

Assessing Arafat's Performance in the Fight against Terror

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Dec 21, 2001

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On December 16, Palestinian television broadcast a pre-recorded speech in Arabic by Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasir Arafat calling for "a complete cessation of any operation or actions, especially suicide attacks." Since he said many of the right words, it is important to clarify what would constitute a "100 percent effort" against terror.

The Speech

Arafat's plea for an end to terrorist activities was his strongest since the onset of the Intifada fifteen months ago. It was also the first time he spoke directly to his people, in Arabic, about the need to stop the violence. Nonetheless, Arafat's speech was less remarkable for what it said than what it didn't say.

- The speech did not outlaw, condemn, chastise, or even mention by name any specific terrorist group.
- The speech failed to condemn terrorist attacks on humanitarian grounds, calling instead for an end to attacks so as not to provide Israel with the pretext for "military aggression."
- The speech offered no roadmap or timetable regarding specific actions the PA planned to curb the violence.
- The speech stopped short of calling for an end to the intifada.

Instead of explicitly denouncing terrorism and specific terrorist groups, he stressed the theme of "national unity," a synonym for incorporating extremist groups into the PA, not dismantling them. Arafat first initiated the policy of national unity fourteen months ago, when he invited leaders of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and other groups to join his "emergency cabinet" within weeks of the Intifada's onset. In August of this year, the PA extended Hamas and PIJ an official invitation to form a "government of national unity."

Two days after his December 16 speech, Arafat changed his tune. He addressed a crowd outside his Ramallah headquarters and made multiple references glorifying Palestinian martyrdom as a means of winning Jerusalem. He cited a passage promising large rewards for "martyrs" fighting in the Holy Land and said that "one martyr in the Holy Land is worth seventy martyrs anywhere else." He also said that "the martyr Muhammad al-Dura [the twelve-year-old boy killed in crossfire between Israeli and Palestinian forces] says to them [the Jews] from paradise, and all of our

martyrs tell them: we are the nation of heroes." The excited crowd answered, "We are marching, millions of martyrs to Jerusalem."

Arafat's December 16 call to cease attacks has been met with a series of shootings, roadside bombs, and continued mortar attacks—many of which were carried out by Fatah groups subordinate to Arafat. As for Hamas, not only did it reject Arafat's televised call to cease attacks, but it has since threatened to target U.S. interests in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel. Whatever benefit is derived from the December 16 speech will only be achieved by following up with the coercive power of the PA, the vast bulk of which remains under Arafat's control. Today, Hamas distributed a leaflet in Gaza temporarily suspending suicide bombings and mortar attacks in an effort to "preserve Palestinian unity." The eleventh-hour declaration should not be allowed to unduly relieve Arafat of his obligation to dismantle Palestinian terrorist networks in the West Bank and Gaza.

Dismantling the Terrorist Networks

After the December 16 speech, U.S. and European officials once again called on Arafat to demonstrate his leadership by clamping down on Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP terrorists and reining in militants associated with his own Fatah group. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that the PA actions "must include the dismantling of all the terrorist networks, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist organizations." Assessing Arafat's performance in this effort should focus on the following:

Arrest terrorists. The critical test for Arafat will be the arrest of active terrorists, starting with the thirty-six names on the list he received from U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni. Chief among these are bomb-makers Adnan al-Ghoul in Gaza, and Jassar Samaru and Nassim Abu Rus in the West Bank. To date, Arafat has detained no more than around five of these thirty-six (along with 180 low-level Hamas and PIJ members, most under very loose "house arrest"), detained and released a number of militants, and expended considerable capital trying to place political leaders like Sheikh Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantissi under house arrest.

Close offices. Arafat first ordered the closure of Hamas and PIJ offices on December 12, then rescinded the order a couple of days later. Over the last few days, Arafat has reportedly reissued the call to shut the offices of institutions associated with Hamas and PIJ. Palestinian police reported closing some thirty-three Hamas and PIJ offices in recent days, at least some of which are connected to the Hamas social-welfare, or *dawa*, infrastructure. Computers and documents were said to have been carted out of an office in the West Bank city of Jenin. Although unconfirmed, moving against the *dawa* system, which serves as the Hamas logistical and financial support network, would be a welcome development. In a forty-nine page affidavit outlining its case against the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, the FBI recently highlighted the significance of the *dawa* to Hamas operations. The affidavit identifies forty-one Hamas activists who hold leadership positions in ten zakat (charity) committees in the West Bank and Gaza. The document establishes each activist's association with Hamas, as well as his position within the given zakat committee. Furthermore, the document details the means by which these Hamas activists used the zakat committees, and sometimes the recipient social-welfare institutions, to further the Hamas terrorist agenda.

Prevent attacks. Attacks against Israel have noticeably decreased since December 16. Arafat's security forces must act on intelligence and threat information that the Israelis recently shared about terrorist cells in Nablus. Israeli officials said that as of today the PA has not taken action on the threat information, nor has it accepted an Israeli offer to facilitate a Palestinian crackdown in Nablus by pulling its forces out of the city and ceasing all military operations in the area.

Confiscate arms. On December 3, the official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that the PA leadership had declared a state of emergency on the previous day, which stipulated that "only security personnel and other licensed persons are allowed to carry any sort of weapon." Despite this declaration, and its relevant Oslo commitments, the PA

has not begun the systematic confiscation of the thousands of illegal weapons in the hands of Hamas, PIJ, PFLP, "popular resistance committees," and Fatah-associated groups such as the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Moreover, there is no evidence of serious action being taken regarding larger weapons systems, such as mortar factories, or the closing down of smuggling routes across the Egyptian border.

Prosecute and imprison. In the wake of Minister Rehavam Ze'evi's assassination by PFLP terrorists, the PA outlawed the military wings of Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP. This pledge was reiterated in the December 3 declaration of a state of emergency, and was mentioned again in Arafat's December 16 speech. Once detained, Hamas, PIJ, and PFLP terrorists must be prosecuted to the full extent of Palestinian law. Once sentenced, they must serve their full term in real prisons. To date, this has not been the practice, either in terms of prosecution or incarceration. The one Hamas terrorist to be tried and convicted in a Palestinian court, Mahmud Abu Hanud, was praised as a hero by the presiding judge who expressed his displeasure at having to sentence Abu Hanud to twelve years imprisonment for "forming armed bands." Abu Hanud was released from prison in October 2000, and immediately orchestrated a number of Hamas suicide bombing attacks targeting Israeli civilians. He was recently killed by Israeli forces.

Incitement. Arafat cannot expect his call for an end to violence to gain any traction when he speaks of Palestinian martyrdom in glowing terms just two days later. For his conciliatory words to carry any weight, Arafat must cease utilizing his state-run television, radio, and print media to incite the Palestinian street to violence, glorifying suicide bombers, and vacillating on condemning attacks against Israelis.

Conclusion

In the fight against terror, both deeds and words matter; one speech, negated two days later by a subsequent speech, does not constitute an antiterror strategy. Assessing these categories of action provides a fuller picture of the status of Arafat's efforts against terrorism emanating from and within the Palestinian Authority.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #356

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

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

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)