

# Behind the curtain

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

A climactic moment in *The Wizard of Oz* is when Toto pulls aside the green curtain, and exposes a man turning levers which he had been using to fool people into thinking he was a wizard. An angry Dorothy shouts, "You are a very bad man." To which the wizard replies, "No, my dear, I am a very good man; I am just a very bad wizard." Israelis and their leaders may be good people, and so far they have been pretty skillful wizards in dealing with Palestinians. But one day the curtain that hides their strategy will be fully pulled away and they will be revealed as a government and a people who, in their quest for national security, have violated the human rights of an entire population.

Yasir Arafat is expected in mid-February to sign principles of agreement codifying the 1993 Oslo Accords. The government of Israel is demanding his signature, and the United States is applying pressure to make sure he signs—a double dose of political muscle that is shoving Arafat into a deal that benefits Israel and Clinton, but not the Palestinians.

As I was reminded again during a recent week-long trip, the Palestinian population remains trapped in designated areas. In the West Bank and Gaza a combined population of 3 million cannot enter Jerusalem for any reason, social, medical, recreational or religious, without a difficult-to-obtain military permit, because of permanent border closures agreed to in the Oslo Accords.

According to a Palestinian official I met at the Orient House (unofficial Palestinian headquarters in East Jerusalem), before the closure the number of patients served annually at Maqased Hospital in East Jerusalem was 1,200,000. Since the closure, that number has dropped by 1 million. Augusta Victoria, the Lutheran World Federation hospital on Mount Scopus, has experienced a similar decline, forcing Palestinians to use inferior medical services in the West Bank.

The daughter of a retired Anglican pastor in Ramallah told me that her father refuses to dignify the Israeli system by asking for the required permit to travel to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, West Jerusalem citizens move easily in and out of East Jerusalem. Thus,

a Christian pastor born in Jerusalem is barred from the city, while new Russian Jewish immigrants have complete access.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has made many peaceful noises since he took office. But what he has said is not what he has done. He promised to stop house demolitions, but three houses were demolished during my recent trip to the area. House demolitions are now so routine in the area that the Israel public hardly notices when the homes of Palestinians are crushed by bulldozers with little or no warning, leaving behind scattered toys and bent bed frames.

Israeli peace activist Jeff Halper, a self-described Israeli '60s liberal who grew up in Minnesota, directs an Israeli group resisting demolitions, racing to sites to greet bulldozers as they arrive. He gets injunctions that delay demolitions for a short time, but rarely can they be completely stopped.

Halper, who will be on an AFSC-sponsored speaking tour in the United States in February, says the demolitions are part of what he terms a matrix of control, creating "functional apartheid." House demolitions are part of this matrix, designed to eliminate Palestinian homes too close to settlements or in the path of bypass roads, or anywhere in East Jerusalem, where Israel is trying to create a Jewish majority. Thanks to expanded settlements, which Barak has also not curtailed, Israel is nearing that majority; latest count: 200,000 Palestinians to 170,000 Jews.

Here is where Israel's wizardry comes into play. Tell the world, an eager-to-believe Bill Clinton and a pro-Israeli Congress that Israel wants Palestine to be a viable state, so long as Israel remains secure. To accomplish this goal, Barak gives Arafat only that land which Israel doesn't want because it is either filled with Palestinians, is inferior for further development, or could be the site for future industrial (read, potential waste problems from aluminum and chemical factories) development.

The permanent confinement of a population into bantustans virtually guarantees that Israel, like the U.S. in Vietnam and the whites of South Africa, will have to face a slowly awakening world opinion that an injustice has been imposed on an entire population. Barak has turned over the most onerous part of the Israeli occupation to Arafat: military control of the Palestinian cities. In return for doing Israel's security dirty work within his own territory, Arafat is able to have his own state and—not inconsequentially—financially benefit members of his Fatah party.

LAW, a Palestinian Human Rights organization, documents extensive human rights violations by the Palestine Authority security forces. The targets are the militant Hamas Islamic members, but any Arafat political opponent is also a target. It is difficult to believe that Palestinians will long suffer these indignities fostered on them by their own leaders.

Closed borders, military road checkpoints and the pass system will keep Palestinians contained in their own 'land' for a time, but one day an aroused world opinion will tear down the curtain of deception and reveal what the wizard was really doing.