

PALESTINE: FOR LAND AND LIFE

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# YOU CANNOT BE FREE WITHOUT MY FREEDOM

THE STRUGGLE OF NABI SALIH





## Location: Nabi Salih, central West Bank

*Nabi Salih is a small village with 600 residents located in central West Bank, around 20 kilometers northwest of Ramallah. Since 2009, the villagers have been holding weekly nonviolent marches to protest the Israeli occupation.*

Initially the goal of the demonstrations was to challenge the nearby settlement, Halamish, established in 1976 on lands belonging to the villages of Nabi Salih and Deir Nidham. Halamish continued to expand with a fence built in 2008, preventing villagers' access to their own land. An Israeli court ruled to dismantle the fence, however, Halamish settlers illegally annexed more land and took control of Nabi Salih's natural spring, Ein al-Qaws (the Bow Spring).<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the protest against the settlement grew to challenge the Israeli occupation in general.<sup>2</sup>

Traveling on the Nablus Road, the journey from Jenin to Nabi Salih is made longer by the blockades and signs for the village are not easily visible. The missing letters on the inconspicuously placed sign for Nabi Salih, otherwise internationally renowned for its resistance, raise the specter of an attempt to obliterate another village, its residents, and the Palestinian identity itself.

The surrounding hills – rich green from the winter rain, interspersed with olive orchards, lush fields, and homes – are a reminder of the role of agriculture in the every day life of the Palestinians. The continued dispossession of land and restricted access to water, however, haunts the village and the valley. Outside of the homes in the village are garland fences made of used gas canisters, which have become a familiar feature of daily life under occupation.



Nabi Salih Village and nearby Halamish settlement © The Oakland Institute

## RESISTANCE TO OCCUPATION

The research team is here to meet Bassem Tamimi, a manager in the Palestinian Ministry of Interior, and also the community leader who helped organize the weekly marches. Waed, Bassem's oldest son, welcomes us into the family home. The house is in Area C and although it was built with permission in 1964, it has been facing demolition orders since 2010. Demolition orders have been hanging over the heads of the family since, and prevented the building of another floor to accommodate the growing family. The order might be linked to the protests that started in 2009 – but Bassem's family was ready to pay the price for resisting occupation.

Bassem's wife, Nariman, is not at home. She is in Jordan for medical treatment – after being initially denied a visa and then waiting for over 24 hours before permission to travel was granted. “But that's life for the Palestinians at the check points,” Bassem shares.<sup>3</sup>

We are invited to lunch as Bassem cooks for his four children. Chopping tomatoes and greens, he says, “You cannot be free without my freedom. This is not about solidarity. It is your responsibility and your duty to join our struggle.”<sup>4</sup> On the coffee table and around the house are trays holding various types of gas canisters and stun grenades used by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) against the weekly protestors.



Bassem Tamimi with three of his children © The Oakland Institute

“My son's name is Salem, which means peace. One time when I was in jail, Salem started crying and wanted his name changed. In Palestine, the peace process has become the means to dispossess people. So peace is a bad word for him. It is everyone's responsibility to change the meaning of peace for the children and people of Palestine. First comes justice and then comes peace. We cannot ask the victim to forgive

if that means to forget. But how can we forget if oppression continues?”

I was born in 1967. Halamish started in 1976. The image that I have of Israel is that of a settler in my land . . . a soldier at the checkpoint, who shot at our demonstrations. Or the soldier who killed my sister when she was struck in the courthouse and fell down a flight of stairs. Or the Israeli interrogator who shook me with such force that I was in coma for eight days. Or the soldier who killed my brother-in-law—that is my image of Israel.”<sup>5</sup>

All residents of Nabi Salih are related by blood or marriage and most share the last name Tamimi.

“We came from Hebron 400 years ago and have been a part of the struggle against the Turkish, the British, and now Israel. We as a family have the highest rate of martyrdom in Palestine—since 1967, 22 people have lost their lives. In this village of just 600 people, every family has directly suffered from the occupation with a family member killed or their land stolen.

