Map showing WEST TIMOR with Kupang, EAST TIMOR with Dili, and the TIMOR SEA.

A Just and Viable Peace?
The Facts on the Ground

—Jane Power

Israeli politicians need a Palestinian state. That's the startling hypothesis that Israeli anthropologist Jeff Halper offered his audience at a February 2001 lecture[*] supported by the Institute for the Humanities at SFU. Without a Palestinian state, Halper explained, Israel's government will face an impossible choice. If they annex the West Bank and Gaza Strip outright, the three million Palestinians there will join the one million Arabs and five million Jews who are currently Israeli citizens, compromising Israel's identity as the Jewish state. If Israel annexes the West Bank and Gaza Strip without giving citizenship to the Palestinians, the resulting apartheid will put Israel hopelessly out-of-date by today's international standards. (Returning the territories seized in the 1967 war is repugnant for Biblical and strategic reasons.) A docile, fragmented Palestinian mini-state is the solution Israeli politicians appear to favour. This was their objective in the past seven years' "peace process." Palestinian engineer Salim Shawamreh, Halper's team-mate on a month-long, cross-Canada speaking tour, has encountered firsthand the Israeli government's move to fragment the West Bank by dispossessing its people. Three times in four years, the Israeli military's "civil administration" refused Shawamreh a building permit, each time with a different reason, while charging him a total of $10,000 in application fees.

Giving up on legality, Shawamreh built a house. Four years later, in July 1998, as the Shawamrehs sat at lunch, 200 Israeli soldiers appeared outside with a bulldozer. By evening the Shawamrehs had joined some 7,000 other Palestinians whose homes have been demolished since 1967. His house, along with the garden and trees he had lovingly established to soften the rocky West Bank landscape, were rubble; his wife was in hospital, beaten and unable to speak; his small children were so traumatized that even two years later, they're afraid to leave their room at night. Shawamreh himself had been badly beaten.

Shawamreh was lucky: neighbours came out to oppose the bulldozer, and Halper and other Israeli and foreign activists, heading for a nearby demonstration, arrived within minutes. Several, including Halper, lay in front of the bulldozers. CNN and other TV crews appeared. Their footage familiarized European and North American audiences with the brutality of house demolition and mobilized support for the family. Meanwhile, within a month, Israeli, Palestinian and foreign volunteers rebuilt the house. The new structure lasted barely one night. At dawn Israeli troops destroyed it, too, and took away the Red Cross tent in which the Shawamrehs had been living. Again, the Israeli Committee

Against House Demolitions and the Palestinian Land Defense Committee rebuilt the house. This third structure still stands.

House demolitions are just one way the Israeli government is trying to divide up Palestinian areas, Halper emphasizes. Others are the "withdrawals" that leave every Palestinian-run town surrounded by Israeli military territory, the "bypass roads" that slice through Palestinian olive groves and vineyards, and the consolidation of Israeli settlements into "blocks" that isolate the areas of Palestinian concentration.

To those who ask why the Palestinians weren't content with the Clinton plan offering them "95 percent," Halper responds first that this is 95 percent of 22 percent of historic Palestine — Israel itself comprises 78 percent. Second, he notes that prisoners occupy about 95 percent of the area of a prison: it's not the territory but the control that counts.

Halper and Shawamreh offer their own "win-win" solution to succeed the moribund Oslo plan: an end to Israeli occupation, leading to productive, developing relationships between mutually reliant Israeli and Palestinian (and possibly neighbouring) states.

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*Professor Bill Cleveland of SFU hosted the discussion, opening his History 465 class to the speakers and the University community.