabitants of the areas where they are located.

## 4. INTERVIEWS

In the course of our fieldwork, we engaged in an iterative process of informal conversations with the inhabitants of Masafer Yatta, as well as Palestinian members of our team. This approach allowed us to identify key macro areas of interest that shaped and guided our discussions:

1. **Activities carried out with OC:** Exploring the nature of interactions and activities between the interviewee and the international volunteers (called "Colombe", that means "Doves").
2. **Impact of COVID-19 on Volunteer Presence:** Understanding the initial impact of COVID-19, specifically focusing on how the absence of the volunteers affected local dynamics, including specific challenges that arose due to their departure.
3. **Post-COVID Volunteer Return:** Examining the experience and the changes when the volunteers returned after the pandemic, including any differences in their role or effectiveness.
4. **Role and Expectations of International Volunteers:** Investigating the perceived role of international volunteers on the ground, comparing what they are expected to do versus what they actually accomplish.

After identifying these core themes, we formulated a set of guiding questions to structure our conversations. These questions are outlined below:

1. Introduction: Could you describe your experience with OC? What activities do you engage in together?
2. Onset of COVID-19: Tell us about the moment when COVID-19 arrived and when the Doves volunteers had to leave.
  - If the participant mentions it was problematic: Could you provide an example of how their absence created difficulties?
3. Post-COVID: Describe how things changed when OC volunteers returned.
4. Role of International Volunteers: What do you believe should be the role of the OC volunteers in the field?

These questions served as a foundation for exploring the broader themes and concerns raised by the local community.

### 4.1. Q&A in Comparison: Age Groups and Male-Female Groups

#### Age Groups:

- **Older participants** reflected on their long-term interactions with OC, acknowledging the lasting impact that the volunteers had on their lives. They described how the volunteers' presence was crucial in altering the dynamics of violence in the area, especially through the use of documentation. Initially, there was skepticism about the effectiveness of cameras, but over time, they realized that international documentation was pivotal for safety and raising awareness.
- **Younger participants** provided more immediate, action-oriented accounts. They shared examples of how volunteer presence directly influenced the frequency of settler attacks, emphasizing the role of volunteers in preventing violence by

documenting incidents in real-time. They described a clear contrast between the times when volunteers were present and absent, particularly during the COVID pandemic, when violence escalated significantly.

### **Male vs. Female Groups:**

- **Male Groups:** Men focused on the practical and protective aspects of volunteer work, especially documentation. They often recounted how volunteers helped gather evidence of attacks, which could then be presented to authorities. They emphasized the psychological safety that volunteers provided by physically accompanying them in vulnerable areas. The interviews frequently pointed to increased settler aggression when volunteers were absent, underscoring the direct correlation between the volunteers' presence and reduced violence.
- **Female Groups:** Women tended to highlight the volunteers' role in the broader community. Their accounts were more focused on the emotional and social dimensions of the relationship, noting how volunteers became part of their daily lives. They discussed how the volunteers contributed to a sense of safety and normalcy, and how their absence during COVID disrupted not only the physical safety of the community but also the emotional bonds that had been formed. Women also noted how the volunteers supported women's roles in the community, helping to expand their opportunities beyond traditional responsibilities.

### **4.2. Effectiveness**

The overall effectiveness of international volunteers was emphasized across all interviews. They served a dual role:

- **As deterrents:** The presence of volunteers alone was enough to dissuade many attacks from settlers and soldiers. The interviews consistently highlighted that settlers were less likely to act violently when they knew their actions were being filmed or monitored by international observers. Several interviewees noted that attacks decreased significantly when volunteers were present.
- **As documentarians:** Volunteers were highly effective in documenting incidents of violence, providing crucial evidence that could be used for legal purposes or shared with international audiences. The interviews stressed that this documentation was a powerful tool for holding aggressors accountable. When volunteers were absent, this lack of documentation often left villagers vulnerable to unfounded accusations or unchecked violence.

### **4.3. Deterrence**

The interviews highlighted that the role of OC volunteers provided a strong deterrent against violence in two key ways:

1. **Physical Presence:** The physical presence of volunteers in vulnerable areas often prevented attacks from settlers and soldiers. Several interviewees recalled that during the COVID pandemic, when volunteers were unable to be present, settler violence dramatically increased. Their return brought an immediate reduction in these incidents, as their presence created a sense of accountability.
2. **Documentation:** Volunteers' ability to capture incidents on camera played a critical role in deterring violence. Settlers and soldiers were aware that their actions were being monitored and could be shared with the international community. Several

interviewees shared that settlers would leave or stop their actions once they saw cameras recording.

#### 4.4. Escalation/De-escalation

- **Escalation:** Many interviewees noted that during the absence of international volunteers, particularly during the pandemic, there was a marked **escalation** in violence from settlers and soldiers. Without the volunteers' presence to document or deter these actions, settlers became more emboldened, taking advantage of the lack of international scrutiny to increase their aggression. This included physical violence, land seizures, and other forms of intimidation that would have been less frequent or severe with volunteer presence.
- **De-escalation:** Once volunteers returned to the area post-COVID, there was a notable **de-escalation** in violence. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that settler attacks diminished, or in some cases ceased altogether, when volunteers were present. The mere sight of cameras or the knowledge that international observers were documenting the events often led aggressors to retreat or behave less violently. This de-escalation effect extended not only to settler interactions but also to the behavior of soldiers, who were less aggressive when volunteers were on the scene.



## 5. OUTPUTS

In conclusion, this study aimed to evaluate the collaboration between OC and the Palestinian community in the South Hebron Hills from 2018 to 2023, focusing on how OC's Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) efforts have supported local safety and nonviolent resistance, particularly in response to settler violence. The interviews show that OC's presence has been helpful in mitigating violence and providing emotional support. A notable emergence from the interviews was that men from the community highlighted the practical benefits of OC's documentation of attacks, while women emphasized the volunteers' contributions to the community's overall sense of security and emotional well-being.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when international volunteers were absent, there was a noticeable increase in settler aggression, indicating that OC's presence had played a role in reducing violence. However, once volunteers returned, the community expressed relief and a somewhat restored sense of safety. This suggests that while OC's role, while not the sole factor in de-escalation, has been important in accompanying civilians.

The escalation of violence after October 7th, 2023, introduced new complexities. Increased restrictions on international volunteers, combined with growing settler violence, have heightened the need for outside support, even as that presence has become more challenging. Despite the risks, the Palestinian community continues to express a need for OC's assistance, seeing it as helpful in protecting them from further harm. The evolving situation requires flexible and responsive strategies to adapt to the shifting political and social realities in the West Bank.