

The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis

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

Dec 10, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Brief Analysis

With the UN Security Council debating a resolution on the Palestinian issue and Saddam Hussein demanding that the Gulf crisis be linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Middle East peace process is again floating to the top of the international community's agenda. Despite the rhetoric in New York and Baghdad, however, little attention has been paid to the changing situation on the ground between Israelis and Palestinians.

In particular, against the background of the Gulf crisis and Yasser Arafat's embrace of Saddam, there are indications that the Palestinian world is undergoing dramatic alterations. Tensions within the PLO are growing sharper. As a result, any initiative to revive the peace process must take certain shifts into account; the parameters of the local political landscape -- especially the status and posture of any Palestinian partner -- will differ markedly from those on the eve of the abortive attempt to hold an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue in Cairo.

Implications of the Kuwait Crisis

- The Palestinian communities of the Persian Gulf are living in the shadow of a serious threat, if not to their very existence then at least to their prospects of remaining the "heartland" of the Palestinian diaspora, both in terms of political and intellectual activity and as a source of financial aid. If Saddam holds on to Kuwait -- which, prior to the crisis, was home to a Palestinian community whose support was crucial to the PLO's success -- he will certainly not stand for any independent activity by the Palestinians there. In fact, it is likely that he will replace them with Iraqis. Similarly, the other Gulf states now regard their Palestinian residents as a threat to stability and will probably move to reduce their number while limiting their freedom of action. The result may be the slow migration of tens of thousands of Palestinians to Jordan, a trend that is already taking shape.
- Subsidies from the Gulf states to the PLO have halted, causing not only a drastic cut in salaries and budgets within the organization, but also a sharp decline in the PLO's "buying power" among the Palestinian masses.
- The gradual transfer of elements of the PLO bureaucracy from Tunis to Baghdad undermines Arafat's authority over his minions, who increasingly tend to answer to Iraq. Saddam has concentrated under his wing an impressive coalition of Palestinian organizations. In addition to the "Western Sector" (the branch for terrorist operations), which embraces the Muin Taher-Jihad Amarin faction of Islamic Jihad, the coalition also includes Sheikh Asa'ad Bayud al-Tamini's Islamic Jihad faction; Col. Muhammed Hawari's terrorist network; Salim Abu-Salem's General Front-

Special Command; Abu Ibrahim's 15th of May group; and the networks of Abu Nidal and Abu al-Abbas.

- Syria's use of the Gulf crisis to advance its control over Lebanon has placed great pressure on the PLO's forces in South Lebanon, including the demand to lay down their arms. While the Syrians may not act swiftly on this issue, Arafat's commanders in the Sidon area are on the defensive and have already been pressed to evacuate the Tufah area on the border with Israel's security zone.
- Saudi Arabia and Egypt are sending signals that they do not rule out the possibility of circumventing the PLO when the political process resumes. In effect, they have pursued a boycott of Arafat similar to the one Syria has maintained since 1983. The Saudis have even threatened to form a "Palestinian brigade" that will not march under the PLO banner.
- In Jordan, the PLO's influence is constantly receding vis-a-vis the Islamic fundamentalists, including desertions by figures that Arafat considered trustworthy.

Developments in the Intifadah

- Arafat loyalists in the territories, including the Unified Command, are losing control of the uprising to Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Arafat has not gained support from supporting Saddam; instead, it is the radical Islamic groups -- which call for an escalation of the struggle, including assaults with knives and firearms -- that are setting the intifadah's pace. Dragged in the wake of the fundamentalist fervor, the PLO was recently forced, for the first time, to endorse the use of "all forms of struggle." Furthermore, the Unified Command has failed to put an end to the indiscriminate killing of "collaborators."
- The "Pact of Honor" between Fatah and Hamas, designed to halt the growing conflict between them, was violated even before the ink was dry. The fundamentalists now make it clear that rather than remain an alternative to the secular nationalists, they aim to take the PLO over from within. Arafat has already proposed that 30 percent of the seats in PLO institutions be allocated to Hamas, and he is prepared to raise the quota.

The Struggle between the "Inside" and the "Outside"

- The DFLP is in the throes of a split that foreshadows things to come. It involves a putsch against the veteran leadership of Nawef Hawatmeh, led by a group of deportees -- such as the Labadi brothers, who founded the Unified Command -- and backed by cadres within the territories. Two issues dominate the platform of this rebel "Renewal Faction": the demand to give the "insiders" decision-making priority over PLO bureaucrats in Tunis about the uprising's course; and, more significantly, the demand to adopt a more pragmatic stance regarding a settlement with Israel.
- A similar process is developing in Fatah, though less vocally and at a slower pace. One example of the trend was the victory of Samir Sbeihat -- a deportee and former member of the Unified Command -- over the veteran PLO leadership in voting for control of the General Union of Palestinian Students, which is funded by the bureaucracy in Tunis.

In conclusion, the PLO faces several new problems. It has lost control over both the intifadah's direction and its expansion -- into Jordan, the Israeli Arab community, and terrorist actions along the borders. While losing support from the Arab states, the PLO leadership faces growing challenges from Hamas, the Palestinian coalition in Baghdad, and the "insiders." Arafat is still maneuvering among all these crosscutting pressures, but the time is approaching when he will have to choose the direction he intends to take. What seems certain is that the pressures driving the PLO toward radicalization are today far stronger than the impulse toward moderation.

Ehud Yaari is the Arab affairs correspondent for Israel Television and an associate of The Washington Institute. He is author of *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising—Israel's Third Front* (with Zeev Schiff, Simon and Schuster, 1990) and the Institute paper *Towards Israeli-Palestinian Disengagement* (Policy Focus #10, August 1989). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

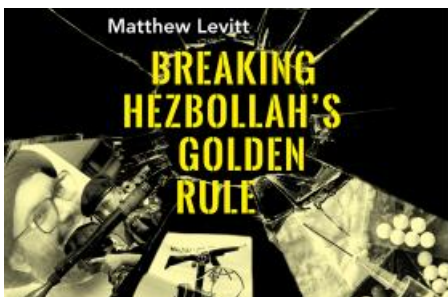
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)