

The Wye River Peace Agreement: Assessment and Implications

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Brief Analysis

On October 26, 1998, Zeev Schiff, military editor of Israel's Haaretz newspaper and a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, and Abbas Kelidar, consulting adviser to the Office of Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan and a visiting fellow at the Institute, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum, along with Robert Satloff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Mr. Schiff and Mr. Kelidar's remarks. [Read an expanded version \(templateC05.php?CID=1876\)](#) of Dr. Satloff's remarks.

ZEEV SCHIFF

The first major achievement of the Wye agreement was that it postponed the problem of Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state. This, rather than the percentage of Israel's "redeployment," was the most important pre-summit issue, because a unilateral declaration in May could trigger an immediate Israeli reaction that could result in the annexation of the remaining territories, increased violence, a spill-over effect in Jordan, the end of the Oslo process, and the pulling of other Arab states into a confrontation with Israel. The issue, however, has not been solved, only postponed. Final-status talks are scheduled to begin soon, despite the fact that three key issues from the interim period remain unresolved: safe-passage, the Gaza seaport, and the third further redeployment. Moreover, the agreement did not specifically address two other issues: First, it does not explicitly freeze new settlements or the enlargement of current ones, because the settlements issue was not mentioned in the original Oslo accords. Second, there is no actual proscription on the unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state. Therefore, the outcome of the coming stages remains uncertain.

The second main achievement of the agreement was that it ended a long stalemate in the peace process and the negative repercussions that are almost inevitable from such an impasse. The third major achievement is the improvement in security arrangements, as compared with those outlined in previous accords. The problem with earlier agreements was that they were not clear enough and thus significant time was wasted clarifying issues.

Security Aspects: One problem with Wye may be that the parties apparently had no choice but to drag in the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which will no longer simply keep track of the details and advise the Palestinians on what to do and how to do it, but will go into active planning against Hamas and the terrorist infrastructure. Hopefully, CIA involvement will be only temporary and it will act as mediator and facilitator rather than as another on-the-ground

combatant in the anti-terror war inside the territories. The sooner the CIA's job is done and there are more direct contacts between Israel and the Palestinians without U.S. involvement, the better it is for all three sides.

The Wye agreement is an improvement on the Hebron Accord, which had no operational component. After Hebron, for example, the Palestinians often imprisoned suspects just to prevent their extradition to Israel; the two sides cooperated only after terrorist acts; and they had basic disagreements on how to fight Hamas's terrorist infrastructure. Through Wye, there is now a better mechanism for intelligence cooperation before events occur. There is also a better understanding on the need to cooperate during interrogations and while arresting suspects. Above all, it seems clear that this time the Palestinians are truly prepared to fight the infrastructure of terrorism. Although success will be difficult, the objective should not be to destroy the entire infrastructure -- there is a civilian aspect to it -- but instead to control it.

Territorial Issue: The structural allocation of the territory for "redeployment" is significant because the three percent given as a nature reserve in the Judean desert is a blow to the "Allon plan." The concept of the plan, proposed by Yigal Allon immediately after the 1967 War, was for Israel to withdraw from most of the West Bank's heavily populated areas while keeping a strip of territory along the Jordan River, which was less populated by Arabs. This strip would start in the North near the Syrian border, continue down through the Jordan Valley and the Judean desert, and connect further down with the Negev. The Israeli government's decision to give up land in the Judean desert overlooking the Dead Sea rather than to further expose settlements in Judea and Samaria was a mistake. In the end, Israel is not going to be able to hold on to all of the settlements and so the strategic aspects of this plan are more important.

ABBAS KELIDAR

Interests are what ultimately determine the actions of individuals as well as those of states. This holds true for the outcome of the Wye summit, which represents the most recent in a consistent pattern of actions characterizing Israeli-Palestinian relations since the signing of the Oslo Accords -- a quid pro quo arrangement. Until the Madrid conference, a resolution of the Arab Israeli conflict -- and especially the Palestinian aspect of it -- seemed nearly impossible. Each side's claims on the historic land appeared to be mutually exclusive. In this context, the more modest goal was to maintain peace in the region for longer than eleven years -- previously the longest period without an Arab-Israeli war (i.e., between 1956 and 1967).

Now, interests have evolved, and attitudes and outlooks have changed with them. The Oslo Accords not only made the 1994 Jordan Israel peace treaty possible, but they also changed the ways Palestinians and Israel related to one another. Oslo's primary contribution was that it gave a purely political cause -- that of the Palestinians -- a territorial dimension. Prior to that, the Palestinian cause was represented in international fora but not in Palestine. Moreover, Oslo marked an Israeli acknowledgment to share the land with the Palestinians and effectively set forth the process for doing so. For Israel, Oslo was supposed to mark the end of the conflict and the end of anti-Israel terrorism.

> Egypt and Jordan were able to make peace with Israel because President Anwar Sadat and King Hussein were willing to address Israel's primary concern: security. At Wye, Arafat seems to have finally followed them in this path. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu received from Arafat and U.S. president Bill Clinton the security guarantees he has been demanding. At the same time, Arafat received 40 percent of the land he has long sought.

Yet, difficult questions still remain: Will both parties hold to the established timetable? As it is in both of their interests, probably yes. Can extremists on both sides undo what has already been accomplished? Unfortunately, it is possible. Will Arafat's crackdown on weapons confiscation and his collaboration with the CIA lead to a Palestinian civil war? This too is conceivable. Furthermore, CIA involvement may prove problematic because it involves the United States directly as a third party.

> It is important to note that Jordan will be affected no matter what happens with the Palestinians. This is not only because of the large Palestinian community in Jordan, but also because Palestinian and Jordanian interests are intertwined. Whereas the ideal situation in the future may be a confederal system, Jordanians are reluctant to talk about that right now, as it would be a deal between a state -- Jordan -- and a people -- the Palestinians. Rather, Jordan is waiting for the emergence of a Palestinian entity or state with which negotiations could begin.

Egypt's attitude is also crucial. During the deadlock, Egyptian leaders have seemingly "been running with the hare and hunting with the hounds." Egypt can play a significant role. Its support for the accord, coupled with strict implementation, can ease the path of normalization and may also warm the current "cold peace" between Egypt and Israel.

> Syria will do its utmost to undermine the Wye agreement. Yet, rapid progress and smooth implementation of the agreement may provide Syria with an incentive to revive negotiations, especially if Netanyahu can start from where former Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres ended.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey

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