We learnt of Budrus village, where Israel's separation barrier was going to take away the village's land and uproot olive trees. This gave way to villagers' peaceful demonstrations against the barrier. After 55 demonstrations, the people of Budrus won and the Israeli government changed the route of the barrier. We went to Budrus in solidarity and saw the village win with civil resistance, not armed resistance.<sup>6</sup> So we were inspired to protect the image of our struggle, our society, and not be portrayed as terrorists. Also, there was lack of participation by women in the struggle. So we decided to create a model in Nabi Salih, given our rich history of resistance.”<sup>7</sup>

The protests started on December 9, 2009. Women and children were there. The demonstration – a nonviolent procession – set out from the village center to the spring, to protest the illegal takeover of lands. “There was a lot of gas. Settlers attacked with live ammunition and 25 people were injured. The protest started at 12:30 pm and it was over at 10:00 pm,” Bassem said.<sup>8</sup>

The early demonstrations reached the main road that separates the village from the spring and the settlement before being dispersed by the Israeli security forces. After several demonstrations, Israeli military and border police

forces were stationed to prevent the demonstrators from reaching the spring. The demonstrations would be frequently halted while still inside the village. Without any violence having been directed at them, security forces would make extensive use of crowd control means to stop the protest as soon as it began.<sup>9</sup> On December 9, 2011, 28-year-old Mustafa a-Tamimi was killed while throwing stones during a weekly demonstration when a tear gas canister hit him in the head.<sup>10</sup> On November 17, 2012, Rushdi a-Tamimi, a 30-year-old, was injured by live fire during the weekly demonstration and died of his injuries two days later.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in December 2009, there have been daily clashes and weekly protests, only to stop in 2016 – the reported reason being: “The tear gas is inside the village, the clashes are inside of the homes, and it’s a small village, which makes it difficult for the people to continue.”<sup>12</sup> Since the protests started in 2009, an estimated 350 people from the village were injured, 50 left physically disabled, and two from Bassem’s family were killed by the Israeli military.<sup>13</sup>

## CHILDHOOD DENIED

*“The prominence of the Tamimi children in these confrontations has inevitably raised questions – not least among pro-Israeli commentators – about how much they have been pushed by the family into the frontline of potentially dangerous encounters.”<sup>14</sup>*

“Some people feel that by exposing our children to the protests, they grow up before their age. But there is no safe place for our children. My house has been raided over 150 times since the protests started. If my children only know fear, how will they live and survive?”

Last time when I was out of the country, my wife was away with my daughter, and my two young sons were alone with their older brother, the Israeli soldiers knocked at the door. They ransacked my home and arrested my son. Waed was in jail for 10 months – his alleged crime, based on a child’s testimony – throwing stones at the Israeli soldiers. We could not visit him in jail. We as parents could not even cry. To make him strong, we could not be weak. Also his siblings were watching. So my children have had to learn to be strong.”<sup>15</sup>

“In 2012, my wife was filming when her brother, Rushdi Tamimi, was shot. She continued to film when she wanted to run and hug her brother and comfort him as he bled to death. But our camera is our weapon. The soldier who killed my brother-in-



On August 28, 2015, the world was shocked by the images of a masked IDF soldier with an assault rifle, holding a young boy in a headlock, jammed between rocks, whilst the boy’s mother and sister attempted to wrestle him away from the soldier – his sister biting the soldier on the wrist. The young boy was 11-year-old Mohammed Tamimi and his sister, Ahed Tamimi, Bassem’s children. The images became a symbol of the denial of childhood of Palestinian children by the occupying forces.<sup>16</sup>



“I watched my youngest son being attacked by the Israeli soldier and questioned what I should do. Martin Luther King and Gandhi did not have to undergo such examination. This is not easy. I wanted to hit the soldier with a stone. I wanted to grab his weapon. I thought, if I keep quiet what will my son think of me? So I was there, beating the soldier with my bare hands. Today I am known as Bassem – father of Waed, Ahed, Mohammed, and Salem.”<sup>17</sup>

Screenshots from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg1\\_0lfjqc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg1_0lfjqc)  
© Bilal Tamimi

law was put on a week's leave while my son got 10 months, for a crime reported by another child," laments Bassem.

"It is not us but the occupation that has deprived our children of their childhood. My daughter decided to become a lawyer when she visited me in a jail. But if there were no occupation, she will like to be a soccer player."<sup>18</sup>

### THE FAILURE OF THE OSLO AGREEMENT

Bassem calls the Oslo agreement nothing more than a "conscientious *Nakba*," distinguishing Israel from the occupied territory. "The two-state solution became the strategy to take away 70 percent of the Palestinian land while the Palestinians became mere residents of Gaza and the West Bank. Palestine was lost."<sup>22</sup>

Under the Oslo accords with the start of the process in 1993, the West Bank was divided into three administrative areas, A, B, and C. The newly created Palestinian Authority was to control Area A; have civilian control of Area B with Israel in control of security; and Israel was to be in full control of Area C, including security matters and all land-related civil matters – land allocation, planning and construction, and infrastructure. The Palestinian Authority is responsible for providing education and medical services to the Palestinian population in Area C.

