

Prison of hope: On the ground in Palestine

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

On the ground in Jerusalem, one can see how much syndicated columnist Thomas Friedman overlooks. Friedman, the premier media commentator in the U.S. on foreign affairs, would have us believe that—as a liberal Jewish thinker—he doesn't think Israel should hold on to occupied lands, and he will indeed say that settlements in occupied lands are a bad thing. But in fact he is not against all settlements—only against the “ideological” settlements in isolated pockets of the West Bank and Gaza. For him, the Israeli settlements in Gilo, Har Homa and Ma'ale Adummim (all built on land confiscated from Palestinians) are not really settlements; they are Israeli neighborhoods that conveniently surround the city of Jerusalem.

Friedman's perspective haunted me as I traveled recently in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, talked with Palestinians who live under occupation, and met with Jewish officials who are a party to that occupation. I thought about Friedman's influence as my colleagues and I drove through a settlement with its swimming pool, shopping mall (Ace Hardware and Burger King signs prominently displayed), green lawns and palm trees transplanted from Palestinian farms. I'm often sent copies of Friedman columns by people who praise him as an American Jewish writer who is a voice for peace.

I don't think he is a positive voice in the debate. On the contrary, he symbolizes what is wrong with American liberal thinking on this topic. Friedman is a voice of liberal political and media leaders who are intimidated and controlled by the propaganda machine of the American Jewish lobby in Washington.

What kind of stranglehold does the Jewish lobby have on American debate? Enough to create a new term in our politics: being “McKinneyized,” a reference to Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, who lost her safe seat to another African-American woman who had received massive financial support from Jewish contributors.

Of course, intimidation and funding is what lobbyists do. Their goal is to carry the day for their clients—in this instance, whichever government is currently in power in Israel. The problem is, lobbyists are supposed to influence, not dictate, policy.

As for Friedman's views, Kathleen Christison, former CIA analyst and now a freelance writer on Middle East issues, noted recently in *Counterpunch* that Friedman thinks "Palestinians have no goal in mind other than killing Jews. Palestinians are not resisting Israeli occupation but pursuing the extermination of Israel—'death to Israel'—as he puts it. Furthermore, anyone who argues otherwise is simply part of the Palestinians' 'chorus in the Western diplomatic corps and media, their apologists and enablers.'"

Christison finds that Friedman consistently asserts that the Palestinian intifada is "a reckless, pointless, foolish adventure," chiefly because two years ago at Camp David, Israel and the U.S. gave the Palestinians a credible opening diplomatic offer to end the occupation—an offer that, Friedman claims, "would have satisfied the vast majority of their aspirations for statehood."

Friedman "has been a principal propounder of the 'myth of the generous offer'—the notion that Israel proposed a nearly perfect deal to end the occupation, grant the Palestinians a fully sovereign state in the West Bank and Jerusalem, eliminate Israeli settlements, and give Palestinians half of Jerusalem. But, he has always claimed, the Palestinians rejected the offer because, at bottom, they really want to see Israel destroyed and could not bite the peace bullet."

Friedman's description of the "generous offer . . . conveniently ignores . . . the fact that the Israeli offer at Camp David would have annexed to Israel so many settlements (housing 80 percent of the 200,000 settlers on the West Bank) and so much of the settlers' vast road network that the Palestinian so-called 'state' would have been broken into three almost totally noncontiguous segments, each connected only by a narrow one- or two-mile-wide neck of land, plus a fourth section in Gaza—a reality that would have rendered the 'state' nonviable, indefensible and, perhaps most important, perpetually under Israeli domination."

The diplomatic document currently on the table is the "Road Map," delivered to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon by President Bush's envoy Thomas Burns. The map, designed under U.S. direction by the diplomats of the Quartet—the U.S., Russia, the United Nations and the European Union—is supposed to create a future

Palestinian state built on the same logic as the “generous offer” of bantustans.

It is a plan dead on arrival, because, in the first place, as Friedman certainly must know, it is a plan Sharon will reject. Sharon has already said the plan is unacceptable in its present form, which means that he will keep winking at George Bush until the American war against Iraq is launched, after which he will continue to tighten the prison conditions in which he has placed the Palestinian population. While world attention is diverted to the war with Iraq, Sharon will assassinate “terrorists”—thereby, he thinks, further weakening and intimidating the Palestinians.

But like all deceptions built on violence, this plan won’t work. The Palestinians know that Israel cannot indefinitely occupy and oppress a territory with over 3 million people.

We walked through the Dheisheh refugee camp outside of Bethlehem with a young man named Jihad, who told us that the future of Palestine lies in the creation of its own civil society and an educated, cultured population. A civil society is indeed the key to Palestine’s future, and such a society will be built by the young. Jihad is a dancer, part of troupe that performs in the camp and outside it, when permits are granted. Sometimes, culture comes to the Palestinians, as it did when Beautiful Mind, a Christian rock group from Sweden (sponsored by a Swedish Christian education center) performed a series of concerts to wildly cheering crowds, mostly made up of young Muslims who didn’t understand the words but certainly rocked to the music.

Education is critical to any democratic society, something that Sharon clearly acknowledged when he ordered the destruction of Palestinian education records under the guise of “searching for militants.” That was not the action of a leader who envisions a civil society for Palestinians.

But Sharon cannot change Palestinian culture, a culture in which extended families sustain one another through the harshest of times. And the family is the heart of Palestinian culture (and half the population is under the age of 15).

Bir Zeit University is one of several Palestinian universities that continue to train future leaders under the harshest military restrictions. I spoke with Hanna Nasir, the longtime president of Bir Zeit, who was recently appointed by Yasir Arafat as chair of the commission to oversee future parliamentary elections. He admitted he doesn’t know if elections for parliament will be held in January, as scheduled, but said “we

are preparing for the time when they will be held.”

It is hard to imagine a democracy holding elections with candidates and voters confined to prison-like conditions with little hope for campaigning and no opportunity for political discussions.

Sharon is not interested in a Palestinian election. As part of the charade he is conducting, he demands that Arafat “end the violence,” but he destroys all of the police structures and every part of the Palestinian infrastructure needed to operate a police force, and he confines Arafat to the last standing building in Ramallah’s prison compound, connected to his people and the outside world only by his cell phone.

Our group walked through the rubble of buildings to visit Arafat in his headquarters. We were warmly received by a man who is now totally isolated from all official American contact, as dictated by Sharon. It was clear in our discussions that Arafat looks back with nostalgia to the days of the Oslo accords, when he and Yitzhak Rabin were “partners for peace.”

Meanwhile, in Gaza, where Israeli tanks regularly invade border towns, kill civilians and blow up crowded apartment buildings, and in Ramallah, where Arafat sits surrounded by admiring aides and an Arab press that records his every public utterance, a civil society waits to be born. It will come. Some day historians will look back on this period as the time of the great imprisonment, the dark before the dawn. It is a time when Israeli soldiers are forced to be prison guards for an entire society. The bored English-speaking soldier who only glanced at our passports told us his mother was from Pennsylvania. It wasn’t hard to imagine this young man joining Palestinians at the rock concert in Gaza—but now he can visit them only in a tank.

This situation cannot continue. You have only to sit down for lunch with a Palestinian family as I did to discover that the future is really quite bright. It is bright because the three-year-old Palestinian child who shared her salad with me—she likes *bandura* (tomatoes) the best—wants only to sleep peacefully without the fear that soldiers will come into her house in the middle of the night, as one unit did recently.

Israeli parents, who live in constant fear of suicide bombers, also know this situation cannot continue. That is why the future is bright. Truth crushed to earth will rise again. Ariel Sharon, or whoever follows you, take note.