

Gaza v. Annapolis

By [David Makovsky](#)

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It is tempting to view the current violence in Gaza as just another symptom of the greater Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But it is not. The Hamas-sanctioned rockets and the Israeli retaliation are actually at the core of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's inability to move the peace process even one inch forward since it was launched in Annapolis last November. Stop the rockets, and the process could move.

Annapolis certainly has been plagued with many problems, but nothing greater than the Gaza violence, which undermines any confidence among Israelis and Palestinians that the conflict can be solved.

In Israel, the violence emanating from Gaza undercuts a central premise: that the end of occupation means an end of violence. Israelis believe that they disengaged from Gaza in 2005, but that Gaza did not disengage from them. In 2007 alone, more than 3,000 rockets were fired from Gaza onto Israeli soil.

So now the idea of land for peace has been replaced by land for violence and vulnerability. And if Israelis do not like the book in Gaza, why would they want to see the movie in the West Bank, from where Qassam rockets could reach much of Israel?

Furthermore, the rockets not only put pressure on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to retaliate, but also on Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who is made to appear impotent in the eyes of his public. Abbas was compelled to declare a freeze in the peace talks due to the violence.

Being surrounded by violence makes people view peace as a mirage. Unless treated quickly, the Gaza problem will not go away. Rocket fire could resume as soon as Rice leaves the region, if not before.

The earlier Palestinian rocket, the Qassam, has a range of 10 kilometers, putting the 20,000 Israelis in the town of Sderot within striking distance. Now the Palestinians have imported the Iranian Grad rocket, and have struck the Israeli coastal town of Ashkelon, 15 kilometers from Gaza, with 106,000 residents.

Until now, Rice's Gaza strategy has been to leverage a diplomatic breakthrough on the broader conflict, including the fate of the West Bank. She believed Abbas could use this to bring about his re-election, and thus achieve the political reunification of Gaza and the West Bank.

But things are not likely to get that far. Abbas cannot reach a deal because of the ongoing violence, and Israelis will see Gaza as a cautionary tale against any deal over the West Bank.

There is little question that if Hamas ceases firing rockets on Israel, there will be no reason for Israel to strike back at Gaza. In other words, putting an end to the rocket fire would put an end to the violence. How can this be achieved?

There are a few things Rice could do to improve the situation.

First, there needs to be a meaningful international consensus against such rocket attacks. No country would act with Israel's relative restraint after 3,000 rockets had been fired on its territory.

Second, Rice should urge the Arab states to acknowledge that the rocket attacks must stop. The same Arab League that views borders as sacrosanct has been silent about Arab attacks inside pre-1967 Israel.

Arab delegations came to Annapolis because they understood that peace requires a regional umbrella. It is in the interest of Arab states that an Islamist victory in Gaza not be emulated in the region. Arab leaders condemned Hezbollah's provocation at the start of the 2006 war, and they should do the same against Hamas now.

Third, Rice needs to urge the Egyptians to reach military-to-military cooperation with Israel to plug the tunnels used for smuggling rockets from Egypt to southern Gaza. The United States is sending technology and advisers to Egypt to deal with the tunnels, but there is no substitute for direct Israeli-Egyptian cooperation. And Egypt has its own interest in preventing an Islamist state on its eastern frontier.

Fourth, a de facto cease-fire with Hamas -- facilitated by Egypt or Norway -- cannot be ruled out. It is not a panacea, as some of its advocates believe. Hamas's price may be prohibitive, and it may not be willing to allow its Fatah rivals from the West Bank to take control over Gaza's crossing point.

Furthermore, previous failed cease-fires between Palestinian factions show that Hamas, which is sworn to Israel's destruction, is ideologically loathe to impose a cease-fire on other rejectionist groups.

Even a de facto cease-fire should not be confused with any direct engagement with Hamas. Such engagement can only undermine the Palestinian moderates who have taken risks for a two-state solution.

Should a cease-fire occur, its effectiveness would be based on improved Egyptian-Israeli cooperation along the porous southern Gaza border, where the arms originate. A de facto cease-fire with Hamas must not become a means for Hamas rearmament.

Gaza is itself a problem, but it is also a metaphor for a broader issue. Failure to grapple with it is to ensure the escalation of violence there, and to doom any chance Rice has of reinvigorating a diminishing Annapolis process.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](#) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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