# Flexible Frontiers:

## What Future for Bethlehem Apart from Jerusalem?[1]

Ahmad El-Atrash

## Introduction

Bethlehem, like Jerusalem, is considered a sacred city by all three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The town long enjoyed growth and development due to maintaining an organic connection with Jerusalem, until the Israeli occupation of the rest of Palestine, including East Jerusalem, began in 1967. Ever since, Bethlehem, along with its neighboring towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour (henceforth referred to collectively as the Bethlehem area) has been experiencing constantly changing flexible frontiers, where demography shapes geography.[2] The long-established socio-cultural, economic, and above all spiritual lifelines between the Bethlehem region and Jerusalem were undermined by the many Israeli geopolitical constructs, such as the Israeli settlements and the Segregation Wall, that infiltrate and dissect the urban fabric of the Bethlehem area, severing it from Jerusalem. Such facts on the ground are affecting every aspect of Palestinian life, including the right of freedom of movement and other associated rights, such as the right to worship, and the right to education.

This paper presents a re-reading of the wanton changes in the administrative and political boundaries of Jerusalem from the perspective of the historically dependent and neighboring Palestinian towns of the Bethlehem area. The role of successive ruling powers over the Bethlehem area in modern history is also analyzed in a manner that highlights the associated urban reverberations and their repercussions. These are seen as intensifying difficult urban conditions that are the cause of the present failure in sustaining the natural and built environment of the Bethlehem area and city-region at large.

The many "statutory" planning practices

that have affected the historic relationship between Jerusalem and the Bethlehem area could be seen as an accumulation of decrees, laws, and by-laws legislated by successive ruling powers. These were the Ottoman Turks (1516-1917); the British Mandate (1918-1948); the Jordanian Administration (1948-1967); the Israeli Military Occupation (1967-1993); and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) (1993 to the present). Following is a brief discussion of the changes made to the boundaries that justifies characterizing them as flexible frontiers – borders modified by each successive power to suit different colonial goals, whether involving actual colonies or not.

## "Statutory" Planning and the Changing Boundaries of Bethlehem

Before any exposition of the many "statutory" planning practices that resulted in shaping the spatial settings of the Bethlehem area and its relation to Jerusalem, it is important to remind ourselves of the concept of *tradition*. Tradition is a dynamic concept that implies a relation between the past and the present; the accumulation of decisions that are constantly amended and reformed upon experience. Conceptually, "tradition implies immutability, yet it is relentlessly under revision."[3] Bearing this in mind, and starting with the Ottomans as the initiators of the prevailing "statutory" planning legacy, the ruling groups negotiated an ever-changing relationship with the past of the Ottoman polity, as well as the "acquired" past of conquered territories. Then as now, material remains from the past, "buildings or objects," most importantly those of religious significance were crucial sites for the articulation of such a relationship. Thus the Bethlehem area was regarded as part of Jerusalem, since Bethlehem contains many religious sites of great spiritual value. As such, the early Ottoman administration, in collaboration with local entrepreneurs and merchants, propelled the restoration and repair of Palestinian towns, especially Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In fact, law and order were restored, and consequently, there was a regular increase in population and an economic boom ensued.[4] Administratively, the first subdivisions for Greater Syria came during Ottoman rule, when the land of Palestine was divided into three districts[5] (a district was called *sanjaq* in Turkish and *liwa'* in Arabic). These were Nablus, Acre, and Jerusalem. Following this subdivision, Bethlehem was administratively part of the Jerusalem district that spanned an area of 1,560 km[2].

