

Thursday

INSIGHT
Opinion & Commentary

August 3, 2006

Losing Freedom... Bit By Bit

By Gary Fields

Husan, West Bank -- As a farmer from one of the oldest and most distinguished families in the Palestinian village of Husan near Bethlehem, Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Sabatin seems unlikely to personify the issues at the core of the war currently raging in the region. When one listens closely however, to this soft-spoken and dignified man describing the difficulties he confronts in farming his land, it becomes clear that his story is not simply about farming. Indeed, the story of Mr. Sabatin is a metaphor for the conflict and destruction ravaging Lebanon and Gaza.

Contrary to popular mythology, this 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. The plight of Mahmoud Sabatin reveals the essence of this conflict.

The Sabatin family has lived in Husan for at least 400 years farming this land, he tells me. Recent history, however, has altered the conditions of farming for the Sabatin family -- and for innumerable Palestinian farmers who share a similar fate.

In order to access his land, Mr. Sabatin not only has to get a permit from the Israeli military authorities who administer the Occupied Territory of Palestine. He also has to go through the security gate of an Israeli settlement, Betar Illit, to get to his land, which his family has owned and cultivated for the past 200 years. He is not allowed to drive his car to his land. He must park it in the village, walk across a road for Israeli vehicles only, and then walk into the settlement where he then confronts a security checkpoint that decides whether he can pass.

Like virtually all Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territory of Palestine, Betar Illit is built on land belonging to Palestinian farmers, in this case, farmers from Husan.

In order to build the settlement in 1989, the authorities of Betar Illit confiscated 5000 dunums of land belonging to Husan village (4 dunums equals one acre). The process for



Mahmoud Abdel Aziz Sabatin pointing out where Israeli settlers damaged his olive trees. *Photo by Gary Fields*

such confiscations is very simple. The settlement authority petitions the Israeli Government to create a settlement in a certain location. Upon favorable review, the Government declares the area in question to be Israeli "state land" to be used for the public purpose of housing Israeli citizens, and then cedes the land for development to the settlement. The land is then rezoned by the Occupation Authorities as residential and thus the former agricultural use by Palestinian farmers is declared "nonconforming."

The political architect of this settlement program was none other than Ariel Sharon when he assumed the job of Minister of Housing following the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1967. In a celebrated quotation, Sharon described the objective of Israeli settlement policy adopted soon after that date to be the taking of land in Palestine "dunum by dunum."

What enables Israel to take land for settlements in this fashion? The answer is transparent: *force*. It is Israel's military occupation of Palestine -- and the backing it receives from the US Government -- that provides it with the power to engage in this activity.

Of the 5000 dunums of land taken from Husan by the settlement, 30 dunums belonged to Mr. Sabatin. On these 30 dunums now stand apartment blocks housing Israelis. In a way, Mr. Sabatin might be considered "lucky." After all, the settlement did not take all of his land. He still has 50 dunums remaining which now lie in the shadow of the settlement, only meters away from the buildings that occupy the land confiscated from him. As we walked through his fields, we could see people from the settlement watching us the entire time.

Mr. Sabatin told me how the settlers burn and vandalize his remaining olive and fruit trees on a daily basis. Just as he was describing this to me, we came upon several olive trees apparently burned just that morning. The ashes were still smoldering from this deliberate act of destruction when we came into his fields. He just stares at the blackened limbs and burnt ground in silence.

As we go through his groves, other trees, almond and fig, revealed branches torn off and scattered on the ground, the trees bending and disfigured. "I love these trees," he tells me. "They are part of my family."

Mr. Sabatin then told me a story of his father, a very proud and honorable individual, when they were building the settlement. His father tried to prevent the bulldozers from uprooting the trees on his land confiscated for settlement construction. He stood in the path of the bulldozer, refusing to move, and then the army came to arrest him. They demanded his ID. The elder Sabatin picked up a handful of dirt from his land now being taken from him and screamed at the soldier, "this is my ID."

After wandering for some time through the olive, fig, and almond groves, the security man from the main gate at the settlement entrance intercepted us in the field. He had a call from one of the settlers about us and came to question us as to what we were doing. Mr. Sabatin told the security person about the fires and vandalism and asked him why nothing was done to prevent settlers from destroying his livelihood. "The settlers are tending the land," the security person retorted. "You see, what can I do?" Mr. Sabatin asks me.

If these difficulties weren't enough, now Mr. Sabatin has something else to worry about. In another part of Husan, he owns a beautiful piece of land, roughly 20 dunums where he grows vegetables. This land is irrigated with numerous natural aquifers typical of land near the border with Israel but inside Palestinian territory. Israel has always coveted these natural water sources.

For this reason, Israel has built the Wall *inside* Palestine at key locations in order to annex many of these natural aquifers. Recently, the Israeli authorities informed Mr. Sabatin, along with others in the village, that this land is in the pathway planned for The Wall. When built, the Wall will confiscate an additional 400 dunums of land from Husan, including the 20 dunums from Mr. Sabatin. Dunum by dunum, more and more Palestinian land is changing hands. Little wonder that so many people here are so angry.

We spent close to 3 hours in Mr. Sabatin's fields during which time he described how desperate he is to keep what he still has. I don't know how he can go on. I felt compassion for his resilience. As an American, I was uneasy wondering what he might think of me and the policies of my government. Then, of course, at the end of the tour, he invited me to his home for dinner, a feast in fact, breads just baked from the ovens, the freshest vegetables, olives from his trees. He kept telling me how welcome I was.

Fields, author of Territories of Profit, is currently in the West Bank interviewing people for his upcoming book on The Wall and teaches in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego.