

Whose land is it? Apartheid in Israel/Palestine: Apartheid in Israel/Palestine

by [Jonathan Frerichs](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

On the long climb to Jerusalem I notice two kinds of trucks. One kind is carrying huge battle tanks still muddy from combat in the West Bank. The other is carrying tents sent from America for Palestinians who have lost their homes in the fighting. The tanks tell rush-hour commuters, “We are at war.” I see them again pictured on T-shirts that say “Peace Through Superior Force.” The tents on the other trucks draw little attention. Their Palestinian recipients will eventually reject them as signs of the duplicity of American policy..

We pass a Jerusalem traffic light where Israeli and Palestinian thoroughfares intersect. The green light for the Israeli traffic is long. “You belong here,” it seems to say. The green light for the Palestinian traffic is short. “We call this a racist traffic light,” says an Israeli lawyer who defends East Jerusalem’s Arab residents. Through bypasses, overpasses and outright barriers, Israeli planners and engineers have removed most points of contact between the two populations, he explains. An “apartheid” tunnel probably will soon replace this light. To anyone entering East Jerusalem after an absence of several years, it is clear that Israel has been taking over traditional Arab neighborhoods.

Later, driving in an interchurch aid convoy to the town of Jenin, we pass military checkpoints where Palestinians wait in long lines. Not far away Israeli settlers speed to their jobs on highways cut through Palestinian land. The West Bank has 280 military checkpoints through which Palestinians must pass.

The settlements themselves make the loudest statement—190 of them now in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, including enclaves carved out of Palestinian communities, according to the Foundation for Middle East Peace. The settlements are more numerous, more complete and much bigger than they were when I was

here four years ago.

When the sun is shining these bright limestone cities set on top of hills dominate the landscape. Palestinian land has been expropriated for settlements and roads; Palestinian homes have been demolished as punishment for those who resist the Israeli occupation. These deeds are documented by courageous Palestinian and Israeli NGOs. Each fallen stone, each torn olive branch is a new memorial for the villages that have vanished by the hundreds since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

Despite all these visible signs, much of the occupation is hidden, like an iceberg. Jeff Halper, an Israeli anthropologist who heads a nonprofit organization called the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, calls Israeli policy a “matrix of control.” The system is “designed to allow Israel to control every aspect of Palestinian life in the occupied territories while lowering Israel’s military profile in order to give the impression to the outside world that what Palestinians refer to as ‘occupation’ is merely proper administration, and that Israel has a ‘duty’ to defend itself and the status quo,” Halper says.

Halper’s group details a web of zones, restrictions and intrusions. Occupied land, for example, is divided into areas A, B, C, D, H-1, H-2, Yellow, Green, Blue and White, and controlled by a mixture of civil administrators, military orders and undercover agents. Underground water is controlled. Businesses have to cope with various licenses and inspections. Farmers cannot plant or sell certain crops. Palestinians cannot work, travel or enter other areas without permits from Israeli authorities.

Vigorous debate about the occupation takes place in Israel. In April the newspaper *Ha’aretz* carried a quote by Michael Ben-Yair, attorney general of Israel in the mid-1990s, calling the occupation the “seventh day” of Israel’s 1967 Six-Day War: “We enthusiastically chose to become a colonial society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the occupied territories, engaging in theft and finding justification for all these activities.

“Passionately desiring to keep the occupied territories, we developed two judicial systems: one progressive, liberal—in Israel; and the other cruel, injurious—in the occupied territories. In effect, we established an apartheid regime in the occupied territories immediately following their capture. That regime exists to this day.”

How much of this “seventh day” war or the “matrix of control” is evident to Americans? Could the U.S. pursue its policies if Americans could actually see what is happening in the Holy Land?

In the region itself satellite television channels are making the occupation more visible than ever. The impact of Al Jazeera TV can be compared to what CNN’s might be if a regime like Saddam Hussein’s occupied the homeland of 3 million Americans and CNN provided hours of direct coverage of the occupation. Across the Arabic-speaking world the realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are becoming more and more palpable.

That reality plays out in ways that will never make headlines. In a hospital on the Mount of Olives a man lies swollen and gasping like a puffed-up fish, a victim of what Palestinians call “the situation.” For him the situation means waiting seven days between the dialysis treatments he should be receiving every two days. He is Abdel Majoud Awes, one of the millions whose personal problems are compounded by the perversions of justice in the Holy Land. He is Palestinian, but many an Israeli is also burdened or broken by the conflict. Their fates are the real news of the Middle East.

Awes explains that his home in the West Bank is a ten-minute drive from the dialysis machine in Nablus that keeps him alive. But when Israel launched its campaign against militants in late March, Israeli soldiers stopped Awes from going for treatment for two painful weeks. Desperate, he finally called an ambulance to take him on the long journey to Jerusalem. But soldiers at one of the checkpoints turned the ambulance back. “By then my body was swollen all over,” Awes told me. “It was harder and harder to breathe. I was looking death in the face.” He weighed 250 pounds—30 more than normal—because of all the fluid waste retained in his body.