The next era was the British Mandate (1918-1948). While it is true that Britain only assumed the mandate over Palestine from the League of Nations in 1922, the British had already imposed their legal system in 1918, when their military administration took on full responsibility for governing the land. As is the case with the Ottoman legacy, some of the laws from that period remain in force today.[6] Nevertheless, Palestine was then divided into sixteen districts, each under a military government, with most of the West Bank falling into two district plans, namely the District Plan for Jerusalem (RJ-5) of 1942, and the District Plan for Samaria (Nablus) (S-15) of 1948. The Bethlehem city-region was part of the RJ-5 plan. These Mandate plans took no account whatever of Palestinian needs, and provided virtually no opportunity for spatial development.[7] It is important
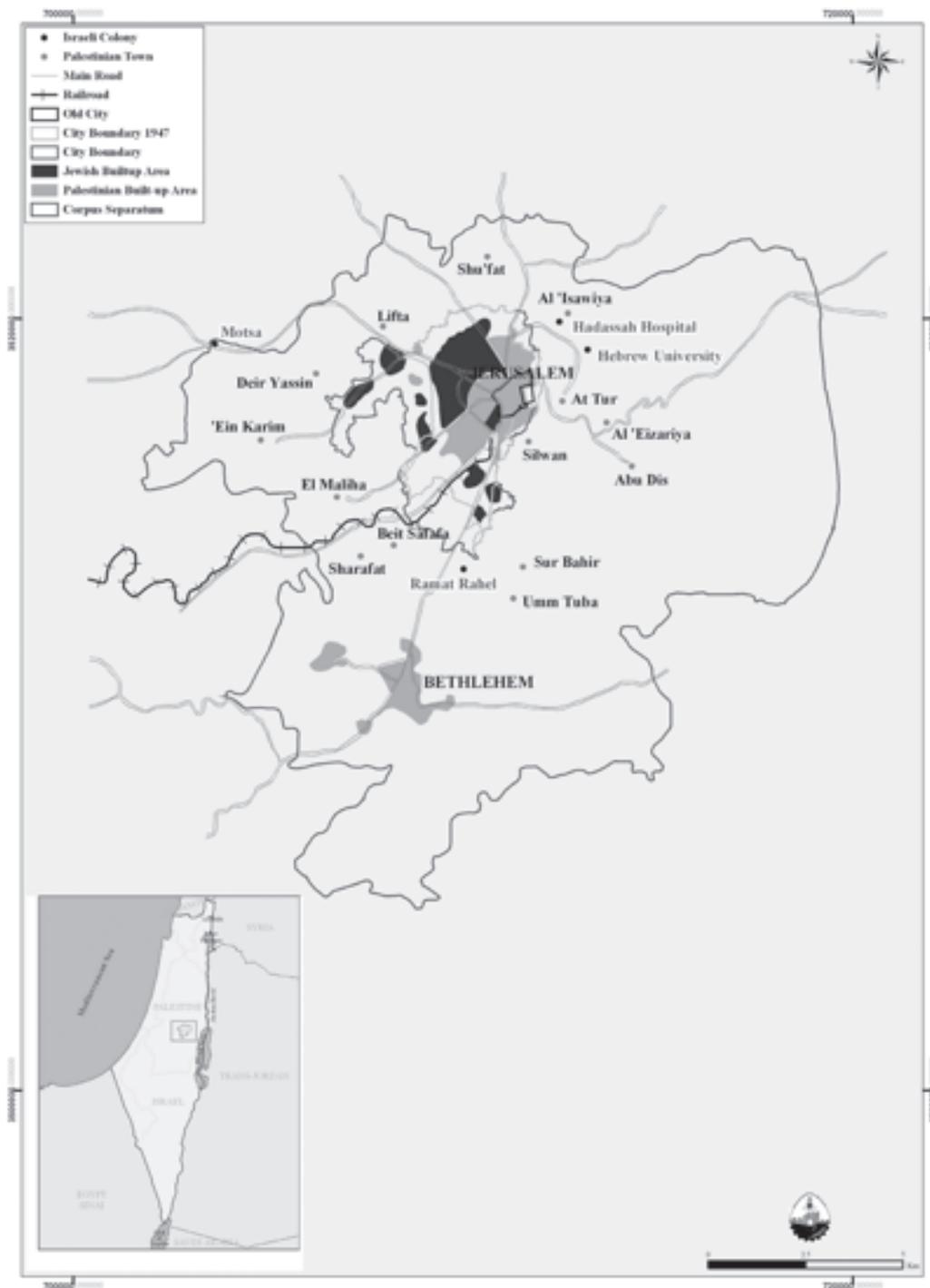
Figure 1: Corpus Separatum – Bethlehem as Part of Jerusalem under the UN Partition Plan. *Source: ARIJ.*

