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Another Side of Terrorism in the Middle East

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The art of political language, as George Orwell observed, is to make falsehoods sound truthful and to deny voice to those without power. There are few practitioners of this art more highly skilled than the government of Israel.

As the military occupier of the Palestinian territories for the past 40 years, Israel has managed to represent itself as the beleaguered victim of terrorism in its conflict with the Palestinian people. At the same time, the Israeli government, through its influence in America, has discredited and even silenced those voices inside the Palestinian territories with a far different story about terrorism and its victims. Truth, however, is sometimes able to prevail despite the efforts of those with power to prevent truth from gaining voice.



Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Sabatin at the spot where Israeli settlers burned his olive trees. Photo by Gary Fields

Last August on these pages, I was able to tell such a story about a Palestinian farmer, Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Sabatin. What had been happening to Sabatin, in facing daily harassment from Israeli settlers from Bettar Illit, I insisted, went to the essence of the conflict between Israel and Palestinians. Contrary to popular mythology, this conflict is not a clash of civilizations. It is a conflict about land - and the power of one group of people to seize and control the land of another. Sabatin personifies this conflict, while at the same time his situation gives a very different set of meanings to the idea of terrorism and its purveyors.

Sabatin owns land directly next to the Jewish settlement of Bettar Illit, a town built on land confiscated in 1989 from the Sabatin family and from numerous other Palestinian families from the town of Husan. All told, about 5,000 dunums (1,250 acres) was forcibly taken from farmers in Husan to build the settlement.

After construction, Sabatin was left with a small portion of his former property and has since tried to cultivate olives, figs and almonds on this land. In order to access his farmland, however, Sabatin now has to get a permit from the Israeli military authorities who administer the Occupied Territory of Palestine, and he must pass through the security gate of Betar Illit even though his family has owned this land for 200 years. In owning land in the shadow of the settlement, Sabatin is in a precarious predicament.

Last year, Sabatin took me on a tour of his land and told me how settlers from Bettar Illit burn and vandalize his remaining olive and fruit trees on a daily basis. As we walked through his fields, I was able to see olive and fig tree branches shorn from their trunks and scattered on the ground. I also saw several still-smoldering piles of ash, olive trees burned just that morning. "What can I do" Sabatin asked me repeatedly. I never knew what to say.

These settlers from Bettar Illit actually want Sabatin to take flight from his land. They are trying to force him to make a "choice" about whether it is worth it to remain. With enough pressure, perhaps he will finally relent and give it up.

Now, it appears that the settlement has handed Sabatin an ultimatum. Two weeks ago settlers again set fire to some of his olive trees, but this time the fire burned out of control. The firefighting unit from the settlement had to extinguish the blaze. What they did next, however, is befitting of the term Orwellian.

The governing council of Bettar Illit informed Sabatin that it would charge him 7,000 Israeli shekels (\$1,600) for the cost of extinguishing the fires since they occurred on his land. This is an amount of money well beyond his means. They gave him until today to remit the money and informed him that failure to pay would result in the settlement confiscating the rest of his land.

Sabatin was frantically and desperately trying to find a way to keep his land as the deadline given to him by the settlement approached. Even if he pays the amount, however, what is to prevent extortion such as this from occurring again?

This time, however, after years of abuse at the hands of these settlers, Sabatin has vowed to resist. With help from numerous individuals in the San Diego area and beyond, Sabatin has obtained the services of a well-known Israeli human rights lawyer and is preparing to contest the confiscation order. Today's date may very well mark a turning point in his own personal saga.

In truth, Sabatin is the personification of a much bigger campaign that has been going on since 1947-48 when Palestinians owned about 90 percent of the land in historic Palestine. Now Palestinians own about 12 percent of the land in their historic homeland and this amount continues to decrease as land policies, including the activities of settlements, continue to encroach on, and confiscate, Palestinian land and property while transferring Palestinians into ever-smaller territorial spaces. Ariel Sharon, the former prime minister of Israel and the architect of the settlement policy, described this campaign as a policy of taking Palestinian land "dunum by dunum."

These policies raise questions about the real purveyors of terror and its victims. The occupation of Palestine by Israel has removed all rights of Palestinians to land and has undermined their capacity to make a living where they have existed for centuries. Palestinians have no security when their land and livelihood can be taken at any time. Until the occupier recognizes these rights, the tragedy of Mahmoud Sabatin will continue - and the conflict will not rest.

Gary Fields, author of *Territories of Profit* (Stanford University Press, 2004), currently is writing a book on "The Wall" in the Palestinian territories. He teaches in the Department of Communication at the University of California San Diego.