

Rice Is Thinking Big, but Will It Work?

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

Jan 11, 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.



Articles & Testimony

Precisely because expectations of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's trips to the Middle East usually plunge lower than the Dead Sea, she seems to feel that she can quietly gauge receptivity to new approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian situation without setting off world headlines.

As President George W. Bush puts forth a new strategy in an uphill battle in Iraq, there have been calls from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and others abroad, as well as calls by the Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton Commission) at home, to demonstrate progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Moreover, Rice entered this administration as one of its brightest lights and now is portrayed by some in the media as lacking diplomatic achievement.

It is against this backdrop that Rice wonders if the Israelis and Palestinians might be willing to accept broad principles that would govern a final status deal. The advantages are clear: 1) An unprecedented statement by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in a speech at Sde Boker about Palestinian "full sovereignty" pending security performance led to no backlash in Israel. 2) Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Rice's kindred spirit, ardently believes a "diplomatic horizon" could facilitate rather than hinder the revival of even the original three-phased sequence of the moribund roadmap since there would no longer be any question about the shape of its ultimate destination. 3) Critically, reaching such principles could vindicate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in his struggle against Hamas as he asserts that the key to a final status deal is negotiations and not violence. 4) It is very tantalizing to at least some in the Bush administration to point to such principles as being not sharply at odds with the Saudi initiative even if terms are not identical, viewing such a move as cementing further the anti-Iran alliance among many Arab states led by Riyadh.

However, the drawbacks are also equally evident: weak leadership on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli divide. Can Abbas, who is locked in a power-struggle with Hamas, compromise on the issue of Palestinian refugees or will he be reviled as someone who betrayed the Palestinian cause? With very poor polling numbers ever since the war last summer, can Olmert agree to Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem without leading to sharp political turmoil in Israel? Moreover, if grand diplomatic pronouncements are not matched with deeds, will Hamas not exploit this and declare it the latest proof that negotiations are bankrupt? If we learned anything from 2000, it is that to try and fail has violent consequences. While the sequence here would be different, the Middle East corollary of philosopher George Santayana's famous edict haunts all: everyone remembers the past, but all repeat the same mistakes anyway.

Undoubtedly, public attention during her trip is likely to focus on security and economic confidence-building ideas that would improve daily life and could effectively bolster Abbas. Washington believes US inaction could guarantee that the Hamas militia in Gaza dubbed the "Executive Force" -- now numbering 6,000 and headed for 12,000 -- gobbles up smaller Fateh security services. To do nothing means acquiescing to a twist on the old intifada bumper sticker: "let Hamas win". However, Rice wants to think bigger than confidence-building.

She does not know if Olmert is ready for such an approach, and one would be wrong to assume that the cautious Rice would publicly dive into something like this without the requisite backing of the parties. At the same time, it is hard to believe that Rice would raise such issues without the blessing of President Bush.

As Rice visits the region, she should dispel some of the mythology that exists in the Arab world on Middle East peacemaking.

1. "If Israel does not go to final status talks, this shows it does not want peace." This is the reductionist, land-driven narrative that sees gradualism as an Israeli plot. It received a boost in the US last year due to contributions by American academics who are not Middle East experts (Walt/Mearsheimer) and by former President Jimmy Carter. This narrative conveniently ignores the fact that some of the biggest obstacles to resolving this conflict in 2000 were not land, but issues of refugees and security. Through land swaps, land seems the most easily resolved of these issues. The other issues helped doom the talks in 2000 and seem even less resolvable now. Apart from the impasse on refugees, security is a problem as well. From the Israeli side, how could the IDF withdraw from virtually the entire West Bank when 1,000 Qassam rockets have fallen on Israel from Gaza since its 2005 pullout? The distinction that Israel views final status talks as desirable but not feasible is seldom heard in the Arab world, even if the difference is heaven and earth.

2. "Everyone knows what the solution is but the parties just do not know how to get there." This makes it sound as if all that is missing is a book on diplomatic etiquette. In fact, rejectionism and terrorism are not marginal phenomena, as Hamas currently heads the Palestinian Authority government.

3. "The Arabs states are for peace. They put forward the Arab Initiative in 2002." It is axiomatic that Arab leaders will urge Rice to press Israel, but it is far from clear that they will do their share. Even though the Arab Initiative is an improvement on the past, there is no doubt that this is a very asymmetrical peace plan. The initiative requires Israel first to do all the front-loaded work by getting out of the West Bank and Golan Heights, with Arab reciprocation delayed, hence less binding. This process would be far more effective if Arab states were to take parallel steps to reinforce progress on all sides. This would bolster the center among Israel and the Palestinians, providing the latter with key political cover. If the Quartet's roadmap is to be revived, it should be matched by an Arab roadmap.

5. "The whole problem of the Arab-Israel conflict is that Israel enjoys too much support in Washington." The Walt/Mearsheimer/Carter thesis is a familiar echo of what famed American historian Richard Hofstadter described in his essay, "The Paranoid Strain in American Politics", about the American right's scapegoating of liberals as communists during the McCarthy period. Perhaps it is not surprising that scapegoating occurs during periods of turmoil like the Iraq War, but it is also unfair. American Jews did not stop Bill Clinton from proposing the partitioning of Jerusalem in 2000, for example.

6. "Everything in the Middle East is linked to the Arab-Israel conflict." Since September 11, 2001, the American public has been treated to an endless seminar on the Arab world. Its conclusion has been that Islamism has very deep cultural and political roots, linked to dysfunctionality in Arab regimes but not driven by the Arab-Israel conflict. The 2000-2004 intifada did not cause a single Arab regime to fall; al-Qaeda prepared its plots at the height of US peacemaking in the Middle East in the 1990s. The Sunni insurgency in Iraq's Anbar province is not driven by the dynamics of Israelis and Palestinians.

The US should be involved in the search for a two-state solution not because of Iraq, but because it wants to find problem-solving solutions that give dignity to both Israelis and Palestinians alike. An elevated debate that avoids unchallenged slogans as well as a carefully orchestrated policy that avoids the pitfalls ahead could even prove Santayana's Middle East corollary to be wrong.

David Makovsky is director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where his latest monograph is *Lessons and Implications of the Lebanon War: A Preliminary Assessment* (2006). ❖

BitterLemons International

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



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)

TOPICS

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

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

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