



## The Middle East: Learning from the Past

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By David T. Jones

**David T. Jones** is a retired Senior Foreign Service diplomat. He served as minister-counselor for political affairs at the U.S. embassy in Ottawa during the mid-1990s and writes frequently on bilateral issues coauthoring, inter alia, *Uneasy Neighb(u)rs*—a study of U.S.-Canada relations and is a regular FPRI E-note contributor. He derived this article from a two-year study with a small group in the State Department Historian's office.

*Abstract: The effort to bring peace to the Middle East has been an almost century long process. Legions of soldiers, politicians, and diplomats have attempted the political equivalent of transmuting dross into gold. They have failed; none more comprehensively than President Bill Clinton and his Middle East interlocutors. Despite personal energy, intelligence, and creativity, U.S. efforts failed. After a stretch of benign/malign neglect, Washington again is venturing into the swamp by sponsoring renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. There are learnable lessons from what has been (mis)managed in the past. The question remains whether the United States will take counsel from them.*

The cynic observes that remarriage after divorce illustrates the triumph of hope over experience. But who can count the number of times Uncle Sam has gone down the aisle with Israel/Palestine/Syria/Egypt? President Barack Obama is now in his “legacy phase,” he has determined that catching flies with vinegar doesn’t work. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu now appreciates there is no “President Romney” option in relations with Washington. Thus, peripatetic Middle East travel by Secretary of State John Kerry culminated in resumed “direct final status negotiations”<sup>1</sup> between Israeli and Palestinian teams at the end of July.

There is no guarantee of success...and much arid ground to re-plow.

### Bureaucratic Background

In early 2002, then Secretary of State Colin Powell tasked the State Department's Historian's office to review the last two years of the Clinton

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<sup>1</sup> “Obama Welcomes Israeli-Palestinian Talks,” *Al Jazeera English*, July 30, 2013.

Administration's Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). For a number of reasons, ranging from changing administrations to the lack of a valid interlocutor, the MEPP was then in hiatus; next steps were both substantively and chronologically unclear. Consequently, during this interregnum, the objective was to compile a full source collection of material pertinent to whatever a new team of negotiators chosen to address the Middle East conundrum would need to know.

The issue is exceptionally difficult and convoluted; the Bush Administration could not assume any of the previous negotiating team would be available when the U.S. government determined to re-engage. A "library" of the MEPP effort with chronology and documentation could provide a basic starting point for any new team and tools for their preparation. The effort was expected to provide the basis for background study and preparation by a new team of U.S. negotiators when again they entered the swamp. To be sure, "no one steps into the same river twice" but neither is history to be ignored lest George Santayana's maxim come into play.

Consequently, the State Department's Historian assembled an expert team. In the process, team members reviewed every obtainable paper and electronic document; interviewed virtually every significant member of the U.S. MEPP team throughout the government; and repeatedly visited the embryonic Clinton library in Little Rock (then housed in a vacant auto dealership) to review NSC/presidential papers.

The effort took more than two years, assembling a massive compendium of material and finally compiled a 75-page assessment of circumstances and events designed for senior officials.

In spring 2004, the document was transferred to the State Department's Historian for editing and review. Eventually, an edited version of that study was transmitted to Secretary Condoleezza Rice. News media reported in February 2007, vaguely, that she had it on her reading stack during the holidays.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, the State Department released to me a separately prepared unclassified MEPP critique *en toto* with no deletions in a letter dated April 20, 2011.<sup>3</sup>

## Substantive Perspective

Whatever its flaws, which Israelis can recount far better and in grimmer detail than any non-Israeli, the country remains more politically and socially democratic and with a firmer appreciation of the rule of law, equality of its citizens, and human rights than any of its neighbors. Consequently, we will look the other way when a 2009 Israeli incursion into Gaza to redress the constant stream of Hamas-generated rockets kills 100 times more Palestinians than Israelis. Nor will we cavil when Israeli ships stop unarmed civilian vessels in international waters and commandeer them—action we otherwise might deem piracy.

<sup>2</sup> "Rice Looks Back for a Way Forward on Mideast Peace," *Washington Post*, Feb. 21, 2007, p. A12, noting Secretary Rice had the study for reading.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Gllovich, Letter to David T. Jones pertaining to Case No. 200705931 PAHO1, April 20, 2011.

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