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## THE WHO, WHERE, AND WHAT OF WYE

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### **The Significance of the Wye Agreement / The World After Wye / The Achievement of the Wye Memorandum / The Cost to Israel's National Interests / The Palestinian Reaction to the Wye Agreement**

The signing of the Wye Memorandum at the White House capped nine days of round-the-clock negotiations. After twenty consecutive hours of talks that began on that Thursday morning, the deal seemed to be clinched at dawn on Friday but was put on hold when Prime Minister Netanyahu balked at President Clinton's refusal to free convicted spy Jonathan Pollard. When an understanding was finally reached, the signing of the agreement was rescheduled for the late afternoon. By the time the White House ceremony ended, there were less than ten minutes to spare before the onset of Shabbat.

#### **The Significance of the Wye Agreement**

The most important thing about the agreement is the agreement itself. The significance of the Wye Memorandum is that it was signed by leaders of a Likud-led government. Netanyahu, in signing the Wye Memorandum at the White House, has aligned himself with the will of the people of Israel. Opinion polls in Israel consistently show that the majority of Israelis support and want the Oslo peace process to continue. Binyamin Netanyahu and the

Likud party are now wedded to the peace process. Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and the Labor party conceived the idea and forged its framework. But it is Netanyahu who has made the peace process into the consensual will of the Israeli people. The long months of stalemate and stalling have come to an end. Netanyahu has indeed crossed his rubicon and opted for pragmatic political leadership rather than ideological blindness. True, there still remains the ideological extreme right, whose members regard handing over even a part of the land as a sellout. But Netanyahu, in signing the Wye Memorandum, has effectively shoved them to the political hinterland.

The extreme right has yet to recognize the reality surrounding the Wye Memorandum and the overwhelming public support for the peace process. Their attempts to bring down the government, the Land of Israel Front actions in the Knesset, and the demonstrations in the street are the rear guard action of a militant minority who are frustrated in their inability to impose their will on the majority. Unfortunately, the intemperate and incendiary

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language of these extremists is all too reminiscent of the atmosphere before Rabin's assassination. Their ugly invectives have already led to stepping up security for Netanyahu, Sharon, and Mordechai.

The National Religious Party daily newspaper *Hatzofe* ran an editorial, "Netanyahu is good for the Palestinians." This is a play on the campaign slogan which many believed put Netanyahu over the top in the 1996 election. That campaign, bankrolled by a \$1 million contribution by an Australian Lubavitch multimillionaire, plastered the country with the slogan, "Netanyahu is good for the Jews."

The rejectionist front in the Knesset may be able to bring down the Netanyahu government and bring about new elections, or conversely, to push the Likud into a unity government with Labor, but its threat to establish a new "genuine" right-wing party that would run its own candidate for prime minister is a fruitless and hopeless exercise.

A new reality has been created at Wye Plantation. This is Netanyahu's agreement. Both the Oslo agreement as well as the Hebron accord were regarded by Netanyahu and, more importantly, by his constituencies as legacies that he had inherited from the previous Labor government. However, the Wye Memorandum is his. By virtue of the White House signing, both he and the party of Jabotinsky and Begin are now signed on to a peace process which involves surrendering parts of the Land of Israel. Unlike the Hebron accord, which Netanyahu portrayed as an unwanted piece of unfinished business left over from the previous Labor administration, this agreement is all his own doing.

### The World After Wye

By signing the Wye Memorandum, Netanyahu has moved over to the political center. This is the true significance of all the posturing and gamesmanship which went on at Wye Plantation, but should not obscure the new reality that has been created. This is Netanyahu's agreement, and the responsibility for it falls squarely on his shoulders. A Likud prime minister, heading a right-of-center government, has now signed on to handing over Israeli-controlled territory in the historic biblical homeland of Judea and Samaria to the Palestinians.

What Netanyahu achieved at Wye Plantation did not come without considerable cost. He succeeded in signing an agreement to save the peace process after months of sterile wrangling, but, to gain the support of his right-wing constituency in Israel, he had to hang tough. Unfortunately, this also meant offending and

insulting the American peace team, including even the president of the United States. As David Makovsky of *Ha'aretz* newspaper reported, "Israeli officials behaved as if it was a stage, with right-wing supporters in Israel as the play's audience and President Bill Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, CIA Director George Tenet and the American peace team as mere props. This focus on gimmickry is sad from Netanyahu's perspective, since it served mostly to distract attention from the merits of Israel's case rather than amplify it."