Then, showing the everyday perseverance that life requires in Palestine, a friend carried Awes on his back over the hills to a rendezvous with a taxi summoned from Jerusalem. The dialysis unit at the Lutheran World Federation’s Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem was treating 20 patients a day, nearly double its normal load. Awes was just one more.

For Awes, a shopkeeper, the crisis costs time, money and health. “The three-hour taxi ride is about \$50 each time, and it makes me very tired,” Awes said. “My wife has to stay home to keep our small shop open and look after our young daughter.” To help her and to save money Awes makes the trip to Jerusalem only once a week.

He arrives each time swollen and discolored. The infrequency of his treatments are tempting fate.

The Lutheran World Federation also has five village clinics in the West Bank. As the policies of occupation have hardened, these primary health centers provide the only health care available to 1,000 patients per week. A routine visit to one of them goes like this: A doctor and nurse park their van at a gas station on a freeway used by settlers and other Israelis. Leaving a letter of explanation on the dashboard, they breach occupation regulations and cross the boulders that restrict Palestinian access to the freeway, then hike down a path to a village taxi waiting below.

In a typical half-day visit to the West Bank village of Beit Liria recently the doctor saw 79 patients. Whether the patient is a newborn, a heart attack victim or a cancer sufferer, each consultation can last only a few minutes. The 15,000 inhabitants of the village have been living isolated inside a "military area" for eight months.

Providing mental health care presents even greater challenges. Trauma, rehabilitation and vocational counselors supported by Lutheran World Relief have joined forces with other caregivers to cope with the rise in caseloads. In Jenin a counselor tells me that more and more youth are suicide-prone. "Suicide bombers?" I ask. "No," he says emphatically, "just suicide." Even some of the brightest students see suicide as a fitting epitaph for a hopeless life. His words stay with me at the town's "ground zero," where fierce resistance in a refugee neighborhood was smashed by rockets and armored bulldozers.

A "refugee" in Jenin is someone from 58 villages conquered by Israel in 1948. Now, 54 despairing years later, some of the grandsons and granddaughters of these refugees, still living in the poverty of the camp, have reportedly gone beyond suicide to suicide bombing. The messages these suicide bombers leave behind chill one's blood. Explosives wired to desperate hearts, and the carnage then visited on others, are sweeping indictments of every party to the conflict, especially of those whose own tactics favor explosives and disregard the human heart.

Minutes from Jenin one finds oneself in the beautiful Galilee. It was green and blooming in springtime when I was there. Every field and flower declares this a land of promise. This too is evidence. Peace is possible, even in Jenin.

Peace will come through deeds that give life and that deal in truth. For example, if a provisional state of Palestine is declared, Israeli settlements and other forms of

occupation will have to be dismantled just as quickly as Palestinian militancy. Without honest reciprocity, the bestowal of statehood will be little more than a pretext for maintaining the “matrix of control.”

A balance also must be found between the forces that influence America’s government. At its last national convention the largest political-action committee for Israel welcomed 50 U.S. senators and 100 representatives. The various groups that lobby for justice for both Israel and Palestine are scarcely noticed. If a just peace for Israel and Palestine could find even one active supporter among every thousand of America’s Christians, Muslims and Jews, Bethlehem’s angel chorus would have good reason to sing again.

Meanwhile, in Bethlehem and other places, the church is standing with the weak and seeking peace. Most of the peacemakers are Palestinians. In his 28th day under curfew Mitri Raheb, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, was still gracious toward his assailants. He and others like him ask Americans for prayers and for letters to Congress.

Outsiders work for peace as well. Esker Sindby, a medical student from Denmark, rides along to village clinics because Israeli soldiers behave differently when Palestinian staff are accompanied by people from other countries. He is one of a small team of “ecumenical accompaniers.” Sandra Olewine, a U.S. Methodist minister, spent April under siege in Bethlehem. She shared her neighbors’ suffering and described in vivid e-mails the F-16 strikes across the street. She is one of many foreign church workers who believe the Holy Land can nourish two peoples and three faiths.

Craig Kippels, an American hospital administrator, uses his professional skills to support the Palestinian leaders and staff at Augusta Victoria Hospital. He, his family and many like them work stressful years in institutions that serve those in need. Daniel Seidemann, an Israeli lawyer, defends land and property rights for Palestinians and NGOs in East Jerusalem. He is arguing the multimillion-dollar tax case that hangs over the LWF hospital there, a case that threatens Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Swedish and ecumenical service agencies as well. All of these people, and many more, are needed now and for the foreseeable future. Injustice is gaining ground. Only deeds of love and truth will bring peace.