

Slight hope for peace

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [Nov 11, 1998](#) issue

Yasir Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu have departed from Maryland's Wye Plantation. If you believe there is any cause for serious optimism following their meetings, then, as George Strait sings, "I've got some ocean front property for you in A-ro-zo-na." There is, however, a hint of a hopeful breeze emerging from Wye. It derives from the fact that Bill Clinton, Israel's best friend ever in the White House, witnessed Netanyahu's bargaining style up close. And it wasn't pretty.

As the meeting appeared on the verge of an agreement, Netanyahu brought up an old demand, which he knows is largely window dressing. The prime minister demanded that the Palestinian Charter be redrafted to remove a call for Israel's destruction. That makes sense, until you remember that the offending words in the charter have already been removed by the Palestinian National Council. Netanyahu's ploy was to insist that Arafat call together the entire 7,000-member PNC to ratify a new charter.

President Clinton was reportedly furious at this stalling tactic; a charter revision would lead to a lengthy conflict among Palestinian legislators, who would be eager to redo other parts of the charter. Clinton reminded Netanyahu that the U.S. and Israel's former Labor government agreed with Arafat that an earlier PNC vote had already removed the offending charter language. Even so, as a show of recalcitrance, and for media consumption back home, the Israeli delegation puts its bags outside on the lawn and prepared for a midnight departure. Fortunately it was only for show, and the meetings continued.

Netanyahu's major demand was that Arafat "guarantee" Israel's security--one of those political demands which is hard to deny but almost impossible to meet. Arafat pointed out the obvious: for all his efforts to halt attacks on Israeli citizens, he cannot guarantee total success. In fact, the young man who threw hand grenades into a crowded Beersheba bus stop was a Palestinian who lived in an area under Israeli control.

Violent attacks against Israeli citizens are reprehensible and should be condemned. But Israelis are not the only victims of violence. Systematic as well as individual acts of violence are also committed against Palestinians, whose small living areas are honeycombed with massive Jewish settlements--whose residents are heavily armed. The Palestinian communities are connected by Israeli-only highways, and security buffer zones cut into Palestinian villages and farm lands. Nothing that happened at Wye changes the reality that Israel continues to control, completely or partially, all but a small section of Gaza and the West Bank. Most important, all border crossings through which Palestinians must pass, sometimes daily, remain under Israeli control.

This control may temporarily give Israelis a greater sense of security, but it creates long-term insecurity for both sides. Frustrated Palestinians continue to turn in their despair to radical leaders who preach hatred against Israel.

Perhaps the most important development at Wye is the plan for the CIA to monitor Arafat's crackdown on his own radical forces. Until now, Israel has been the sole monitor of what constituted proper Palestinian action. This allows Netanyahu to act as final judge of what Palestinian police actions are sufficient, a control somewhat akin to Michael Jordan having his own whistle to halt play when he believes he has been fouled.

But even these faint signs of progress cannot alter "facts on the ground" which will almost certainly doom any serious moves toward peace prior to the May 4, 1999, Oslo deadline for completing current negotiations.

Writing in the *Washington Post* (October 2), Stephen S. Rosenfeld reports on the successful manner in which Israel has created facts on the ground by establishing and expanding Jewish settlements. "Internal diplomacy has largely failed to redress Israel's transformation [of the occupied areas] by its settlement policy." He cites a report from a pro-Palestinian research organization, the Foundation for Middle East Peace, that estimates that "about 350,000 Israelis currently live across the pre-1967 cease-fire line separating Israel from the West Bank and Gaza--about half of [whom] live in annexed East Jerusalem."

Israel has been allowed to expand its presence in what was once Arab-controlled land through the support and implied endorsement of its principle ally and funder, the U.S. government. The settlements, a clear violation of United Nations resolutions that date back to 1967, enrage Palestinians, who, writes Rosenfeld, are convinced

that Israelis "are interested more in land than peace." These settlements are accepted as "facts" not only by Israel, but by Western media and Western governments that are afraid to challenge Israel's insistence that its security is under constant threat from surrounding Arab states. The truth is that much of that threat is a function of the hostile climate created by Israel's settlement expansion into Palestinian territory.

Meanwhile, Arafat continues to insist he will unilaterally declare the existence of a Palestinian state after May 4. Many Israelis fear that war could erupt following such a declaration. Uri Avnery put those fears in tangible form in a fictional account he wrote for the Jewish *Ma'ariv* publication.

Avnery, a veteran Jewish peace activist, projects a scenario that would follow Arafat's unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state on May 14, 1999, "51 years to the day after Ben-Gurion declared the founding of the State of Israel." In Avnery's fictional account, war begins a week later after Israel annexes "51 percent of the West Bank, 31 percent of the Gaza Strip, and all the Israeli settlements on Palestinian land."

"Opinions regarding the cause of the war are contradictory. The Palestinian version claims that the residents of Kiryat Arba settlement opened fire on the Palestinian army near the Baruch Goldstein tomb. [Goldstein is the Jewish radical who was beaten to death after he killed a large number of Muslim worshipers in Hebron; his tomb is considered sacred by many Israeli hardliners.] According to Netanyahu's version, it was the Palestinians who opened fire on the Hebron settlers."

In Avnery's scenario, the war continues for seven days, causing considerable damage, much suffering and deaths on both sides. It finally ends after the passage of a resolution by the UN Security Council which accepts the state of Palestine as a UN member and orders UN peacekeeping forces to the area. "President Clinton decided not to veto the resolution when a secret poll confirmed that the vast majority of American Jews also supported it."

This scenario, which current political posturing does little to halt, is a serious possibility if the peace process continues to proceed with the sort of games that characterized the Wye meeting. As May approaches, look for even greater acts of random violence--precursors of a war no one wants and no side could possibly win.