

Why, Oh Wye, Americanize Mideast Conflict?

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Is the Wye River Memorandum mediated by President Clinton another Camp David -- a historic breakthrough toward Middle East peace -- or a technical accord tying up the loose ends of previous unimplemented agreements? The answer is "both."

The rustic plantation site and the near-constant involvement of the president offered a dramatic setting to deal with less-than-dramatic issues. Virtually everything on the Wye agenda had already been agreed in principle in the past, especially in the January 1997 Hebron Accord, the last agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. However, several aspects of the Wye agreement do have much wider reverberations. The Israeli territorial concession at Wye is the final nail in the coffin to a claim by any major Israeli political party to "all the land of Israel." While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud had previously agreed to "redeploy" from chunks of the West Bank, this new accord translates that promise into reality, in a stunning way.

According to the accord, Israel will transfer 14.2% of territory currently under joint control (Zone B) to sole Palestinian control (Zone A). In addition, a further 13% of territory under sole Israeli control (Zone C) would change hands -- 1% to Zone A and 12% to Zone B. That would constitute a six-fold increase in the size of Zone A created when the Labor Party was in power. Overall, this agreement means that the Likud sanctions full or partial Palestinian control of 40% of the West Bank, up from 27%.

Effectively, this is the tacit Likud acceptance of some form of Palestinian entity -- state? -- as the eventual outcome of the peace process. The only remaining questions are how large and how sovereign that entity will be. In return for that major concession, Israel won some significant victories at Wye, the biggest being a strengthened security cooperation accord that passes the muster of hawks like Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon.

Israel asked for, and the Palestinians readily agreed to, an enhanced role for the Central Intelligence Agency in supervising anti-terrorism efforts. This would mark an unprecedented -- and potentially risky -- expansion of the American role in overseeing the execution of a Middle East peace accord. U.S. intelligence officers could have a role in checking everything from the confiscation of illegal Palestinian weapons to the size and composition of the Palestinian police force.

The danger here is that a new role as arbiter of Israeli-Palestinian disputes would muddy the prime mission for U.S.

intelligence officers in Israel -- to work with the Israelis against common threats. Given that no supervisory mechanism in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict has ever been dismantled, this could entail an open-ended, long-term role for the CIA in a conflict not our own. Evidently, however, this was such an improvement over the faulty security set-up now in place that even skeptics accept it as the less-bad option.

Mr. Netanyahu also won a symbolic achievement that addresses Israeli skepticism of Palestinian intentions -- yet another but far more specific promise to modify the PLO charter. Ever since the Palestine National Council (PNC) met in May 1996 to endorse a "decision to cancel" clauses incompatible with making peace with Israel -- an act applauded at the time by then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres and supporters have fought a lonely, uphill battle to convince the world that the PLO had promised to act but in fact hadn't. While Yasser Arafat technically avoids a new PNC session, Mr. Netanyahu is likely to be vindicated through the convening of an even larger gathering of Palestinian notables to confirm the revocation of articles in the charter that are antithetical to peace. The accords even specify a date certain for this event, which Mr. Clinton himself will attend.

Similarly, Mr. Netanyahu's campaign to free imprisoned spy Jonathan Pollard may make many Americans chafe but it resonates well in Israel, across party lines. Pollard was an Israeli spy active during a Labor-Likud coalition government; responsibility for his actions is spread across the political spectrum. Mr. Netanyahu narrowly failed to win Pollard's freedom but did elicit a pledge from Mr. Clinton to "seriously" study the matter. On the negative side, mixing the Pollard case with the Wye talks only confirms the regrettable trend toward the Americanization of the Israeli Palestinian dispute, a process that has been gathering steam for the past two years.

On several key issues, the Wye summitters apparently punted. Will there be a fight over still another Israeli "redeployment"? Wye sets up a committee to address the issue. Can Mr. Arafat continue to threaten a unilateral declaration of state hood that would scuttle the process altogether? Wye only reaffirms past promises to avoid "unilateral acts" that affect the ultimate disposition of the disputed territories. And, lest we forget, there are the core issues -- Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees and the question of a Palestinian state-that Wye does not address at all.

In the end, the Wye agreement solves some, but not all, of the problems that have embittered Israeli-Palestinian relations. But in light of the unhappy legacy of past agreements, this accord will be judged not by what was achieved on the Eastern Shore of Maryland but on whether those achievements are executed faithfully and fully in the West Bank and Gaza. ❖

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