

The Hebron Agreement:

A Closer Look

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky), [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Jan 27, 1997

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

The weeks between the Hebron agreement and the first phase of Israel's "further redeployment" in the West Bank have already produced an uncommon still in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, with tourism officials undertaking a joint marketing scheme under the motto: "Peace -- It's a Beautiful Sight to See." In this critical "time out" period, it is important to clarify the key achievements that permitted both parties to claim "victory" less than four months after riots and violence had brought the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to the precipice of collapse.

* For Arafat, the major achievement was to expand the Hebron talks beyond their original, limited mandate and win de facto Likud support for - or at least grudging acceptance of - the process of "territorial compromise" in the West Bank that had been inaugurated under Labor. This was reflected in Israel's commitment not just to follow through on the delayed Hebron redeployment but to implement the three "further redeployments" mandated under the Oslo II accord. Trading several months of delayed Hebron redeployment for the end of "Revisionism" among mainstream Israelis is, for Arafat, an historic accomplishment - and a bargain.

* For Netanyahu, the major achievement was to win American support for Israel's view that defining the depth of "further redeployments" does not require negotiations with the Palestinians. This means Israel alone will determine which pieces of West Bank rural territory will be ceded to Palestinian administration over the next eighteen months and which will be kept under Israeli control as "specified military locations" - an Oslo II phrase with echoes from Camp David that Netanyahu interprets to mean any area of importance to Israeli security.

Timing: Netanyahu had also promised his Cabinet not to give the Palestinians a commitment to a "date certain" for the third redeployment, and, through diplomatic acrobatics, he succeeded. Technically, the fact that redeployments are supposed to conclude by August 31, 1998 - a year later than outlined in Oslo II - is only the "U.S. view," as noted in letters to Netanyahu and Arafat by Secretary of State Christopher and amplified in a note by Special Middle East

Coordinator Dennis Ross. While this technicality has the potential to create U.S.-Israeli disagreement down the road, Netanyahu evidently believes it preferable to a contractual commitment to the Palestinians.

Toward Final Status: So far, Israel has withdrawn or redeployed from roughly 29 percent of the West Bank, including 3 percent in Zone A (urban areas under total Palestinian control) and 26 percent in Zone B (areas under shared Palestinian-Israeli control). Under the Labor government, most observers thought the three further redeployments would give Palestinians control over some 80 percent of the West Bank, mostly on a Zone A basis, but that is now unlikely. Netanyahu will still have to pass the unwritten test of "reasonability" in defining the extent and content of redeployments, but he reportedly plans to implement them mostly on a Zone B basis and leave the Palestinians with only 50-60 percent of the West Bank in toto, thus enhancing Jerusalem's bargaining leverage before the May 1999 deadline for completion of "final status" talks.

On three other points, Israel appears to have made important gains as well. First, in terms of Hebron itself, the new protocol does improve upon the original security arrangements -- in potentially important, even if not fundamental, ways. These have to do with restrictions on Palestinian police firearms, wider buffer zones for Palestinian police operations, enhanced joint security efforts and restrictions on Palestinian construction.

> Second, of potentially longer-term significance was Israel's affirmation of a right to settle within Hebron, foreshadowing a future final-status negotiating clash. The new Israeli approach is a clear departure from that of the Rabin-Peres era, when most observers presumed the Jewish presence in Hebron would be wiped away in the tide of "final status" arrangements. In contrast, Netanyahu emphasizes that his goal is to "preserve and consolidate" the Hebron Jewish community. It is a near-certainty that Netanyahu, in final status talks, will insist on a continued Jewish presence in Hebron -- "a place of supreme importance to the Jewish people for over 4,000 years" - under Israeli control. Fending off Cairo-backed demands for joint patrols, Israel also managed to maintain its control over all security aspects of the Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque.

> Third, Israel has thrust the issue of the PLO Charter back into the forefront of the process. In May, when the Palestine National Council approved a resolution that it "had decided to amend the Charter" to bring it into conformity with the Oslo Accords, then-Prime Minister Peres praised the move as the most significant ideological shift of the twentieth century, and governments around the world - including the United States - acknowledged it as fulfillment of the PLO's contractual obligation. Netanyahu, and the Likud, argued differently, that it was only the beginning of a process of compliance, not its end. The Hebron accord - under which the PA commits to completing the process of Charter revision - validates the Likud's view.

Potentially another Israeli achievement in the agreement was the commitment of each side to implementation of unfulfilled Oslo II obligations "on the basis of reciprocity" and "immediately and in parallel." This was one of Netanyahu's principal "talking points" since his election, and its inclusion in the agreement is, at the least, a political achievement. How it will be implemented, however, remains unclear. No linkages or timetables for fulfillment of outstanding Palestinian obligations are noted in the text. In practice, the Likud government, like Labor, will have to choose which unfulfilled obligations are "deal-breakers," which will be temporarily overlooked and raised at a later date, and which may never be raised again. (Indeed, The New York Times reported that significantly more than the 400 Palestinian policemen permitted under the agreement appeared to be taking up positions in Hebron, some with firearms banned under the agreement; so far there has been little protest from Jerusalem about a seeming violation of a core element of the Hebron agreement.) Also, "reciprocity" is a two-way street - there are sure to be some obligations that Israel will have its own difficulties in fulfilling, e.g., safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza, which poses real security challenges.

The U.S. Role: The Hebron agreement raises important questions about future U.S. peace process diplomacy. For the first time since Madrid, the U.S. played a crucial role in devising and drafting most elements of an Israeli-Arab

accord. Distrustful of the PLO, Netanyahu relied on U.S. negotiators as much as his own to get an agreement he believed essential to Israel's security and diplomatic standing and his own political survival. In so doing, he sanctioned an entirely new sort of U.S. role, opening the door to potential clashes with Washington when inevitable confrontations emerge with Arafat over the extent of each side's compliance with commitments. Managing U.S.-Israeli relations in this new environment will require closer U.S.-Israeli diplomatic coordination than ever before.

Washington has already begun to build a post-Hebron relationship with the Likud through a diplomatic offensive to convince the Arab world to "unfreeze" relations with Israel. While Likud has generally been dismissive of the "New Middle East," it recognizes that normalization is an important barometer of Arab political intentions. The fact that an Arab League summit threatened to halt normalization just one month after Netanyahu's election confirmed to many Likudniks their worst fears about the Arabs; today, after the Hebron agreement, an Arab resumption of normalization would mark recognition of the importance of the Netanyahu government's move on the peace process. At this early moment, there are already positive signs from Oman, Jordan and even Yemen; a major Egyptian company, Kato Industries, has even indicated intent to buy a stake in Israel's largest industrial group, Koor Industries - the first-ever direct purchase of Israeli shares by an Arab company. In the run-up to "further redeployments," the U.S. role in improving Israel's ties with the wider Arab world - including a jumpstart to the nearly forgotten multilateral talks - will go far toward convincing the Israeli government that its historic compromises in the Hebron agreement are recognized far beyond the confines of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

Policy #117

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)