

Who Are the Terrorists?

By Nina Stein

On Friday, August 28, Iyad Burnat, a resident of the West Bank Palestinian village of Bil'in, was ambushed and brutally beaten by Israeli soldiers. His crime: participating in a peaceful, non-violent demonstration in his village, a right that we, as American citizens, take for granted. Every Friday afternoon, for the past ten years, people of this village, along with international and Israeli activists, have been protesting the Israeli built separation wall. This wall was built through the village, cutting it in half, with the western half, consisting of village farmland, expropriated by Israel for the building of a Jewish settlement, Modi'in Illit.

I met Mr. Burnat this summer when I visited Bil'in as a member of a delegation to Israel-Palestine organized by Interfaith Peace Builders. Mr. Burnat, a husband and father of five, was the 2015 recipient of the James Lawson Award, an award that honors activists outstanding in their leadership, courage and strategic use of non-violent civil resistance. During our visit, Mr. Burnat took us on a walk to the separation wall, following the route taken by the weekly protesters. The route was littered with innumerable spent tear gas canisters. Although the weekly demonstrators are unarmed, carrying, at the most, signs of protest and sometimes even musical instruments, they are repeatedly attacked by Israeli soldiers with tear gas, rubber bullets, and sometimes live ammunition. One man, Bassem Abu Rahme, was killed during a demonstration, when hit in the chest with a tear gas canister, and Mr. Burnat's 17 year old son, Majd, had a nerve severed, when shot in the leg during another demonstration, which has left him with a permanent disability.

During the Friday protest, Mr. Burnat was approached by Israeli soldiers at gunpoint, brutally beaten by several of them, and even though he was in great pain and offering no resistance, was very tightly handcuffed, with plastic bands cutting into his wrists, blindfolded with a cloth soaked in pepper spray burning his eyes, and arrested. He was taken to a police station where he was held in this condition, for ten hours, without charge. During this time he was not allowed to see a doctor, despite his repeated requests and extreme pain, in violation of international humanitarian law. At midnight, he was thrown onto the street, where a cousin, who had been arrested with him, was able to call for an ambulance. At the hospital he

was diagnosed with two broken ribs and severe bruises all over his body. As no charges were brought against him, it is clear that the purpose of this incident was to intimidate and inflict harm on Mr. Burnat.

This was not an isolated incident. It happens repeatedly to Palestinians throughout the West Bank, where many of them are held for days, months, and even years without being charged or brought to trial. Mr. Burnat, himself, has suffered several previous arrests resulting in imprisonment, beatings, and torture.

During our trip, we visited several Palestinian West Bank villages where we repeatedly heard of people being terrorized by Israeli soldiers breaking into their homes, frequently during the night. Children, especially, are traumatized when they witness the arrest of a parent, sibling or the child him/herself. Children as young as nine are known to have been arrested. A few days prior to our visit to Bil'in, we visited the East Jerusalem village of Silwan, which abuts the southern wall of the old city, where soldiers had arrived at 3:00 that morning and arrested six children. Following arrest, regardless of the age of the prisoner, beatings and intimidation are the norm.

The Palestinians are frequently portrayed in our media as terrorists. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, terrorism is defined as "the use of terror, violence, and intimidation to achieve an end." In view of all of this, I would like to ask: "who are the real terrorists?"

Dr. Nina M. Stein of Waterbury is an Assistant Professor of Chemistry at the University of Connecticut's Waterbury Campus and is a member of Jewish Voice for Peace New Haven. She visited Bil'in on Monday August 3, and met there with Mr. Burnat. She was among those who stayed that night as guests in his house.

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