

# Lucky Sharm?

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

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## 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

Three years ago, after a series of horrific bombings in Israel, President Clinton invited an array of world leaders to an anti-terrorism summit in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Clinton's goal was to save the Israeli-PLO peace process and, with it, Shimon Peres's Labor-led government. The process survived, Peres didn't, and the summit had little lasting impact on terrorism.

Last week, Sharm was the setting for a more modest ceremony. Under the motherly gaze of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat signed a major agreement. Whether this Sharm event will have more lasting value than the previous one will become evident in five months, when Israel and the PLO are scheduled to produce a "framework agreement on permanent status"--already known to aficionados as FAPS. This will be a sort of plan to make a plan to settle final status issues.

In many respects, the Sharm accord looks like old wine in, well, old bottles. Ten of its eleven articles either repeat language from past agreements or tinker with their still-unimplemented obligations.

For the Palestinians, Sharm attaches specific dates to past Israeli promises to open a key market street in Hebron, inaugurate a land passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and permit the construction of a Gaza seaport. As for the Israelis, Sharm gives them two extra months to complete withdrawals envisioned in last year's Wye accord and permits Israel to conduct them so that the Palestinians get more contiguous territory while Israel retains the strategic Judean desert. Also, Sharm highlights the bilateralism of Israeli-Palestinian peace, suggesting (if not promising) less direct U.S. involvement, as Barak wants.

None of these changes alters the total amount of West Bank land--40 percent--to be under full or partial Palestinian control by the end of this stage. Still, many of Sharm's clauses are subtle concessions by Israel. For the first time, Sharm affirms in writing a hotly contested oral promise Israel made to release Palestinian "security prisoners." At Wye, Israel had managed to retain linkage between its territorial withdrawals and specific Palestinian obligations, such as confiscating illegal weapons or amending the PLO charter. Israel's Sharm negotiators agreed to specific dates for further withdrawals, without direct linkage to outstanding Palestinian obligations.

In perhaps the most important shift, the Sharm accord commits Israel to a specific date by which "permanent status negotiations" must end: September 13, 2000. Heretofore, the negotiating calendar was left ambiguous, so as not to

provide the Palestinians with a ready-made trigger for a unilateral declaration of independence. Clinton and the European Union had previously floated vague target dates, but Israel's own acceptance of a firm date may give the PLO a deadline on which its patience with talks can "legitimately" expire.

What's in it for Israel? Arafat's assent to the following 29 words: "The two Sides will make a determined effort to conclude a Framework Agreement on all Permanent Status issues in five months from the resumption of the Permanent Status negotiations." Thus the parties agreed that they would no longer pursue a detailed final settlement as the goal of long-suspended permanent status negotiations; instead, the more modest aim would be the achievement of a broad understanding about their future relationship.

But, given the fact that new interim agreements have become a nearly annual ritual in the peace process, why would Barak want to demand yet another one? Sharm is Barak's antidote to the Alice-in-Wonderland quality of Middle East diplomacy, in which the party that has every interest in changing the status quo (the PLO) evinces no desire to engage in good-faith negotiations to accomplish that, while the party that should be generally satisfied with the way things are (Israel) is eager to see them changed. For the last three years, Israelis of varying stripes have tried to get Arafat to engage in "permanent status negotiations" on the issues he ostensibly cares about most about--Jerusalem, statehood, Israeli settlements, Palestinian refugees--but the PLO leader always dodged.

Good-faith negotiations are about compromise, but the PLO believes that it already made its historic compromise by grudgingly--and perhaps not irrevocably--accepting Israel's right to exist within its pre-1967 borders, and that it therefore needs to give no more. As a result, not a single PLO leader has yet to brave ridicule (or worse) by suggesting a compromise on the goal of winning every inch of the West Bank, Gaza, and eastern Jerusalem. Arafat prefers to threaten a unilateral declaration of independence which, even if it were unchallenged, would leave him with less land than he would get in a bilateral agreement. Unlike a negotiated peace, though, for Arafat such a declaration would preserve the right to press his maximal claims.

The FAPS is designed to be the mechanism to force Arafat to reveal his true intentions. Rather than wait until September 2000 or some later date--as the late Yitzhak Rabin intoned, dates are never "sacred" in this diplomacy--the search for an agreement by February 2000 will show whether there is any give at all in the Palestinian approach to a final peace with Israel. In essence, Barak believes he has found a way to reduce the dithering time from twelve months to five.

Additionally, Barak's FAPS timetable meshes with his plan for Syria and Lebanon. If the still-dormant Israeli-Syrian talks finally resume in mid-autumn--President Clinton plans to travel to Turkey in November and just might undertake a surprise Middle East peace shuttle--they may attain critical mass shortly after January 1. That timing might permit Barak to play Arafat off against the Palestinian leader's old nemesis, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad: the prospect of an Israeli-Palestinian FAPS could spur Assad to speed up talks with Israel, lest he be excluded from Arab-Israeli peacemaking once again; or fear of an agreement on the Golan Heights might motivate Arafat to cut his own deal with Israel sooner rather than later. Either way, Israel would benefit.

If Barak's plan succeeds in smoking out Arafat or pitting the Syrians and Palestinians against each other in competition for Israel's affection, it will be deemed brilliant. However, the PLO leader has a long record of turning weakness to advantage, and the text of the Sharm accord itself does not give Israel much room to force Arafat's hand. The last Wye withdrawals are scheduled for January 20, three weeks before the FAPS target date. An American side-letter to the Palestinians promises Arafat that Israel could not hold that withdrawal hostage to progress on FAPS negotiations. And, even in the wording of the Sharm agreement, the Palestinians promised only to make a "determined effort" to reach this framework accord--an imprecise term at best. Chances are that this phase of negotiations will, like its predecessors, skirt breakdown before nearing breakthrough. We'll find out if Barak's gambit was a clever one in five months. Or twelve. Or maybe when the next interim agreement comes.

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