

Palestinians in the pressure cooker

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

Middle East summits come and go with one repeated mantra: bring an end to the violence. That plea is always interpreted as a demand for both sides to stop shooting at each other and settle down long enough for their leaders to hammer out an agreement that will end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It won't happen, of course. Not in Bill Clinton's final weeks in office, and not for some time to come.

Yasir Arafat's fragile hold on power is dependent on Israel, the United States and the careful organizing eye of the CIA. With that backing and little else he will try to control his people by sheer brute force. He is not likely to succeed. As Ron Ben-Yishai, writing from a strongly pro-Israel perspective, says, Arafat is "not in complete control of Fatah's field activists, the Tanzim, and the Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists . . ."

Meanwhile, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* asked 41-year-old Marwan Barghout, the head of Tanzim (the military arm of Fatah), whether he had control over the demonstrators. Barghout, a possible successor to Arafat, is from a prominent Palestinian family. He graduated from Bir Zeit University and has spent time in exile. He told *Ha'aretz*: "Israelis don't understand what a popular uprising is . . . If I give an order to stop, they will stop? Are you mad?" Nor would he try to persuade them to quit. "You, the Israelis, can't obtain peace without paying a price. You have to choose 'either occupation or peace.'"

There will be no early end to this conflict. There is far too much anger and frustration among Palestinians, many of whom have spent their entire lives under a 33-year military occupation. Resentment of expanded Israeli settlements in their territory, the arbitrary border closings and the constant harassment of Palestinian civilians have cemented their determination to resist any peace agreement based on the Oslo Accords. Nor will the surrounding Arab states allow Arafat to accept an accord that removes Arab control over major Muslim religious sites on the Noble Sanctuary (the Temple Mount).

Bill Clinton will not leave behind a legacy of peace. The reason? He was so intent on ending overt violence in the region that he either refused to acknowledge, or simply failed to recognize, the obvious truth: overt violence is not the major problem.

The real source of the conflict is the systemic violence exercised by an occupying military power over a captive population. Israel systematically co-opted land for isolated Israeli settlements under the guise of maintaining a presence next to religious sites. Since 1967 Israel has built suburban population centers that surround east Jerusalem. These “facts on the ground” leave Palestinians with a future state marked by noncontiguous population blocs crisscrossed by defense-oriented, Israeli-only highways. And every border crossing is controlled by Israel.

The demand for justice is a power stronger than any military or police force. The Jewish people, victims of centuries of systemic anti-Semitism, should be the first to acknowledge this. Still, blinded by an obsession with Israeli security, both Israel and the U.S. continue to believe that Palestinians will accept an unjust future.

The American public believes that the U.S. is an “honest broker” in this conflict—something almost no Palestinian believes, except perhaps Yasir Arafat. Nor will this change under the next president, as was evident in the second debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush. Both men deplored the deaths of two Israeli soldiers at the hands of an angry Palestinian mob in Ramallah, but offered no words of sympathy for the deaths of more than 130 Palestinians, including many children.

This narrow vision will continue to control American attitudes because there are few voices supporting Palestinian concerns in U.S. politics. As Palestinian academic Hanan Ashrawi recently wrote:

The latest eruption of confrontations between the Israeli occupation army and civilian Palestinian protesters became the playing field for the full force of the Israeli “spin machine” in a most deliberate, concentrated and racist exercise of deception and dehumanization directed against a whole people. The most basic form of deception is in fabricating a false symmetry between occupier and occupied, between oppressor and victim.

Acknowledging the horror of the deaths of the two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah, Ashrawi calls attention to Israeli poet Yitzhak Laor’s plea to his fellow Jews “not to exploit this incident to justify existing racism and hatred.” Laor documents several

lynchings of Palestinians by Israeli army and security forces. No one was punished, and no moral outrage was expressed by the Israeli public.

Racism and hatred are a deadly brew, especially when mixed with the violence of three decades of military occupation. In the *Independent*, Robert Fisk describes the damage caused by “our continued inability to grasp what happens when a whole society is pressure-cooked to the point of explosion. . . . Who can doubt that the attempt to sink the *Cole* . . . was directed at a nation now held responsible for Israel’s killing of scores of Palestinian civilians?”

The USS *Cole* disaster is a reminder that the failure to end systemic violence against the Palestinians guarantees repeated acts of violence against Israel and the U.S. Only the end of systemic violence in the region will bring lasting peace and security.