This division was to be temporary with the intent to enable an incremental transfer of authority to the Palestinian Authority. However this arrangement remains in force 20 years later.

Area C, encompassing nearly all of the land in the eastern part of the West Bank, from the eastern slopes of the mountains of Samaria to the Jordan River, as well as broad swathes of land in the west and center of the West Bank, constitutes 60 percent of the territory of the West Bank (about 300,000 hectares). Area B constitutes 22 percent and Area A, 18 percent. Most of the Palestinian residents of the West Bank live in Area A and B – home to some 2.8 million Palestinians; whereas Area C is home to only 150,000 Palestinians in 532 residential areas.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, by 2015, 389,250 Israelis settlers were living in 135 settlements and 100 illegal outposts – established without formal permission from state authorities, but with their encouragement and assistance.<sup>24</sup>

Israel has strictly restricted Palestinian settlement, construction, and development in Area C, leaving those in the Area very vulnerable. Permits for development are denied to Palestinians. Less than one percent of Area C, which is already built up, is designated for Palestinian use – the remainder is heavily restricted or off-limits to Palestinians, with 68 percent reserved for Israeli settlements, and 21 percent for closed military zones.<sup>25</sup>

### MILITARY DETENTION OF PALESTINIAN CHILDREN

The West Bank is governed by two separate legal systems – with the Israeli settlers subject to the Israeli civilian and criminal legal system, whereas the Palestinian population is under the Israeli military law. This includes the Palestinian children.

Approximately 8,000 Palestinian children have been arrested and prosecuted in an Israeli military detention system since 2000, the majority charged with throwing stones. Most of the children were taken from their West Bank homes during the middle of the night<sup>19</sup> by heavily armed Israeli soldiers. They would arrive several hours after their arrest at an interrogation and detention center alone, sleep deprived, and often bruised and scared.<sup>20</sup>

No Israeli child comes into contact with the military court system.

At the end of August 2016, 319 Palestinian minors were held in Israeli prisons as security detainees and prisoners, including 10 administrative detainees.<sup>21</sup> Administrative detention allows the Israeli military to hold prisoners indefinitely on secret information without charging them or allowing them to stand trial.



Used IDF gas canisters on garden fences in Nabi Salih © The Oakland Institute

In 2013, the World Bank estimated the impact of these restrictions to be a loss up to \$14 billion of revenue for the Palestinian economy.<sup>26</sup> According to the Bank, access to Area C, which contains most of the West Bank's natural resources and open spaces would enable the Palestinians to halve their budget deficit and expand their economy by a third.<sup>27</sup>

“In 1948, our best lands and farms were taken, leaving us with poor lands. After the 1967 war, labor markets in Israel were opened so people could leave the land and work there. Then Israel took over our market and filled it with subsidized food. So now it controls food, agriculture, water, electricity. In Jordan valley's agricultural area, only 5,000 Palestinians are left while 20,000 settlers control its \$300 million agricultural market. Mekorot, the Israeli water company, controls the water.<sup>28</sup> Water is in the West Bank and they sell us our own water. We pay five times more than the settlers. So Palestinians have black tanks to store water. To buy the tank, we pay 20 times its price. We are tired of this.”<sup>29</sup>

In March 2016, Bassem and 35 other Palestinians and Palestinian Americans who have experienced the loss of their loved ones at the hands of Israeli forces, or lost their land to settlers brought a \$34.5 billion lawsuit against United States-based tycoons, charities, and firms who support Israeli land grabs, settlement building, and other human rights violations. Sheldon Adelson, the Las Vegas casino magnate, Irving Moskowitz, a philanthropist with property interests in East Jerusalem, and John Hagee, the founder of Cornerstone Church, a megachurch in San Antonio, Texas, were named in the lawsuit for financing the construction of settlements on Palestinian soil. About four dozen charities, firms, and individuals are named in the case, including private firms, such as Dead Sea-based cosmetics maker Ahava, UK-based security firm G4S, and the industrial powerhouse Israel Chemicals Limited.<sup>30</sup>

Bassem, declared a “prisoner of conscience” by Amnesty International in 2012,<sup>31</sup> had his visa to the US revoked in March 2016.<sup>32</sup>

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Oakland Institute | PO Box 18978 | Oakland, CA 94619 USA  
[www.oaklandinstitute.org](http://www.oaklandinstitute.org) | [info@oaklandinstitute.org](mailto:info@oaklandinstitute.org)

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