

What were Village Leagues?

After Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, the territory stayed relatively quiet for a number of years. However, the PLO remained armed and active outside Palestine's historic boundaries, occasionally carrying out attacks on Israel, first from Jordan and then from Lebanon. In 1976, Israel organised local elections in the West Bank, hoping to give some legitimacy to its occupation and create a "moderate" Palestinian local leadership willing to accept autonomy under Israeli rule. However, this plan backfired when pro-PLO candidates won sweeping victories in all the towns of the

West Bank. Rather than securing a pliant Palestinian political class ready to do its bidding and accept its occupation, Israel inadvertently gave legitimacy to an enemy that it was refusing to recognise at the time.

It, therefore, encouraged the formation of the unelected Village Leagues, which were presented initially as "non-political entities", concerned with agricultural affairs and representing Palestinians living in rural areas not served by the municipal councils, which were now dominated by pro-PLO elected officials.

A stillborn alternative

In reality, Israel was setting them up as an alternative to the PLO and their supporters, and it later imprisoned or deposed the pro-PLO mayors who were elected in 1976. The head of the Village Leagues was Mustafa Dudeen, a local notable, who was previously a Jordanian cabinet minister. Jordan had ruled the West Bank before the 1967 Israeli occupation, and Israel had hoped that it could find collaborators among pro-Jordanian traditional leaders. When Israel militarily defeated the PLO in Lebanon in mid-1982, the Village Leagues began to be reported on in the press at the time as a serious alternative with which Israel could do business. However, de-

spite trying to ingratiate themselves with rural Palestinians by handing out money, the Village Leagues were an utter failure. Opinion polls conducted at the time showed that they had the support of 0.2% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, while the PLO enjoyed 86%, despite its Lebanon setback. The Village Leagues were seen as little more than traitors and local thugs, and in the end, Israel withdrew support. By the end of 1982, they had sunk into irrelevance, and in 1987, the Palestinian population in the West Bank rose up against Israeli rule in the First Intifada. Israel then had to negotiate with the PLO, signing the ill-fated Oslo Accords in 1993.

Can Israel re-create Village League experiment?

The kind of local leadership that Israel is proposing for the Gaza Strip appears to be remarkably similar to the Village Leagues — pliant, non-political, and concerned only with local affairs. The circumstances, however, are very different. Israel has utterly devastated the Gaza Strip in its indiscriminate war but still faces fierce armed resistance across the territory. These conditions are very different from the West Bank of the 1970s. While Gaza's population is weary of war and faces starvation and disease, and many Gazans had expressed discontent with Hamas's 15-year rule of the territory long before the events of Oc-

tober 7, any leadership appointed by Israel will almost certainly face rejection and contempt. Its members will also likely face physical attacks by Hamas and other armed groups that are still active in the territory.

Israel's previous failure to impose an administration on the West Bank and Gaza compelled it to agree to the Oslo Accords in 1993 and withdraw from Gaza in 2005. It is likely to face a similar scenario if it appoints a leadership made up of collaborators.

The article first appeared on The New Arab.

A person walks out of the destroyed Palestinian Legislative Council building in Gaza City on November 26, 2023.

OMAR ISHAQ/GETTY IMAGES

Israel's 'day-after' plan for Gaza is brutal occupation



An Israeli soldier is seen looking over the leveled buildings of the northern Gaza Strip in a military tank. AFP



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OPINION

Netanyahu is taking Israel's war on Gaza to a final terrifying stage, promising that total victory is at hand and using 1.5 million Palestinians in Rafah as hostages. If he can't force them out into Sinai, he wants to take over complete control of the Rafah crossing from Egypt, destroy Hamas, and obliterate its leadership.

This is a mission impossible. Whatever new genocidal acts Israel commits in the coming days, the Palestinians will continue their resistance among the ruins of Gaza and once it is rebuilt.

If Israel has its way, however, and Western powers continue to enable its ethnic cleansing project, the bombs that have destroyed Gaza will be replaced by a new weaponised form of urban planning. Israeli scenarios envisage post-war Gaza as a more militarised version of the West Bank with thousands of hectares of land under direct Israeli occupation.

Apparently, orders have been given to determine the locations for permanent army stations. The shape of the new urban landscape will be minutely planned by Israel, if it is given a free hand, to lock Gaza into a grid of surveillance and control.

