

Rice's mission: Making demands on Israel too

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to the Middle East in late March, she took along a plan to provide both Israeli and Palestinian leaders with “a political horizon.” The plan, says *Washington Post* reporter Glenn Kessler, depends on her ability to “coax the Israelis” into giving the Palestinians the glimmerings of a Palestinian state while persuading the Arabs to give the Israeli government more room to strike a deal (*Washington Post*, March 23).

These are not political goals; they are diplomatic guideposts toward political agreements. The reference to “the Arabs” in the Rice plan, for example, indicates that the secretary of state is counting on help not only from a unified Palestinian government, but also from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, moderate states in good standing with the U.S.

Secretary Rice must also persuade Israel’s prime minister, Ehud Olmert, that U.S. patience has its limits, even in the case of close friends. Unlike previous U.S. diplomats, she is making demands on both Israel and the Palestinians.

Five months ago I described a dangerous escalation in the Palestinian territories, which seemed headed toward a civil war. It appeared that the U.S. was moving to train Fatah forces to confront Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip.

Condi Rice had a different plan. As a diplomat, she chooses her words carefully, which is why observers took note when, on her return from the region on January 18, she spoke of Hamas with a surprising shift in diplomatic nomenclature.

“[Previously] . . . you had Hamas, of course, sitting out as a resistance movement, not at all, by the way, involved in the politics at all. Now, I know that the inclusion of Hamas into the political system for elections has made things in some sense more complicated.”

The State Department quickly issued its usual declaration that the U.S. still considers Hamas “a terrorist organization,” but Rice did not take back her observation that Hamas is a “resistance movement”—a major language shift in dealing with Hamas.

Paul Woodward, who published Rice’s comments at Conflicts Forum (conflictsforum.org), writes that to describe an organization as a resistance movement implies, among other things, that “it has broad-based civilian support based on a relationship to land and culture—that it is not simply a self-validating ideological collective; [and] that it is a political and militant response to a social reality which the resistance is attempting to challenge.”

This language shift could not have gone unnoticed by Palestinian leaders, who were working to halt street fighting in the occupied territories, conflicts that looked more like urban gang warfare than anything resembling a civil war. Hamas and Fatah political leaders started serious conversations about a future unity government.

Saudi Arabian King Abdullah issued a call to Hamas and Fatah to meet at Mecca to work toward a unity government. The meeting was a success: the two parties agreed to create a cabinet with ministers that would include independents and technicians.

Secretary Rice was now ready for her next Middle East visit. Her way had been prepared by King Abdullah and some sensible Palestinian decision-makers, and some back-channel diplomacy.

Olmert and his cabinet still demanded an absolute boycott of the new Palestinian government. Undeterred, Rice sent Jacob Walles, the U.S. counsel based in Jerusalem, to meet with Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah. This was a signal that she would not be party to a total boycott.

In the March 23 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Ilene R. Prusher interviewed new tourism minister Khouloud Daibes, a Palestinian Christian with a Ph.D. in architecture and a political independent. Daibes told Prusher that the outside world was trying to impose a kind of “collective punishment” on the Palestinians for having made a “democratic choice.”

Daibes said that Palestinians are optimistic about the new coalition government. Meanwhile, Prusher reported that “a slight majority of Israelis say their leaders should talk to the new Palestinian government.”

Prusher identified other moderates in the Palestinian cabinet, including foreign minister Ziad Abu Amr, who has already met with several high-ranking diplomats in Europe. The new minister of information is expected to be Mustafa Barghouthi, a highly respected peace activist who ran against Mahmoud Abbas for president in 2005.

This emerging Palestinian leadership, which includes Hamas, Fatah and independents, wants peace. But it also maintains a realistic political connection to public opinion, the substance of which is perhaps best summed up by Barghouthi: "Palestinians will never accept to be slaves of the occupation or to an apartheid system. . . . A compromise that is less than the areas of 1967, will not provide a strong base for stability."