From the very beginning Netanyahu was intent upon demonstrating to his right-wing constituency that he was nobody's puppet nor could he be pushed around. The Americans requested not to bring spouses — Netanyahu could not be without his wife, Sara. The Americans requested participants not to leave the plantation — Netanyahu was determined to rendezvous with the settlers demonstrating outside as well as to stroll and windowshop with his wife in a nearby town.

That two Israeli ministers, Natan Sharansky and Ariel Sharon, failed to arrive on time for the negotiations meant that the first few days were wasted and supposedly rubbed U.S. officials the wrong way. According to reports, this was compounded by the apparent insult when Netanyahu's bureau chief, Uri Elitzur, indicated that he wanted to bring the Jewish settlers into the closed area to participate in the Shabbat *minyan*. "The ostensible problem was not a dearth of Jewish men already at the summit, but that traditional Jews, including members of the Clinton administration, were not acceptable as part of the *minyan*."

The most glaring example of gimmickry was supposedly the threat by the Israelis to leave the talks. A declaration that the Israelis had set a four-hour deadline did not go over well with their American hosts, according to reports. Of course, the Pollard fiasco at the very end of a wearisome week only deepened ill feelings.

Yet all of this, staged or otherwise, did serve the purpose of persuading the right-wing camp in Israel that their prime minister had done everything he could to minimize the damage of the Oslo agreement. The signature of a right-wing prime minister on an agreement to pull back from portions of the Land of Israel may have been worth it. It was something Netanyahu perhaps could not have done more quickly.

### The Achievement of the Wye Memorandum

Despite critics who claim that there is little in the Wye agreement to justify the interminable delays and incessant wrangling, there is a clear impression, at least

on paper, that the section of the agreement dealing with security is both impressive and promising. For Netanyahu's right-wing constituency this is decisive.

The Palestinian Authority signed a commitment to conduct a comprehensive, thorough, and continuous war against all terrorist elements and infrastructures. This time the United States will be the one to supervise and confirm that Arafat upholds his commitments according to a detailed timetable. The details of the Palestinians' security commitments, the timetable established for the implementation, which promises reciprocity between them and the Israeli withdrawals, and the American involvement in all stages of security implementation are, from an Israeli standpoint, the main innovations and advantages of the agreement that was achieved.

What all this means is that we are no longer talking about a right and left in Israeli politics. The debate about territories for peace is over. Netanyahu simply reformulated the equation so that it reads territories for security and peace. Now there is a national consensus and support for a peace process conceived by the left and implemented by the right.

If Netanyahu can push the agreement through his right-wing cabinet, estimates are that the agreement will gain a lopsided majority in the Knesset vote. Speculation is that the agreement should have the support of over 90 members of the 120-member Knesset. A breakdown of the possible vote shows 93 MKs supporting the agreement, with only 16 opposed and another 11 as yet undecided.

The 9 MKs from the National Religious Party represent the only substantial bloc to oppose the Wye agreement and may or may not carry out their threat to bring down the Netanyahu government. However, there is every reason to believe that Netanyahu, having established himself as the leader who can bring both security and peace, does not have to worry that much about his political future.

### **The Cost to Israel's National Interests**

The way the negotiations played out at Wye may have strengthened Netanyahu politically, however, it did entail considerable cost to Israel's national interests.

The eighteen-month delay in implementing this second redeployment, as well as the bickering and wrangling, cost Israel the trust of many of its friends as well as undermined Israel's relations with the United States, Egypt, and other Arab countries. The Wye agreement nails down those commitments made at Oslo but utterly lacks the spirit of Oslo, of building trust and conciliation.

More significant is the fact that Oslo was achieved without American involvement. This time the president of the United States devoted close to 100 hours to personally sitting day in and day out in trying to hammer out an agreement. What this means is that the United States, in being a signatory to the Wye Memorandum, is not a mere witness to the accord. Rather, the United States is, to all intents and purposes, a third side to this agreement. It is virtually a trilateral agreement. The request and expectation that the Americans would release Jonathan Pollard in exchange for Israel's releasing Palestinian prisoners is evidence thereof. America has moved from being a facilitator to becoming a mediator arbitrating between the two feuding sides.

