

Understanding Arafat's Strategy

by [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

Feb 10, 1994

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Cairo agreement initialed yesterday by Chairman Arafat and Foreign Minister Peres is an important step toward the implementation of the Oslo accords, though hard negotiations remain ahead before any Israeli troop withdrawal can begin. This agreement, however, will not put to rest the wonderment, impatience, anger, and especially exasperation expressed by Israelis and U.S. officials alike at the way Arafat conducts negotiations. In private talks, top PLO officials level the same kind of criticism, although they are far more experienced in the endless maneuverings of their chairman. Nonetheless, one often gets the impression that there has been no serious effort to evaluate how Arafat himself perceives the issues.

Not infrequently, Jerusalem (and Washington) make assumptions about Arafat's "self-evident" interests, only to discover later that these assumptions do not necessarily coincide with the deeper logic of his position. Arafat has sprung no surprises in his moves in recent months; rather, his interlocutors surprised themselves. At no stage has Arafat felt obliged to fulfill the expectations of his new partners, and this is the way it will be in the future, too. What has emerged during the negotiations on the implementation of the Gaza-Jericho agreement is no more than a preview of the way he will perform when it becomes a reality.

The "Sanctity" of the Oslo Agreement

From Arafat's point of view, the Declaration of Principles (DOP) includes some important achievements that must not be endangered, like the recognition of the PLO, which opened his way to the White House (and more recently to the Saudi Arabian royal court) and Israeli withdrawal within the borders of Mandatory Palestine. These make the agreement a major historical milestone -- the gains must be exploited and perpetuated. At the same time, the DOP's less desirable elements, which touch on the nature of the interim regime in the territories, must be evaded or at least improved significantly. In Arafat's eyes, the DOP and recognition were the down payment for what he is expected to deliver: ridding Israel of Gaza.

Gaza-Jericho -- A Necessary Evil

Arafat sees in the establishment of a "national authority" in the Gaza Strip and Jericho the danger of a trap which would entangle the PLO in the problems of the disadvantaged population, harness it to an active security partnership with Israel, and lead to a process of "derevolutionization" of its ranks. At this stage, he has no interest in excelling as

an efficient administrator or architect of economic rehabilitation. And he certainly has no desire to be depicted as a kind of Palestinian General Lahad, fighting against the "armed struggle" of other Palestinian organizations. This is why there was no urgency in his efforts to reach a rapid implementation of the agreement. Few serious preparations were made for receiving control, and the advantages of tough and prolonged bargaining were preferred. If Israel assumed that Gaza is an attractive asset to Arafat, it soon became clear that in his eyes it was more a burden that he could not avoid having to carry.

The Transitional Period as a Springboard

Arafat has no reason to make the interim regime a model of stability, reduce tension, or strengthen the alliance with Israel. His assessment is that this will be a period of internal struggles and disappointments in the Palestinian camp; there will not be any dramatic improvements in the economic situation; and, terror attacks will continue or even increase. Arafat's desire to stabilize his control over Gaza and Jericho does not necessarily mean that he will strive for peace and quiet. For him, ongoing friction with Israel -- and there will be no lack of issues of contention -- and an environment of insecurity will escalate the pressure and expedite the bargaining on a permanent settlement. Crisis must be a constant feature of the interim period, short of allowing Israel to stop the process.

West Bank Autonomy -- A Superfluous Stage

Arafat -- and many policymakers in Israel -- consider negotiations on early empowerment on the West Bank (excluding the Jericho enclave) and the redeployment of the Israel Defense Forces an impossible, or at least unproductive, exercise. It is clear to him that those talks will go on, at best, until close to the start of negotiations on the final settlement. It is therefore preferable to shift the focus at the outset to the final objectives, skipping the general elections stage. This will be done, of course, while publicly insisting that this stage of the DOP be carried out fully to the extent this is possible.

The Preservation of the PLO in the Diaspora

Arafat does not intend to carry out a transformation of the PLO by moving it lock, stock, and barrel to Gaza or Jericho. Rather, he means to transplant parts of the existing structure, like the upper bureaucratic and military echelons, to the autonomous areas, while keeping other parts outside. He himself does not contemplate settling permanently in Jericho (and definitely not in Gaza). He will rule by means of the shuttle system, with executive positions going to expendable figures whom he will supervise individually and directly from afar. Parts of the PLO's security and intelligence apparatuses, as well as diplomatic, financial, and administrative units will remain outside. His plan is to create a situation in which the National Authority in Gaza-Jericho remains subordinate to the PLO's governing institutions, which will convene alternately in the territories and outside.

Postponement of the Understanding with Jordan

Arafat is not interested in coming to an all-embracing agreement with King Hussein on the future links between the Palestinians and the Hashemite kingdom. This is a question he wants to leave open, while avoiding an untimely confrontation with Jordan. From his historical perspective, the issue of who rules Jordan will have to be decided at a later stage, and the right conditions must be created gradually. For now, his principal aim is to stop the erosion of his status among Palestinians on the East Bank, a considerable number of whom support Hamas, while others dissociate themselves from the deal with Israel, for fear that it undermines their position in Jordan.

Healing the Rift in the Palestinian Arena

Arafat is pleased that the rejectionist organizations and Hamas have not yet set up an alternative to the PLO. From his point of view, this is a significant achievement that clears the way for a renewed understanding in the future with his rivals of today. First, he would like to see a truce between Fatah on the one hand, and the Popular Front and

Hamas on the other, and inclusion of their representatives in the government (including on the fringes of the "police," which is actually supposed to be more of a small army with limited weaponry). In the next stage, he will try to mobilize support for his positions on the permanent settlement. The dialogue with the opposition will continue on every level, aided by the constant tension in his relation with Israel and the intermittent violence in the territories.

Reaching Out to Syria

With all the hostility between Arafat and Hafez al-Assad and the long-standing disagreements between the PLO and Syria, Arafat apparently believes that his interests ultimately demand fitting into a peace package centering on an Israel-Syria agreement. He sees advantages in coordinating with Syria in future talks on a final settlement, and in linking the implementation of a settlement on the Golan to progress in the Palestinian arena. He believes that he and Assad can strengthen each other vis-à-vis Israel at critical moments; even if Assad recoils from open partnership, Arafat will try unilaterally to compel Syria to take him into consideration.

Finally, Arafat knows that he must be sure that his tactics must not erode the basic support of the Israeli public for the deal. This consideration limits his room for maneuver and will compel him to pursue a careful balancing act, i.e., in terms of terrorist activity and in staging demonstrative gestures, such as seeking to pray in Jerusalem or trying to court the Israeli-Arab population.

Ehud Yaari is Arab affairs commentator for Israel Television and an associate of The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #114

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)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-
analysis/palestinians)