



The Final Encirclement of a City?

The most recent planning developments in Jerusalem, summarized in this journal by Jeff Halper's recent article "The three Jerusalems" (JQF 15), and Nazmi Jubeh's "The Ghettoization of Arab Jerusalem" (JQF 16, Winter 2002), signal that the possibility of solving the problem of the city's future through a shared partnership, so far a principle feature of peace negotiations, may be in need of radical rethinking.

The essence of these developments can be highlighted through the following steps undertaken by the government led by Ariel Sharon, in full cooperation with the Jerusalem municipality:

- The physical detachment of the city from its Palestinian hinterlands in the West Bank through the beefing up of existing settlements along the outer ring road.

- The segregation of Arab villages and townships caught inside the ring road from each other and from physical continuity with other Palestinian neighborhoods through a grid of crisscrossing highways linking the existing Jewish settlements with a high-speed road system used by Israelis only.

- The closing of "loopholes" for Palestinian development to Jerusalem's east and south, areas that constituted the major hope for a future Palestinian state, with continuity at its waistline and linking Bethlehem-Beit Sahour conurbation with the Ramallah-Beit Hanina conurbation. This sealing-off is now being accomplished through the expansion of Ma'aleh Adumim colony to the east - linking it to the Jerusalem municipal boundaries - and the speedy consolidation of Jabal Abu Ghneim settlement south of Bethlehem. We should recall that early protests several years ago against the building of Har Homa on confiscated land were countered by statements to the effect that these new settlements were meant to serve Arab and Jewish residents alike. Today, there is not even a symbolic gesture towards Arab presence; these are pure Jewish suburban ghettos.

- The consolidation of existing settlements north of the city in the Binyamin Bloc and the Giv'on Bloc, as well as the expansion and consolidation of the Etzion Bloc to the south in the form of encouraging settlers to fill empty apartments through material inducements (easy loans and credits, in addition to outright grants), will block the natural growth of the greater Ramallah-Bireh area, and greater Bethlehem-Beit Sahur and Beit Jala conurbation.

Thus these colonial schemes not only deal a decisive blow to the possibility for Palestinian communities' physical contiguity, but also suppress the possibilities for their future natural growth.

To be sure, these schemes around Jerusalem (beefing up, expansion, consolidation and encirclement) have been in the offing for several years. Their cumulative effects have built into a critical mass that is bound to redefine the future relationship between Palestinians and Israelis. What is new here is the use of the current international crisis over Iraq, and the American obsession with global terrorism, as a smokescreen to cover the final stages of a grand scheme of encirclement that will deal the deathblow to the peace process.

Does this mean that we have reached the point of no return in the process of demographic encirclement? If so, what is the alternative to the policy of separate sovereignties that has so far guided peace forces on both sides of the ethnic divide for the last ten years? This will be the central question facing the immediate future of the city.