

Candid reporting

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [Feb 23, 2000](#) issue

If you want to correctly interpret the news, stop assuming that the mainstream media know it all; pay attention instead to voices speaking quietly over in the corner. Read, for example, people like Amira Hass, a Jewish reporter who covers the West Bank and Gaza for *Ha'aretz*, a Jerusalem newspaper. The story of how she became the Palestinian correspondent for *Ha'aretz* is described in her book *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Siege*, which records her three years as a journalist living in Gaza from 1993 to 1996.

"I became the paper's correspondent in the [Gaza] Strip, covering the last few months of direct Israeli occupation and the transfer of authority. I decided to make my home in Gaza, at first moving from one friend's house to another's until I rented an apartment in Gaza City." This is an unusual step for a Jewish woman.

But Hass is not easily deterred. Her parents were survivors of the Holocaust, and provided her with a legacy of resisting injustice by speaking out and fighting back. As a child, her mother was traveling on a cattle car bound for the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp when she saw a group of German women watching as she went by. Hass's mother noted their "curious but indifferent stares." For Hass, these women became "a loathsome symbol of watching from the sidelines." The memory convinced her that she would never be a bystander.

A friend in Tel Aviv asked Hass what her (Palestinian) friends would do if militants found out that a Jewish woman was staying with them. Hass hadn't thought about the possibility of trouble. "None of my friends was concerned; they opened their homes to me freely, whether in the Rafah refugee camp or in al-Shatti camp. . . . I learned to see Gaza through the eyes of its people, not through the windshield of an army jeep or in the interrogation rooms of the Shabak, the Israeli security service."

Hass now lives in Ramallah in the West Bank, a Palestinian town north of Jerusalem, where she continues her work as a *Ha'aretz* correspondent, and where I met her during a recent trip into the West Bank. Since that meeting I have been a regular reader of her *Ha'aretz* articles (available on the Internet), the most recent of which is

a warning that the “good news” we will be hearing about Yasir Arafat’s agreement with Israeli Prime Minister Yehud Barak offers little that is good for the Palestinians.

Hass writes: “The Israeli proposal to transfer a few of the northern Palestinian ‘neighborhoods’ of Jerusalem to Palestinian civil control could appear to be part of the positive dynamic characterizing the entire diplomatic process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.” By turning over 17,500 acres of Jerusalem and environs that Israel annexed in 1967 to Arafat’s civil government, Israel appears to be accommodating, while the Palestinians are praised for compromising.

Hass reports that while Israel retains military control over those 17,500 acres, the move will save money for Israel, since its finance ministry will not have to carry the burden of child allowances, medical insurance and free education for Palestinians. In Israel’s view, 30 years of intentional discrimination regarding employment, livelihood and housing opportunities, as well as the flight of much of the Jerusalem middle class to the West Bank or abroad, leaves too many Palestinians in the city, some of whom have become “an impoverished population of welfare recipients living in Third World conditions. The solution: The Palestinian Authority can bear the economic and human responsibility of this policy.”

This latest agreement could also provide Arafat with a face-saving gesture that would allow him to have domestic control over the village of Abu Dis, which he could then rename Al Quds (Arabic for “Jerusalem”), a shift in nomenclature which would permit Arafat to build his capital in “Jerusalem” (where construction of a parliament building has already begun). This small concession has met strong resistance among the conservative members of Barak’s cabinet, which would explain why Barak tentatively took Abu Dis out of the agreement. Angry over this decision, Arafat left the talks, and called for further U.S. pressure on Barak.

Of course, Abu Dis—which would still be under Israeli military control—is a small price to pay for an agreement which calls for, as Hass has written, “the de jure if not de facto Israeli annexation of the giant settlements of Ma’aleh Adumin and Givat Ze’ev, among others,” officially expanding Jerusalem’s city limits eastward.

Current news stories might lead one to assume that the negotiations are good for both Israel and Palestine. But according to Hass, this is not an equal-opportunity negotiation: “The expansion of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories during the Oslo years reveal[s] that Israel continued to consider the land as a resource for Jews alone: a Palestinian presence is tolerated but Palestinian needs have no claim. .

. . And [this has continued] under the watchful eye of the Oslo Accords, which explicitly upheld Israel's position as the sovereign power." Such candor is rare in American media; but you will find it in the writing of Amira Hass.