

The power of good will

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

On this year's Israeli Independence Day, Gideon Samet wrote in a column for the Jerusalem newspaper *Ha'aretz* that as long as Israel occupies the West Bank and Gaza, it will never freely celebrate its own independence. "In order to achieve true independence, there is no escaping [Palestinian] independence."

Will Israel's military occupation end before the next independence day celebration? After a recent interview with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, editors of *Ha'aretz* concluded: not under a Sharon government. Comments made by Sharon led the newspaper to observe, "Israel is no longer seeking peace, neither immediately, nor in the foreseeable future." Sharon was quoted as saying, "I don't think we have to put forward such a pretentious goal."

Adds Samet: "As he says about himself proudly, Sharon has not changed. He still sees his destiny in Israel's history as thwarting the ambition of the Palestinian people to establish a viable state alongside the State of Israel. The most he is ready to grant the neighboring nation—and that unwillingly and only because his predecessors signed agreements committing Israel to doing so—is truncated enclaves of humiliatingly circumscribed independence."

Other voices are less pessimistic. Palestinian-American author Souad Dajani identifies historic patterns to indicate that leaders like Sharon can be forced to change through peaceful resistance, pointing to the dramatic shifts in firmly entrenched social structures that followed the American civil rights movement and the black South African struggle against apartheid.

In an essay in *Remembering Deir Yassin*, Dajani acknowledges that Palestinians cannot possibly win a military victory against Israel, but they can change the power structures of Israeli oppression if they "include and encompass rather than exclude and marginalize" those who oppress them. Dajani argues that entrenched power can be overturned if those who are oppressed can "amass a following, where people are carried along by a vision of a better future to replace the past."

I was reminded recently of the white southern church women from my childhood who opposed segregation long before it became acceptable to do so. A group of 30 Israeli Jewish women, members of Machsom (Checkpoint) Watch, have begun a program to monitor the conduct of Israeli soldiers who serve at army checkpoints. According to a recent report in *Ha'aretz* titled "Checkpoint Charlie's Angels," the women set themselves up as observers at checkpoints around Jerusalem to "discourage beatings, verbal and physical humiliation, confiscation of identity cards without due cause, and the obstruction of emergency medical assistance."

This hopeful sign of good will among Israelis toward Palestinians was begun earlier this year because of the concern "that many of the Israeli Defense Forces soldiers who man the various checkpoints in the West Bank do not see the Palestinians as equals."

"We see examples of humiliation [of Palestinians] on an almost daily basis," says Adi Kuntsman, one of the cofounders of Machsom. "People have their IDs taken from them for checks . . . sometimes waiting an hour or two to get them back. At other times, they will be told to collect their IDs from the civil administration, or an army base." She has seen people forced to stand with their hands in the air and their faces to the wall, or forced to sit in the baking sun or the rain.

The women behind this initiative are accumulating evidence about the operation of the checkpoints to send to other Israeli human rights groups, documenting what they feel is a direct link between the abuses they document and "a tendency within Israeli society to regard Palestinians as less than human."

According to one of the observers, soldiers at the checkpoints assume that the problems of Palestinians "are not really so bad; their illness is not so serious, their families are not suffering. . . . They can stand, it's fine, they can sit in the rain, never mind that they are old, never mind that they want to go home . . . their time doesn't have value; their families don't have value." Because such sentiments toward Palestinians seem rife in Israel, many soldiers don't feel they're really doing something wrong.

American journalist Amy Wilentz has written a novel, *Martyrs' Crossing*, that describes the aftermath of the death of Palestinian child Ibrahim Hajimi at an Israeli checkpoint. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Wilentz says that her work of fiction is being repeated in actual events in Palestine:

Ibrahim [in Wilentz's novel] is a conflation of many Palestinian babies who have been born, suffered or died at checkpoints for no defensible reason. No matter what the situation on the ground, there can have been no reason for the Israelis to have delayed a diabetic in a potentially fatal episode. The Israelis even claim that they do not delay such people, but they do.

Thousands of Palestinian children have been shot, killed, wounded or left to die at checkpoints and in the streets of Gaza and the West Bank, not because Israeli soldiers are cruel, but because they carry out orders from a government that continues to dehumanize Palestinians in a desperate effort to cling to its own power to oppress.