This is not a new phenomenon in the Israeli mindset. The mechanisms of 'Israel's architecture of occupation' have been unpacked in the work of Eyal Weizman in his book *Hollow Land*. Weizman is Director of Forensic Architecture and Professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College.

The book explores the planning history of Zionism and notes how from the start, the Zionist project enlisted architects from the UK to plan Tel Aviv and other Zionist settlements.

Having ethnically cleansed Palestine of the majority of its people in 1948 and levelled 500 villages, the Zionists could transform the landscape as they wished. Today, 75 years on, Israel's determined destruction of the entire infrastructure of Gaza is callously planned so it can be rebuilt as an optimum site of occupation.

In the West Bank, this has been an ongoing project, at least since the time of Ariel Sharon with the massive settlement building, which started in the 1970s. This was organised for defence and colonisation, taking strategic hilltops and developing a network of roads to facilitate military manoeuvres which became effective instruments for possessing occupied Palestinian land.

Sharon announced, on one of his reconnaissance trips to the West Bank, that the Palestinians should see "Jewish lights every night from 500 metres". Later, the building of Israel's apartheid wall gobbled up huge swathes of Palestinian land, impeding freedom of movement along with hundreds of checkpoints. Today, strategic mechanisms of subjugation intersect all coordinates in the West Bank, forming a matrix of control with on/off valves to regulate the movement of the occupied.

Israeli planning policy, on the micro and macro level, creates isolated Palestinian zones, watched over by militarised settlements and outposts. These colonising devices are "intended to make the colonised internalise the facts of their domination".

In 1971, Ariel Sharon bulldozed wide

roads through Gaza's refugee camps, Jabalia, Rafah, and Al-Shati. He wanted to cut up the camps into smaller neighbourhoods that could be easily accessed by the military.

This was the beginning of a strategy Sharon envisioned for Gaza, similar to that of the West Bank. He planned to build five wedges of settlements in what he called the '5-finger plan' to break up the Strip into controllable sections. He also planned new neighbourhoods for the refugees in order to destroy the fabric of the social life of the Palestinian camps.

Sharon never completed his plans for Gaza. What Netanyahu has done in the last four months, however, would outstrip Sharon's wildest fantasies. The carpet bombing of Gaza, the murder of over 30,000 Palestinians, and the destruction of every aspect of Palestinian life in Gaza is almost complete.

Weizman, in his analysis of the architecture of occupation in the West Bank, uses ideas from French philosopher Michel Foucault's *Power and Knowledge*. Foucault describes that authority changed how power was exerted on the public with the rise of institutional forms of power, such as the hospital, the asylum, the police, and the prison, where the bodies of the masses were codified and observed through new disciplines of observation.

Instead of power being exerted through public executions and torture, power transmuted into capillary power, micropower that ran through every institution of society. Foucault gives the ultimate metaphor for this: the panopticon.

The panopticon is the ultimate tool of surveillance, a prison where the staff could observe all the inmates at once. The prisoners would not know if they were being watched and so they would always discipline their own behaviour under a faceless gaze.

This concept gave rise to the idea of panopticism, where every aspect of social life could be similarly designed to facilitate the exertion of power and its control in spatial and surveillance terms.

How, then, would Israel plan a new Gaza, if it could? Would it cut it into five zones, as envisioned by Sharon, with settlements or military bases? It would, no doubt, try to organise the urban environment of Gaza in a way that would give maximum spatial domination to facilitate military incursions, to access every street and every house.

The planning will ensure that these zones will be under constant observation, through technological apparatus, installed everywhere.

Another key element of panopticism is the isolation of individuals. Preventing horizontal relations avoids the formation of groups — divide and rule.

The obliteration of neighbourhoods in Palestinian towns and refugee camps has already shattered communities, which once fostered support and solidarity.

This has realised Sharon's idea whereby new neighbourhoods would break up the Palestinian camps to compartmentalise the Palestinians of Gaza, to cut social bonds, and to fragment them as a society and people.

Whatever form the new Gaza will take, the Palestinians will rise to continue their struggle. As Foucault said, "Where there is power, there is resistance."

The full article first appeared on The New Arab.