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## Many Plans, No News

Thomas Friedman

In the Middle East today, home of the invention of algebra, a new math seems to have taken over. It is subtraction by addition. It goes like this: Add more trips to the region by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- who doesn't seem to have any coherent strategy -- to an emotionally stale, restated Saudi peace overture to Israel, and combine it with a cynical Hamas-Fatah cease-fire accord and an Israeli prime minister so unpopular his poll ratings are now lower than the margin of error, and you'll find that we're actually going backward -- way back, back to the pre-Oslo era.

Only the bad guys make history in the Middle East today. Only the bad guys have imagination and resolve. Arab, Palestinian and Israeli "moderates" are just watching. Their leaders have never been weaker, and America has never been more feckless in framing clear choices to spur them to action.

We could be and should be doing better. Nearly seven years ago, President Bill Clinton put forward something called the "Clinton plan" for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. For the first time, the U.S. laid out its own detailed design of a fair deal between the parties. That plan called for Israel to give up 95 percent of the West Bank, Gaza and Arab East Jerusalem; for Palestinian refugees to be able to return to Palestinian areas but not to Israel; for the most populated Jewish settlements around Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to remain in place and the others to be removed; and for Palestinians to be compensated for those settlements with land swaps and other arrangements from Israel.

Yes, Yasir Arafat rejected it at the time, and even the Israelis never fully embraced the plan as it was, but everyone knew then and knows now that the Clinton plan is the only realistic framework for peace. The Bush team took the view that since Arafat wouldn't accept it, the Clinton plan was a dead letter and therefore could be and should be forever sidelined. They also put themselves on the sidelines of Arab-Israeli diplomacy for six years, rather than sell anything with the name "Clinton" on it.

So instead of constantly telling the parties that the Clinton plan was the only viable basis for peace, and that U.S. diplomacy would be devoted to building a context for Palestinians and Israelis to act on that plan and a U.S. team to execute it, President Bush gave us scattershot visits by his secretaries of state and minimalist, stopgap measures to engineer cease-fires or talks about talks. Who can name them? "The Mitchell plan," "the quartet," "the Zinni mission," "the Tenet plan," "the road map," the "two plus four plus four framework" and soon the "six plus two" framework.

You can make fun all you want of Bill Clinton's "naive" Middle East peace passion, notes Mr. Clinton's top negotiator, Dennis Ross, but the fact is four times more Israelis and

Palestinians died fighting each other during the "realistic," "pro-Israel," sideline-sitting Bush years of 2001 to 2005 than in the "naive" decade of intense U.S. peacemaking -- dominated by President Clinton -- from Madrid to Oslo, 1991 to 2000.

**Had the Bush-Rice team stuck with the Clinton plan, today, at a minimum, it would have been locked in as the only acceptable formula for peace, and at a maximum we might have gotten there. But the Bush philosophy seems to have been: "A.B.C. -- anything but Clinton," said Gidi Grinstein, who heads Reut Institute, Israel's premier strategy policy group. "But by not endorsing the Clinton parameters, we are back with plans that are much worse."**

Indeed, all that is on the table now is the restated Saudi peace initiative, calling for full peace with Israel after full withdrawal and justice for Palestinian refugees -- with no maps, details or Arab plan for how to pursue it with Israel. And we have the Saudi-brokered Mecca peace accord between Hamas and Fatah, which doesn't even acknowledge Israel.

If you read the Mecca agreement, said Mr. Ross, "Israel appears only as an adjective, not as a noun. Israel only appears in the agreement modifying words like 'aggression' and 'occupation,' but never appears as a noun -- much less as a state to be recognized."

That is what happens when America leaves a vacuum. Others fill it with peace plans that fit their needs first and the needs of a real peace second.

The Bush team reminds me of someone who buys a rundown house that comes with remodeling plans by Frank Lloyd Wright, but insists instead on using drawings submitted by the next-door neighbors. You get what you pay for. Or what you don't pay for. Paul Krugman is off today.