to mention that before the end of the British Mandate era, specifically in 1947, the UN Partition Plan envisaged Bethlehem and Jerusalem as belonging to neither of the proposed Arab and Jewish states, but placed them in a *Corpus Separatum* (separated body) under international trusteeship due to their shared religious importance. The *Corpus Separatum* spanned an area of 186 km$^2$ (Figure 1).

The war of 1948 had many political and administrative repercussions. Politically, the Bethlehem area lost part of its land, and as a result of the exodus of more than 900,000 Palestinians, three refugee camps, Duheisha, Ayda, and Beit Jibrin (Al-Aza), were established in and around Bethlehem area to accommodate some of the Palestinian refugees. Administratively, the Gaza Strip came under Egyptian rule, while the West Bank became part of Jordan and remained so until 1967. Since the unification between the West Bank and East Bank in 1950 the common parliament passed much legislation, most of which remains in force. At the time of Jordanian rule over the West Bank new administrative boundaries for the Palestinian districts came into effect, with the West Bank now divided into eleven sub-districts (governorates). For the first time the Bethlehem city-region had an independent and separate administrative body, which nevertheless remained a sub-district within the Jerusalem District. This administrative boundary for the Bethlehem city-region or governorate is still in effect to date and covers an area of 608 km$^2$.

Following the war of 1967, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, illegally annexing it to Israel. As a result, Israel redrew the administrative boundaries of the Palestinian city-regions and expanded the Jerusalem municipal boundary. Subsequently Israel started to construct Jewish settlements on the stolen lands.

The new boundary for the Israeli Jerusalem municipality was delineated according to a demographic purpose: to create geographic integrity and demographic superiority favoring Jews in Jerusalem. The new municipal boundary "was determined according to strategic-demographic policy and not according to pure planning considerations. The interest of this policy was to include within the city ridges and sites which provided strategic control of the city and the roads leading to it, along with large additional territories containing a minimum Arab population."[8]

To achieve this goal, the expansion of Jerusalem's municipal boundaries excluded the inhabitants of the northern densely populated Palestinian residential areas, but not the land. Among these communities were Beit Iksa and Bir Nabala. By the same token, the sparsely populated Palestinian lands in the south (mainly in the Bethlehem area) were also included, but not the inhabitants. As a corollary to this expansion, the Bethlehem city-region lost 18,048 dunams of its land, of which 6,844 dunams belonged to the village boundary of the Bethlehem area; a total of 2,487 dunams of Bethlehem city's lands were confiscated due to the expansion (roughly 8 percent of the city's total lands); while Beit Jala lost 3,147 dunams (22 percent of the city's total area); and Beit Sahour lost a total of 1,210 dunams (17 percent of the city's total area)[9] (Figure 2). Until the 1988 Jordanian disengagement, Bethlehem remained partly under Jordanian administration.

