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For Mideast Envoy, Rookie Status May Be an Advantage

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When national security adviser [Condoleezza Rice](#) ▼ traveled to Israel on a recent diplomatic mission, there were at least two key meetings with Israeli leaders in which she kicked all of the U.S. officials out of the room -- except for one who until last month had no experience dealing with the vexing issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The mystery guest was John S. Wolf, 54, a career diplomat assigned by President Bush to help make sure the Israelis and Palestinians implement the initial steps in the U.S.-backed peace plan.

Wolf, a 33-year veteran of the foreign service, is on leave from his position as assistant secretary of state for nonproliferation. U.S. officials said his lack of experience in the Middle East is actually an advantage because it is difficult for either side to believe he approaches the conflict with a preconceived bias.

"It's a good thing that he has exceptional negotiating skills and very little direct experience in the area," said a senior administration official.

Since Bush announced last month at a summit in Aqaba, Jordan, that he was tapping Wolf as his special envoy to the region, Wolf has been in the region almost nonstop, shuttling between the Israelis and Palestinians as they made tentative steps to ease the conflict.

After initial promising steps, including a temporary cease-fire by anti-Israeli militant

groups, a stalemate has emerged. Palestinian Prime Minister Manmoud Abbas will meet with Bush at the White House on Friday, to be followed by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon four days later.

Wolf's position running the nonproliferation bureau, part of the effort to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction, is being held open, as administration officials describe his new assignment as initially lasting 60 to 90 days. But Wolf has told others his mandate is to fulfill the first phase of the three-part peace plan that seeks to establish a Palestinian state by 2005. Because the plan is based on performance, not dates, completing the first phase might take months.

The State Department declined to make Wolf available for an interview, saying the focus should not be on a single individual but on the team that the administration is deploying to help foster the peace process in the Middle East. Both Rice and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell are deeply involved in the new U.S. peace effort. Israelis interpreted Rice's inclusion of only Wolf at some meetings as a gesture intended to show he has Bush's confidence.

One senior Israeli official in Washington who met with Wolf shortly after his appointment recalled that "he was very humble; he said he knew nothing about the region and the conflict." But by the time Wolf had returned from his first trip, "he was very well-versed, understanding the nuances and knowing all the personalities."

In his new job, Wolf has direct access. Before Powell arrived in Israel late last month, he remarked to reporters that "I have gotten a steady stream of e-mails" from Wolf. But Wolf hadn't yet managed to handle the media attention of his job. After one news conference, he allowed his lanky frame to block the all-important camera shot of Powell and Sharon smiling and shaking hands, earning shouts from the photographers and forcing the two men to replay the handshake.

Wolf, a native of Philadelphia, earned a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth before joining the State Department in 1970. He has bounced around the world, serving in Australia, Vietnam, Greece, Pakistan and Malaysia, where he was ambassador from 1992 to 1995. He was also ambassador to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, a multilateral organization that promotes trade.

A Bethesda resident, he is married and has two children.

During stints in Washington, Wolf moved up the ladder as he rotated through a number of bureaus and served stints as executive assistant to senior State Department officials. He was nominated by Bush to be assistant secretary for nonproliferation on Sept. 11, 2001, the day terrorists struck the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and immediately plunged into the proliferation challenge faced by Bush's "axis of evil" -- Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

As assistant secretary, Wolf was at the center of the debates this past year at the United Nations over the search for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. He was the administration's primary contact with chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix, serving on the "college of commissioners" that advised the U.N. agency assigned to locate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Wolf's fellow commissioners recall him as a dedicated and articulate advocate for State's position, especially pushing the idea that Blix needed to interview Iraqi officials outside of Iraq.

"He is very persistent. He is tough," said Kostyantyn Gryshchenko, the Ukrainian ambassador to the United States. "He always sees the final goal, and subordinates what

he's doing to achieve this goal."

Ronald Cleminson, Canada's representative on the commission, recalled that Wolf often found himself pushing a line on Iraq that others on the commission didn't buy. Wolf once presented a CIA report on allegations of mobile biological weapon laboratories in Iraq, which Cleminson said was based on "very thin evidence." When officials from other nations peppered Wolf with questions, he batted many away by saying he was "not a technical individual," Cleminson said.

Within the administration, Wolf is viewed with suspicion by hardliners on Iraq and other proliferation issues, who say he was quick to accept the conventional wisdom of the regional bureaus at State and had an unimaginative approach to stemming weapons proliferation. "I view him as just this guy floating over the surface of the State Department," said one person close to the debate.

Several sources said he has a blunt, sometimes fiery relationship with his boss, Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton, a political appointee who was also Wolf's boss in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. Bolton has close links to Vice President Cheney's office and the Defense Department, taking a tougher line on proliferation than other parts of the State Department.

State Department insiders also said Wolf can be extremely demanding of his staff, and some felt he sometimes crossed the line into being verbally abusive. Powell, however, was critical in ensuring Wolf's appointment as Middle East envoy and "he has total faith in John," a senior administration official said. He said Powell views Wolf as a "brilliant negotiator and a superb leader who could take on any mission and do a good job" -- proof of Powell's intrinsic belief that good leaders, not specialists, are best suited for difficult tasks.

Once, when addressing a class of foreign service recruits who were inspired to join the State Department because of Powell, Wolf was briefly stumped when asked what would happen to State after Powell leaves. Wolf then answered that was up to the new foreign service officers, that they were Powell's greatest legacy and they would determine what that legacy would be.

Wolf then passed word that Powell should say the same thing when he addressed the class.

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