

Message to Israel: Hillary Clinton states the obvious

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

Hillary Clinton recently stated the obvious: the creation of a Palestinian state would be in the best interest of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. Her comment brought the expected storm of protest from Israel. The White House, in part of what was obviously a carefully planned scenario, replied that the First Lady was not speaking for her husband. Of course she was speaking for him, but under diplomatic rules this could safely be denied. In fact, Hillary Clinton said what the president wanted to say but could not because he must be neutral on the final outcome of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But make no mistake about it, when Hillary Clinton speaks she is speaking for her husband.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu knows this, which is why he refused to attend a planned summit meeting in Washington with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat on May 11. In refusing to attend, the Israeli leader put the blame on the first lady for her statement and on Arafat for failing to curb the violent anti-Israel activities of the Islamic militant movement Hamas.

Netanyahu says he worries about “security” for Israel if he gives up any more territory. But he has already gained control over so much territory in the occupied West Bank and Gaza that the Palestinian state that will finally emerge will be severely emasculated and certainly no military threat to Israel. A far greater threat is posed to Israelis by the frustrated and angry supporters of Hamas, who, in desperation over lack of progress in the peace process, will continue their deadly campaign of attacking Israeli citizens.

The *Chicago Tribune* commended Hillary Clinton, saying she “has performed a valuable service” by stating that a Palestinian state is “very important to the broader goal of peace in the Middle East.” The *Tribune* added that “the peace process began because Israel recognized its long-term security would be in question as long as the Palestinians in occupied territories were dispossessed, felt powerless

and seethed with resentment.” The *Tribune* concluded: “Mrs. Clinton deserves praise for saying as much. Would that President Clinton could articulate this truth as forthrightly as his spouse has.”

Well, he can’t do so openly, which is why Hillary Clinton was just the right person to send a clear signal to Israel. Hidden in her endorsement of a Palestinian state is a blunt warning to Israel to stop stalling and accept the reality that under the 1993 Oslo accords a final agreement is supposed to be in place by 1999. The Clinton administration has now said: Enough already with this hiding behind “security” to avoid reaching an agreement with Arafat. In the warning is the hint that Bill Clinton is ready to do for Palestine what Harry Truman did for Israel in 1947--proclaim U.S. backing for a new Middle Eastern state. He would do this not for the sake of Arafat but for the sake of peace in the Middle East.

The president would not be speaking this bluntly to Israel if he did not know that a majority of Israel’s supporters in the U.S. agree that Netanyahu’s continued intransigence is detrimental to the peace process.

Both Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore, who will run for president in 2000, have impeccable records as supporters of Israel. They can say to Netanyahu publicly what they have, no doubt, been saying privately: We are the best friends Israel has ever had in the White House. We have helped you reach your current strong position by only mildly protesting the illegal settlement policy by which you have saturated the West Bank and Gaza with Israeli communities. A future Palestinian state will be no military threat to Israel, but Israel’s continued stalling to prevent the creation of that state is a threat not only to Israel’s security but also to peace in the entire region.

Ironically, when Jimmy Carter was campaigning for president in 1976 he alienated American Jewish voters by commenting that at some point there should be a Palestinian “entity.” He avoided using the politically unacceptable word “state,” but it was clear that this was what he had in mind. Unfortunately, Carter had not built a strong base among U.S. supporters of Israel, and he never did get the sort of support from that community that Clinton and Gore now enjoy.

Mortimer B. Zuckerman, editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report*, is one of Israel’s strongest supporters in the media. He views the Israeli-Palestinian standoff entirely from Israel’s perspective. The territories Israel has occupied since 1967 belong, in his estimation, to Israel. In a recent editorial he paraphrases a comment

Arafat made to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Oslo: "You give us territory, and we'll fight terrorism from that territory." That is hardly a comment that would have come from Arafat, but it accords with Zuckerman's vision that whatever territory Arafat gets will come from Israel's magnanimity.

From a Palestinian perspective, of course, the territory in question has never legally belonged to Israel and is not Israel's to "give" back. Under United Nations resolutions in place since 1968, no part of the disputed land belongs to Israel. But thanks to U.S. tolerance of Israel's occupation and Israel's shrewd playing of the victim card, Israel has managed to instill abroad the notion that it will "relinquish" only that land which it can afford to give up and still meet its security needs.

In spite of his belief in Israel's absolute right to dole out whatever part of the West Bank and Gaza it wishes to "give" to the Palestinians, even Zuckerman has his doubts about Netanyahu's political astuteness. "Given his remarkable early political success in Israel, Netanyahu has demonstrated an amazing tin ear for the politics of the situation. He seems not to realize the importance of inspiring trust in the people he must work with."

Netanyahu, for his part, while knowing that Clinton is a supporter of Israel, also knows that he has an even stronger base of support in the Congress, in members of the media like Zuckerman, and among Christian evangelicals. He is so confident of that support that, after canceling the summit meeting with Arafat and Clinton, he made a personal trip to Washington, ostensibly to make a new proposal (one he knows Arafat will not accept). The real purpose of his trip was to argue his case with his strongest supporters in the U.S. This is a highly risky political move, since it places him on a collision course with Bill Clinton.

The Israeli prime minister had already antagonized Clinton on his previous visit to Washington when he spoke at a rally organized by Jerry Falwell and other Clinton opponents. Say and do what you please to Bill Clinton, but don't go into his town and attend a party with his archenemies. Netanyahu's tête-à-tête with Falwell and his return trip to campaign among his allies may well be the final straw for Clinton. Since the president is no longer in quest of votes or financial support, he can finally do the right thing in the Middle East: drop his strong pro-Israel stance and work for a fair and just conclusion to the conflict.