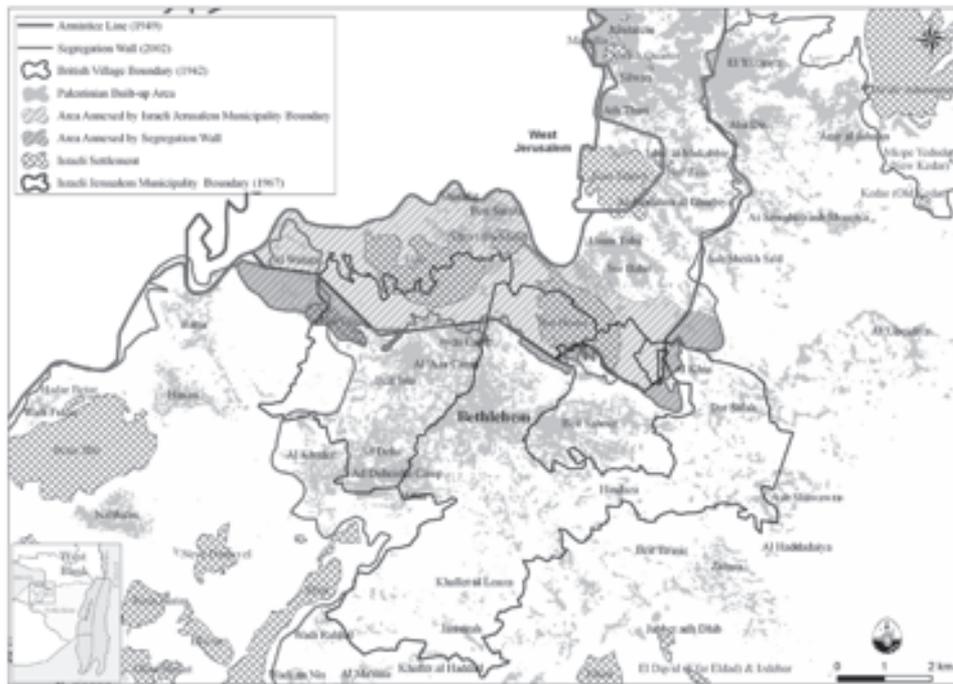With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the PNA assumed partial responsibility

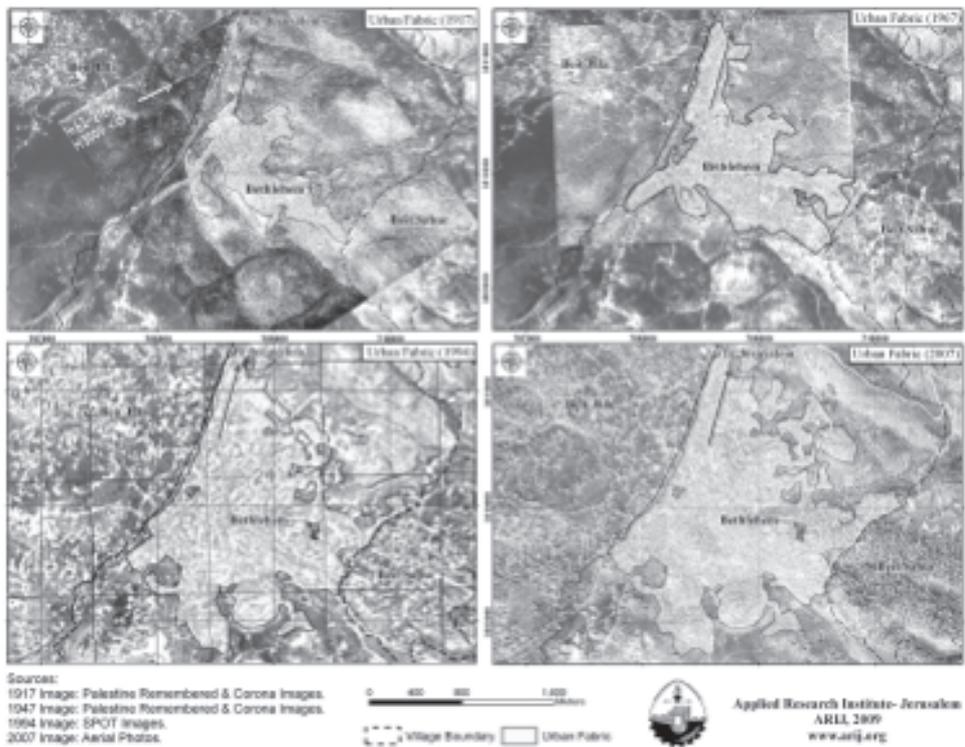Figure 2: Land Confiscated from the Bethlehem Area Village Boundary. *Source: ARIJ.*



