

Palestinian bantustans

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

Palestinians recognize the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks for what they are: the mopping-up process following a power struggle that Israel won. The spoils of victory are evident in the satellite photographs Jad Isaac recently projected for a group of visiting journalists.

Isaac, who directs a Palestinian research institute, can barely conceal his anger as he points to maps that show how Israel has established permanent control over those sections of Gaza that have the best water supply and best soil. Eight thousand Israeli settlers live on 20 percent of the land in Gaza. They are protected by the Israeli army and separated by checkpoints and bypass roads from the 1.2 million Palestinians who live on the rest of the land. (Israel also controls almost half of the Gaza land on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.)

Isaac's studies reveal an Israeli master plan carried forward over many decades under both Labor and Likud governments, culminating in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Weakened by his disastrous support for Saddam Hussein in the gulf war, Yasir Arafat agreed to a plan that provides a few enclaves on which he can establish his state. Under the accords, Israel has been able to redeploy its military forces out of the cities, villages and refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank, leaving Arafat's security forces to police the Palestinians.

Those same forces also keep tight control over Arafat's political opposition. In late November nine Palestinians who signed a manifesto denouncing corruption in the Palestinian Authority were arrested and detained without being charged. Among those arrested were intellectual leaders and several longtime activists against Israeli occupation. According to several of the Israeli peace activists with whom we spoke, Israelis are relieved to have Arafat playing the role of security boss in these areas. Now Israelis don't have to see television footage of their sons and husbands beating up Palestinian women and children.

Israel's plan to make Arafat the new sheriff started the day after the Oslo Accords were signed on September 25, 1993. According to British journalist Graham Usher,

the Israel Defense Force immediately launched an operation in Gaza which ended "with 17 houses destroyed, 16 arrested and the summary execution of two Hamas activists." Asked if the operation was in the spirit of Oslo, the IDF chief of staff, Ehud Barak, responded, "The more terrorists are arrested before the IDF pullout, the easier should be the task of the new Gaza [i.e., Palestinian] police." Ehud Barak is now prime minister of Israel.

Palestinians like Muna Hamzeh-Muhaisen, who has lived in the Dheisheh refugee camp outside of Bethlehem since 1989, have little enthusiasm for a Palestinian state which would be a collection of segregated bantustans—to use the South African term freely used by Palestinians. We talked with Hamzeh-Muhaisen at the camp, on a porch in front of a United Nations medical clinic. She told us she was born in Jerusalem, but her family fled to Jordan just before the 1967 war. She then moved to the U.S. and became a U.S. citizen. But she was inspired by the Palestinian uprising (intifada) in the 1980s, and she returned to the West Bank, settling in Beit Jala.

During the intifada, said Hamzeh-Muhaisen, "I knew I was where I should be. One day in Bethlehem I saw a 12-year-old boy shot dead, the first person I knew who was killed. I had just met him the day before. His death had a tremendous impact on me. His name was Milad Shaheen. After that I knew I had to stay here.

"There were demonstrations here all the time. I saw how the people responded, and I envied them their courage and the way they faced danger. I met my husband, who was active in the politics of that time. We got married and have lived here since. Of course there are days when sometimes I wish I could be back in the States [where she earned a college degree, with a major in journalism]. But [the refugee camp] teaches you values. I had not always put much emphasis on family, but here there is a tremendous family spirit all around me."

We first encountered Hamzeh-Muhaisen through her work on the Internet. She had posted an account of a shooting at the Israeli checkpoint at Rachel's Tomb. The wire services had reported the official Israeli version of the event: an Israeli sniper killed a Palestinian who had stabbed an Israeli soldier. But Hamzeh-Muhaisen reported that the man killed was known to the soldiers, and that the shooter immediately realized that the shooting was a mistake.

Hamzeh-Muhaisen is working with Bir Zeit University on "Across Borders," a program that links refugee to the outside world through the Internet. The program's goal is to

carry information on camp history, post news stories and provide camp residents with access to e-mail.

Muna Hamzeh-Muhaisen was invited by some of her Israeli friends to get away from the camp for a day at the beach. With their Israeli license plates, her friends could move her easily through border checkpoints. But the offer was an affront to her dignity. She prefers to stay in her segregated enclave and continue her work for justice for the Palestinians.