

Mideast time line

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

In the Middle East, May 4 and May 17 loom large on the calendar. For a long time it was feared that Yasir Arafat would declare the formation of a Palestinian state on May 4. That's the deadline set by the Oslo Accords for the parties to settle their differences. But such a declaration would give Israel an excuse to abandon the peace negotiations and crack down even further on Palestinian freedoms.

A May 4 declaration of Palestinian nationhood would also greatly influence the outcome of Israel's May 17 election for prime minister, presumably in favor of Benjamin Netanyahu. He has presented himself in the campaign as the toughest guy on the block--someone who would be tougher in dealing with Arafat than either Labor candidate Ehud Barak or Center Party leader Yitzhak Mordechai. Both Barak and Mordechai are likely to take a more moderate stance toward the Palestinians. With that in mind, Arafat has decided not to declare statehood on May 4.

The need for moderation in Israeli policy is strong. Amira Hass, a correspondent for the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, recently itemized some of the actions "that have been carried out by our strong nation and its representatives on the West Bank" in one week's time. She pointed to reports that Israeli soldiers destroyed the homes of Fayez Jaber in Hebron and of Layla A-Sabarna in the village of Bet Omar because they were built without permits. During that same week, Hass reports, Jewish settlers encountered no problems as they continued "to set up beachheads throughout the West Bank, using prefabricated structures."

Also during that week, Jerusalem officials "issued a demolition order for a mosque in the village of Walajeh, which borders on the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, which is expanding in the direction of homes in the village. In the city of Al Khader, south of Bethlehem, the Civil Administration has ordered the demolition of a wing of the Flowers of Hope School. Meanwhile, Jewish settlers residing in Efrat, a city that has been built in part on lands belonging to Al Khader, are making rapid progress in paving a road that will connect Efrat with Herodion to the east."

These actions, just a few of many cited by Hass, are all sanctioned by Israeli laws that permit the "demolition of Palestinian homes [and] the granting of permission to Jewish settlers to continue building on the West Bank." What does the Clinton administration have to say about what Hass describes as "thoroughly conceived oppression, imposed to further nationalist goals"? What does the U.S. say about the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, and about all changes in disputed areas during the peace process--all of which violate the Oslo Accords and are illegal under international law? It officially says it disapproves.

But this disapproval is expressed very gently during a political campaign that President Clinton obviously hopes Netanyahu will lose. Martin Indyk, assistant U.S. secretary of state, said in Israel on April 12 that he has "concerns" about the ongoing expansion of settlements. Earlier, during a visit with Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the U.S. "does not look kindly on Israel's continued settlement building."

With or without elections, of course, the U.S. speaks gently to Israel; to say one has "concerns" and does not look "kindly" is hardly fearsome language. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Indyk feels that "despite various differences with the [Israeli] government, strategic cooperation remains on firm ground."

Indyk is not a visitor to strike terror in the hearts of Israeli officialdom. His pro-Israel credentials are well known, both to Israelis and Palestinians. He worked for a time in Israel before moving to the U.S. to work for the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the major Israeli lobby in Washington. After a brief stint as Bill Clinton's adviser on the Middle East, Indyk was named ambassador to Israel. He is now assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, the State Department's top Middle East policymaking position.

What Indyk really delivered on his recent trip to Israel was the Big Wink, which says: We all know what is going on here, and you understand that I must express disapproval of your policies, but please, don't let us stand in your way in establishing so many "facts on the ground" that when a Palestinian state does finally emerge, it will be a weak collection of isolated patches of land, not unlike those isolated reservations to which the U.S. government dispatched Native Americans a century ago.

Israel's Supreme Court continues to uphold laws that permit the demolition of Palestinian homes, the confiscation of Palestinian land to build Israeli-only bypass roads, the refusal of building permits for Palestinian families, unwarranted police searches of Palestinian homes, the lifting of identification cards of longtime Palestinian Jerusalem residents, and tight security at checkpoints that keep Palestinians confined to their pitifully cramped and isolated cities and villages. When these individual oppressive acts are reported in the media, laments Amira Hass, the reports do not "convey the depressing significance of life under a regime that arrogantly, deliberately and consistently discriminates."

The ray of hope in this dismal report is the fact that Hass writes for a major Israeli newspaper. Her reports from the West Bank are read by a large number of Israelis. Many of them will vote against Netanyahu on May 17.