Figure 3: Detaching Bethlehem from Jerusalem (1917-2007).[13] *Source: ARIJ.*

for Palestinian territory, and adopted the same administrative arrangements in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where sixteen city-regions are demarcated, five in the Gaza Strip and eleven in the West Bank. At that time, Israel imposed a general closure on the West Bank, whereby West Bank ID holders, including residents of Bethlehem, needed special permits to enter East Jerusalem and Israel. According to the Oslo II Interim Agreement of September 1995,[10] the Bethlehem city-region, like the West Bank, was divided into three zones, namely: Areas A, B, and C.

In 2002, Israel started unilaterally building a Segregation Wall to further separate the West Bank from East Jerusalem and annex Israeli block settlements, namely Ma'ale Adumim, Giv'at Ze'ev, and Gush Etzion, to Israel. The Segregation Wall started first at Rachel's Tomb north of Bethlehem city with Jerusalem's border. The planned trajectory of the Wall would intrude approximately ten kilometers into the Bethlehem city-region, running a total length of 78 kilometers and isolating approximately 161 km$^2$ (i.e. 26 percent of the Bethlehem city-region) of land and water resources, thus putting Bethlehem's inhabitants in limbo.[11] It is worth mentioning that upon the completion of the Segregation Wall, Beit Jala, for instance, will have lost about 46 percent of its land in the course of the last four decades of the prolonged Israeli occupation (Figure 2).

To this end, the prevailing administrative legacy in Jerusalem and its environs has a complex pedigree, resulting from the successive military and administrative regimes that ruled over Palestine. The Bethlehem area is an excellent example of this.

## Human Warehousing – Overcrowding

From this dismal evolution of spatial settings the urban morphology of the Bethlehem area emerges as sprawling and disjointed. It should be emphasized that the linear and radial trajectories of the urban fabric growth in the Bethlehem area radically changed after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank territory and East Jerusalem in 1967. The Bethlehem area used to be considered part of suburban Jerusalem, until it was severed and isolated, ultimately directing the urban growth away from Jerusalem, the city of cities and the center of life for Palestinians at that time (Figure 3).

Due to the current and charged geopolitical context, more than 94 percent of Bethlehem's population live in less than 14 percent (classified as areas A and B) of the total area of the city-region that falls under the Palestinian planning jurisdiction,[12] whereas the remaining area (classified as area C) is totally appropriated and controlled by the Israeli army, through various devices including but not limited to illegal Israeli settlements, outposts, by-pass roads, and the Segregation Wall.

Among the effects of the last four decades of Israeli occupation is that Palestinian sovereignty over land in the Bethlehem area has drastically decreased, as opposed to a corresponding increase in the urbanizing trend termed "human warehousing,"[14] entailing the overcrowding of parts of Palestinian cities, especially in East Jerusalem and the Bethlehem area. Using the gross population density (population per gross area) in the Bethlehem area as a quantitative indicator reveals that this density has exponentially

increased sevenfold over the four decades between 1967 and 2007.[15]

The current gross population density of the Bethlehem area of 3,829 capita/km² is relatively high when compared to other Palestinian cities, and to those of the West Bank and the Palestinian territory, which reached 422 capita/km² and 635 capita/km² in 2008, respectively,[16] but remains lower than the gross population density of East Jerusalem, now at 4,491 capita/km². In this context, it is anticipated that the gross population density of the Bethlehem area will increase, as the rate of population growth is high while access to open land is limited in and around Jerusalem. Assuming that Israel will continue confiscating land and constructing the Segregation Wall, the gross urban population density in the Bethlehem area is projected to rise to 5,135 capita/km² by the year 2015,[17] keeping in mind that the gross population density in the West Bank as a whole has increased by approximately 50 percent over the five years since the construction of the Segregation Wall began.[18]