When Clinton first came to presidential power, the United States still considered the PLO to be a terrorist organization. At Wye, the Palestinians, who do not even have a state, received the same status as the delegates from Jerusalem. Indeed, in the name of once again annulling the Palestinian Charter, the president will travel to Gaza to speak to the Palestinian National Council and other Palestinian leaders. One can only speculate as to how a presidential visit will play out. Can there be any better evidence of a Palestinian state than a presidential state visit?

Netanyahu's inability to negotiate directly with the Palestinians over the past year and a half means that it will now be the United States in the form of the CIA and not Israel who will be the final adjudicator as to whether the Palestinians are truly fighting the war against terror. This is the big difference between Oslo and Wye. With Oslo, Rabin's government maintained a bilateral relationship with the Palestinians without any undue outside involvement. Under the Wye agreement, the peace process is now being referred to by some pundits as a "pax Americana." Nothing will move anymore without American involvement and approval. It may well be that Israel will have lost its freedom and flexibility to make decisions on vital security interests. It may have been necessary, but U.S. involvement in the intricacies and details of the peace process is now a fact of life. The dangers inherent in the CIA playing arbiter and monitor are considerable.

Those nations providing troops to the UNIFIL forces in Lebanon, on more than one occasion, have had their relations with Israel turn sour. Military personnel from the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries have been involved in flare ups and confrontations with the IDF which have created misunderstandings as well as diplomatic incidents. If this happens

on the West Bank where CIA agents will be monitoring and supervising the security arrangements, it may prove most unfortunate and detrimental to Israel's interests and its relations with the U.S.

#### The Palestinian Reaction to the Wye Agreement

If the Israelis have lost in their relationship with the United States over the Wye agreement, it has been all upbeat and positive for the Palestinians. No wonder the Palestinians at Wye Plantation were more amiable than the Israelis. They did not put on any acts and did not issue any threats. Bringing the Americans into the agreement is an historic achievement for the Palestinians. They will no longer have to settle for what Israeli soldiers have to say at roadblocks or after incidents with settlers. Now the CIA will be in the picture. On the diplomatic level, the Palestinians are achieving what took Israel decades of effort: American recognition and support.

Little wonder that over the weekend following the White House ceremony the Palestinian administration launched a campaign to convince the Palestinian public that the new agreement is a great success. All they had to do was point to the settlers and the right-wing extremists who are portraying the agreement as a terrible disaster. The Palestinian message is clear. If the settlers are angry and demonstrating, then it must be because there is a Palestinian victory. No wonder the Palestinian media provided detailed reports of settler demonstrations.

The Palestinian daily newspaper *Al Quds* wrote, "We have just hammered the last nail into the coffin of the idea of a greater Land of Israel." The Palestinian leadership understands that an agreement with Binyamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon is an achievement several times greater than the Oslo accords signed by the Rabin-Peres government. Little wonder that *Al Quds*

goes on to write that "The Wye agreement is more important than the Oslo agreement."

Even the story of Sharon's refusal to shake hands with Arafat played differently in the Palestinian street. Ignoring the handshake, they reported how Arafat, when he came into the room, saluted Sharon, which Palestinians explained as Arafat waving his hand at Sharon in a defiant gesture. It was as if to say, "In the Lebanon war you tried to wipe me out in Beirut. You called me a war criminal, and you said you would never speak to me. And here you are, negotiating with me."

In order for the agreement to be implemented, trust between the parties and a lot of good will and flexibility are necessary. These are in short supply just now, on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides. It will not take much more than a few attacks to cause the agreement to be derailed or suspended. On the other hand, there are great benefits from the Israeli standpoint to the agreement signed at Wye Plantation. It advances the peace process with the Palestinians and, at the same time, establishes a model and precedent for possible agreements between Israel and Syria on the Golan Heights and in Lebanon. Three fundamental principles were set down in the Wye Memorandum: territorial compromise, strict acceptance of Israel's security needs, and economic incentives to both sides to carry out the agreement.

For both Netanyahu and Arafat the challenge is the same. Do they have the ideological will to implement the agreement and do they have the political wherewithal to make it happen?

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