

# End Dialogue If Arafat Stays Unresponsive

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

Jul 12, 2001

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



## Articles & Testimony

As he approaches the half-year mark on the job, President Bush's record on Arab-Israeli issues looks quite heartening. With wisdom born of his predecessor's sour experience, Bush has struck a balance that supports Israel's need for an end to violence, keeps PLO leader Yasser Arafat at arm's length and still promotes a diplomatic plan--the Mitchell commission report--that is universally praised for providing a reasoned path out of the current morass. And, lest one forget, the Middle East has not descended into full-scale regional war.

So far, so good. Yet despite intentions good as gold, cracks have already appeared in the administration's approach. Should they widen, the next six months are unlikely to be as calm as the last.

The first crack concerns the level of U.S. engagement. From the beginning, Bush's prudent distance left the daily business of the peace process to diplomats in the field, far from the halls of power. Over the past eight weeks, however, this pattern has changed. During that time, three envoys have traveled to the Middle East, one more senior than the next, with little substantive change on the ground. Despite the ongoing killings in the region--fueled by Arafat's refusal to arrest terrorists, collect illegal weapons and ban incitement--the next logical step up the diplomatic ladder is the president's own engagement, precisely the scenario the Bush administration has sought to avoid.

The second crack in U.S. policy concerns the very purpose of American diplomacy. Since inauguration, Bush officials have been savvy enough to realize that a peace process train that had led nowhere under Clinton would likely lead to the same destination under Bush. As a result, they threw their weight behind calls for "an end to violence," not efforts to "get negotiations back on track."

But this has changed too. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, has often spoken of the Mitchell report's goal as being "negotiations on final status issues," the agenda on which Camp David collapsed. In fact, the Mitchell report never mentions "final status negotiations" and, as no one contests, the chances that the parties could reach accord on such thorny issues as Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinian refugees any time soon are nil.

For an administration that wanted nothing of Clinton's Mideast legacy, the trend toward greater U.S. involvement and higher diplomatic stakes is a nightmare. It marks the slide down the slippery slope toward exactly what the Bush team should be keen to avoid: presidential engagement to affirm the PLO leader's centrality and a focus on big-

picture negotiations to obscure the messy details of a cease-fire whose responsibilities Arafat has never fulfilled.

Before Bush the Younger finds himself with only bad options, he should consider how Bush the Elder handled a similar situation.

In November 1988, President Reagan authorized the first U.S. dialogue with the PLO. In June 1990, when Arafat refused to condemn a terrorist attack undertaken by a PLO constituent group, President G.H.W. Bush suspended that dialogue. Not until Arafat met Israeli conditions for peacemaking three years later did the U.S. have any formal contact with the PLO.

No serious observer disputes that Arafat is now violating the basic condition of the current U.S. -PLO dialogue, that is, a repudiation of violence in all forms in favor of diplomacy as the sole means to achieve Palestinian goals. Why not issue a statement that the U.S. will give Arafat a certain period--10 days, perhaps--to live up to his anti-terror and anti-incitement responsibilities or else it will once again suspend that dialogue?

Given that there is no conceivable U.S.-sponsored diplomacy that would accommodate Arafat, as Clinton's effort showed, the administration will not be risking "the best chance for peace" by suspending links to him.

In the process, the U.S. would place the onus for a fresh start to Israeli-Palestinian relations where it belongs: on the need for the PLO to satisfy Israel on security.

To complement this step, should it be necessary, the administration should also issue two other statements: one opposing any Israeli retaking of Palestinian-controlled areas, thereby siding against those who want to roll back the Palestinian Authority altogether; and another reaffirming Washington's generation-old commitment to U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, including the principle of territorial compromise.

Taken together, these steps would put the U.S. squarely on the side of those Israelis and Palestinians willing to compromise for the sake of a secure and just peace.

Heresy? Perhaps. Arab leaders will howl and the Europeans will bay, but both are predictable and manageable. Any other problems this idea poses will pale to those that will confront the Bush team if it forever refuses to accept the logic of its own analysis regarding the potential of Arafat as a "peace partner."

There is only so much artful dodging that an administration can do. ❖

Los Angeles Times

---

## 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 \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)