Looking at Israeli population figures in the West Bank makes it quite clear that the illegal Israeli settlers, numbering 628,000 in 2011, constitute an ominous threat to Palestinian urban harmony generally. Israeli plans reveal that they aim to outnumber Palestinian communities in eight of the eleven West Bank city-regions, including the Bethlehem city-region.[19] Although the maximum expected expansion will be within the Jerusalem city-region, the Bethlehem city-region exhibits the highest Israeli net population density (population per built-up area) at 7,140 capita/km² in comparison to the other West Bank city-regions that have an average of 3,325 capita/km².[20]

## Conclusion: Bethlehem's Future Apart from Jerusalem

The age-old link between Jerusalem and Bethlehem has been almost totally severed as a result of predicaments in the form of Israeli settlements and the Segregation Wall, along with a host of other physical obstructions. It is quite clear that without a political resolution that would end the Israeli occupation and thus remove the host of physical obstructions, including the Segregation Wall and the negative influence of the Israeli settlements, the future of Bethlehem looks bleak. Likewise restricting access to the holy sites in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem increases the risk of aggravating religious divisions in an area that has historical and religious importance for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The key question here is whether there is any real possibility of the Bethlehem area to spatially develop in a viable and sustainable way as an indispensable part of Jerusalem. In answering this question it is important to highlight the fact that spatial planning in the geopolitical context of Bethlehem is organically connected to the claimed Palestinian capital of Jerusalem. As such, the future of Bethlehem must be rooted in both the past and present. From this perspective, a more detailed analysis of hard data on the current status of the Bethlehem area is needed in relation to two alternative options, namely, the 1947 *Corpus Separatum* (Figure 1), and the 1948 Village Boundary (Figure 2).

The current population of the 1947 *Corpus Separatum* is about 984,287, of whom 43 percent are Arab and 57 percent Jewish. The population in 1947/1948 was 205,000, of

whom 51percent were Arab and 49 percent Jewish, while the historic Jewish ownership at that time according to the survey of Palestine conducted by the British in 1947 was about 8.8 percent of the 186 km$^2$ comprising the *Corpus Separatum* total area. The current population distribution inside the *Corpus Separatum* area puts the net population density for Palestinians at 11,935 capita/km$^2$, whereas the Israeli net population density is 6,369 capita/km$^2$. In other words the current net population density for the Palestinians inside the *Corpus Separatum* area is almost twice that of the Israelis, indicating overcrowding in the Palestinian parts of the holy city, making it what is now called a human warehouse.

Likewise, the current population within the 1948 Village Boundary of the Bethlehem area is 187,125 capita, of whom 63 percent are Arab and 37 percent Jewish. The population in 1947/1948 reached only 19,626 capita, all Arabs, while the historic Jewish ownership at that time was about 3.1 percent of the 53 km$^2$ comprising the Village Boundary of the Bethlehem area. The current net population density for the illegal Israeli settlements of Gilo, Har Gilo, and Har Homa all within the Village Boundary of the Bethlehem area is 25,325 capita/km$^2$, whereas the net population density for Palestinian neighborhoods is 10,605 capita/km$^2$. This means that the current net population density for the Palestinians inside the Village Boundary of the Bethlehem area is less than four-tenths that of the Israelis.

This quantitative analysis of hard data shows that in both alternative options, whether the Bethlehem area is regarded as part of Jerusalem (*Corpus Separatum*) or not (Village Boundary), the prospect of future Palestinian spatial development is very greatly diminished. Even when the Arab population forms the majority, at 63 percent, in the alternative of the Village Boundary of the Bethlehem area, the net population density for Palestinians is less than four-tenths that of the Israeli settlers.

