

Next Steps in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Feb 16, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis



On February 14, 2007, Institute senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process David Makovsky testified before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. The following is a synopsis of his testimony.

[Read the complete text of David Makovsky's testimony in PDF format.](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/Testimony-20070214Makovsky.pdf>

The Israeli-Palestinian political landscape has been rather bleak over the last several years. Between 2000-2004, the second intifada brought almost unrelenting terror and violence. Despite Israel's pullout from Gaza in the summer of 2005, the parliamentary victory of the rejectionist Hamas party in January 2006 contributed to this downward trend.

Compounding the problem of peacemaking today has been the inadequate leadership of Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. Both leaders have been weakened -- Olmert by the consequences of the war in Lebanon and Abbas by his willingness to yield to his Hamas rivals. This trend was demonstrated last week at the Mecca summit. The agreement signed there will greatly complicate Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's effort to reach a "political horizon" between Israelis and Palestinians, which is scheduled to be launched next week in Jerusalem at a meeting with Olmert and Abbas.

Secretary Rice's mission is to create a "political horizon" for the Palestinians -- specifically a discussion rather than a formal negotiating channel between Olmert and Abbas -- to see if they agree on principles that would shape the contours of a final deal. According to this view, Rice sees her "political horizon" discussions as both validating Abbas's focus on negotiations instead of violence and as satisfying Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni's belief that such a wide-ranging discussion avoids ensuring that Israeli concessions are made in a contextual vacuum. Livni, and apparently Rice, believe that only under the rubric of discussing principles about a final status agreement can significant tradeoffs be reached and a grand bargain be struck -- and then the Roadmap implementation will flow more easily. In other words, defining the end does not mean immediate implementation of the endgame. Prior confidence-building thresholds should be crossed, including security.

Roadblock at Mecca

It is critical to understand how the recent Mecca summit has undercut this endeavor. While there are favorable

aspects of the Palestinian unity accord, especially the prospect of halting internecine Palestinian violence, the negative side weighs heavily. The Mecca accord is a victory for Hamas, which has achieved its goal of forming a unity government without agreeing to the conditions imposed by the Quartet (the United States, European Union, Russia, and the UN) -- namely, no recognition of Israel, no disavowal of violence, and no commitment to agree to past written agreements.

At Mecca, Hamas resisted Abbas's insistence that Hamas commit to these principles. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Abbas has legitimized an unrepentant Hamas.

A rationale of Rice's political horizon initiative was in no small measure to bolster Abbas at Hamas's expense, to show that progress comes through negotiations and not terror. Israeli officials may wonder how it will be possible to proceed with such weighty issues as a political horizon under such circumstances.

Moreover, there is ample reason for skepticism that the PA coalition policy guidelines will be substantially better than Mecca. Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh will be the prime minister. PA officials are publicly saying the Hamas Executive Force militia will continue and be financed by the PA. Hamas has the right to put forward an "independent" name as interior minister, who could head the security services. All this has implications for U.S. policy. People who felt there was a logic to bolstering Abbas against Hamas's growing strength, and therefore supported the security mission of Gen. Keith Dayton and \$86 million in nonlethal military assistance, must now wonder if the new Palestinian coalition alignment could lead to a very different outcome. The military assistance should be held until a review has taken place and clarifications about the new set-up are critical.

Irrespective of the Dayton and \$86 million questions, the Quartet should keep to its three criteria. Such a commitment by the Quartet has not meant a cutoff of funds to individuals and humanitarian needs. According to the UN special coordinator's office for the Middle East peace process earlier this week, overall foreign aid to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza reached \$1.3 billion in 2006. It is estimated that this is 10 percent above the previous year, although there is an obvious shortfall of tax revenue passed along by Israel.

Testing the 'Political Horizon'

Is the "political horizon" doomed? Perhaps the best way to see if Abbas will pick peaceful compromise with Israel over Palestinian unity on the core issues needed to resolve the conflict is to let Rice pursue her course. The litmus test will be the refugee question. The territorial demands made upon a weakened Olmert will be overwhelming, but without Abbas's willingness to compromise as well, there is no chance that an overall deal can be reached.

It is hard to see how Rice's mission to create a "political horizon" can succeed without the active involvement of the Saudis and Egyptians backing compromises, including the key issue of refugees. Without their participation, Abbas likely will not feel he has the Arab backing to proceed. Therefore, in the wake of the Mecca accord, as the Saudis move from backstage to center stage when it comes to Middle East diplomacy, urgent, high-level U.S.-Saudi consultations are needed about whether or not the two countries share a common outlook toward peacemaking.

A benign interpretation of Riyadh's intentions is that the Saudis realize the risk of radicalism and are ready to take the plunge into Arab-Israeli peacemaking. According to this view, there is a changing regional context and this could create opportunities for the United States. There is little doubt that Saudi Arabia -- along with Egypt and Jordan, from which I recently returned from a visit -- fear that an ascendant Iran upending existing order and pursuing nuclear weapons could change the balance of power in the Middle East. The wakeup call was last summer's war between Israel and Hizballah.

There is a less benign interpretation. It holds that what is driving Saudi Arabia is sectarianism, not pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. Under this view, Riyadh has no problem supporting Hamas's program, so long as it is a Sunni organization and can keep Iranian money and influence at bay.

Therefore, it would be useful for the United States to explore Saudi objectives and strategies. Moreover, for a political horizon to succeed, one needs to consider whether Riyadh and Cairo are willing to do something that they were not willing to do in 2000 at the time of Camp David (July) and the Clinton parameters (December). Namely, they need to provide the requisite political cover for Abbas to compromise. If they do not, they need to know that unlike 2000 they will be politically exposed for failing to do their share. In short, if the Bush administration is really serious about a political horizon, it needs to have a dialogue not just with Israelis and Palestinians but also with America's Arab friends to discern the depth of their commitment to peacemaking in a very specific way.

The Mecca experience suggests that not everyone is on the same page. It is not a good omen, as peacemaking requires broad support. Without such assistance, there is a prospect that the well-intended Rice mission could constitute motion without movement.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. He is the coauthor, with Jeffrey White, of the Institute Policy Focus [Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251>). ❖

Policy #1201

RECOMMENDED



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)



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)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)