It is not, therefore, a question of whether Bethlehem can grow as an indispensable part of Jerusalem or not; rather it is a matter of recognizing that as long as the Israeli occupation continues sustainable spatial development for Bethlehem will be impossible to realize. The repercussions of the prolonged Israeli occupation have resulted in a complex model of colonialism. From one perspective, it has undermined the historical and socio-cultural relations between the Palestinian capital city of Jerusalem and the neighboring areas, such as in Bethlehem's case, and thus rendered it almost impossible for Bethlehem to grow as part of Jerusalem due to the total physical severance. From another perspective, as time passes, envisioning a sustainable spatial development for Bethlehem even alone and apart from Jerusalem is indeed a dim possibility, since the West Bank at large is geopolitically split into apartheid-like cantons.

In this regard, one should be candid in admitting that the current trend of spatial development would lead to unsustainable outcomes, and the carrying capacity, which could be callously dubbed in terms of land availability for future spatial development, would be stretched to the limit. It is a glaring fact that after almost two decades of peace negotiations with the Israelis there is no perceptible concrete development on the ground. Nevertheless there is nothing preventing Palestinians from developing a vision and devising apposite strategies for areas, such as those in Area C, that are made inaccessible by current Israeli geopolitical constructs. Unequivocally expressed, Palestinians should

not perceive "autonomy" as tantamount to "sovereignty," and should accordingly plan in a comprehensive way, if the Palestinian flagship project of "ending the occupation, building the state" is to become a reality or a Palestinian fact on the ground.

*Ahmad El-Atrash is a Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Spatial Planning in TU-Dortmund University, Germany. His research interests are sustainable development, urban environment management, strategic-geopolitics and spatial planning, and local governance reform within the Palestinian context.*

**Endnotes**

1   This paper was prepared within the ambit of the author's doctoral research under the supervision of Prof. Christa Reicher and Prof. Michael Wegener of TU-Dortmund University, Germany with financial and technical assistance from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARIJ), respectively. The author would also like to acknowledge Dr. Lubna Shaheen of Birzeit University, who is the local supervisor for this doctoral research. Special acknowledgment is due to Dr. Jad Isaac, Director General of ARIJ, and for colleagues at the GIS Department of ARIJ, especially Mr. Isaa Zboun, for their invaluable contribution and assistance in producing the maps and checking the calculations used in this paper. Finally, the author would like to thank the editorial board of JQ for their valuable feedback and support in the production of this publication.

2   The Zionist motto is to have "a land without a people for a people without a land." The Israeli planning apparatus has been dealing with Palestinian land and people on that basis, therefore they have been confiscating as much as possible of land containing as little as possible of indigenous Palestinians, or in spatial planning terms: "demography shapes geography."

3   F. Suraiya and I. Halil, *The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage: Politics, Society, and Economy* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, and VSP, 2004), 25.

4   H. Fattah, *Planning, Building and Populating Jerusalem in the Ottoman Period* (1999). www.jerusalemites.org/jerusalem/ottoman/7.htm. Accessed 10 November 2012.

5   Within the course of this paper the terms district, governorate, and city-region will be used interchangeably, nevertheless entailing the same administrative connotation.

6   S. Tamari, "City of Riffraff: Crowds, Public Space, and New Urban Sensibilities in War-Time Jerusalem, 1917-1921," in *City of Collision: Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism,* ed. P. Misselwitz and and T. Rieniets (Basel and Boston: Birkhäuser, 2006), 300-311. Tamari lists the main achievements of the Mandate era, most relevant to the scope of this paper are: the modernization of the land code and the taxation system; the creation of a legal corpus to replace (and supplement) the Ottoman code; the conduct of a national census (1922 and 1931), and the creation of the population registry, and finally an infrastructure of roads and communication system. All these are considered basic tools for a nascent spatial planning apparatus. At the same time, and ironically put, the British administration is remembered as the conscious instrument (through the Balfour Declaration) which laid the foundation for building the State of Israel in historic Palestine.

7   It should be borne in mind that during the British Mandate the central and northern parts of Palestine were divided into villages (the term village was also used for cities); the division was based on land ownership where village boundaries were delineated. This division was applicable to the Bethlehem area. See A. Coon, *Town Planning under Military Occupation: An Examination of the Law and Practice of Town Planning in the Occupied West Bank* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1992), 206.

8   S. E. Cohen, *The Politics of Planning: Israeli-Palestinian Competition for Control of Land in the Jerusalem Periphery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 78.

9   Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ), *GIS-Database*. Bethlehem, West Bank. http://www.arij.org/. Accessed 23 March 2013.

10  The West Bank was divided according to the Oslo interim accords of 1995 into three different areas. Area C falls under full Israeli occupation and amounts roughly to 60 percent of the West Bank. Area B, under the administrative control of the PNA and the security jurisdiction of Israeli occupation forces, covers 18 percent of the West Bank. Area A falls under full administrative and security jurisdiction of the PNA, and covers 17 percent of the West Bank. In the Jerusalem city-region the majority of land at 91.5 percent is declared as Area C. The remaining area is denoted as Area B, whereas Area A is trivial and amounts to less than 0.2 percent of the Jerusalem city-region. In terms of geopolitical designations inside the Bethlehem city-region, Area C forms 70 percent of the total land area of Bethlehem. Area B forms 5 percent of the land, and Area A forms 8 percent of the city-region area. The remaining 17 percent of the city-region area is classified as a nature reserve, and was designated as such in the Sharm el-Sheikh Agreement (2000), but in reality this area remained under full Israeli control.

11  For a case study of Walaja village to the west of the Bethlehem area, see R. Saleh, "In the Seam Zone: Walaja's Fate Between Jerusalem and Nowhere," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 49 (2012), 54-67.

12  ARIJ, *GIS-Database*. http://www.arij.org/. Accessed 23 March 2013.

13  A. El-Atrash, "Promoting Sustainable Urban Growth Strategies to Curb Sprawl in the Urban Area of Bethlehem Governorate," unpublished master's thesis, (Birzeit University, 2009), 82.

14  The planning doctrine of "human warehousing" has implications for political hegemony. It is worse than the Bantustans of apartheid-era South Africa. See J. Halper, *The De-Politicization of Repression: Warehousing Palestinians* (2008), at:

http://www.counterpunch.org/halper09162008.html. Accessed 4 May 2013. Halper argues that "Human warehousing is the starkest of political concepts because it represents the de-politicization of repression, the transformation of a political issue of the first degree into a non-issue, a regrettable but unavoidable situation best dealt with through relief, charity and humanitarian programs, together with schemes for economic 'development.' It is a dead-end, a 'given,' for which no remedy is available. This, of course, is not the case, and we cannot let it be presented as such. Warehousing is a policy arising out of particular interests of the most powerful. Our use of the term 'warehousing,' then, should be to 'name the thing' in order to give us a grasp of it, all the better to combat and defeat it."

15  A. El-Atrash, "Promoting Sustainable Urban Growth Strategies," 78.

16  Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), *Palestine in Figures 2008* (Ramallah: PCBS 2009).

17  J. Isaac, F. Abdul-latif and A. El-Atrash, *Policy Tools towards Sustainable Land Use and Urban Environmental Management at Municipal Level under a Transitional Political Context.* (Bethlehem: Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem, ARIJ, 2007).

18  A. El-Atrash, "Promoting Sustainable Urban Growth Strategies," 26.

19  A. El-Atrash, "Praxis of Human Rights in the Palestinian Urban Sphere – Urbanization Trends," in J. Isaac, A. Khair, and J. Hilal, eds., *Status of the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territory – A Human Based Approach, 2011* (Bethlehem: Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem, ARIJ, 2011), 86-111.

20  ARIJ. *GIS-Database*. http://www.arij.org/. Accessed 23 March 2013.