

Annapolis, Analyzed

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Articles & Testimony

Today, the United States will convene a large international gathering to re-launch Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. With this, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has followed through on her commitment, made early this year, to help usher in a time of peace for these two historic enemies. Originally, she intended for them to draft a joint statement that addressed the core status issues of their conflict -- Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security, and water -- and then have the Arab leaders and others at the international meeting endorse it.

But as the Annapolis summit comes to order, it is clear that her objectives have been scaled back. Now she will preside over the launching of negotiations on the permanent status issues, not on a statement detailing how those issues will be resolved. There is nothing wrong with scaling back objectives; after all, the essence of statecraft is to identify objectives that can be married to realistic means and achieved. In the Middle East, the Bush administration has too often declared overly ambitious objectives, pursued them with minimalist means, and failed repeatedly as a result.

So with her goals scaled back, will Annapolis be different -- an example of statecraft rather than stagecraft? It can be if the President and the Secretary begin to shape a wider context for the negotiations and have a clear day-after strategy. They must be able to lay out what comes next in a way that demonstrates that this meeting is different and will produce change.

That, however, will not be easy. After nearly seven years with no peace process, the U.S. must now contend with deep cynicism on the part of both the Israeli and Palestinian publics. One can hardly gain wide support for compromise on the core issues mentioned earlier if neither side sees any changes in its day-to-day reality. For Israelis who withdrew from Gaza and have seen few days without Qassam rockets being fired from it, why would they believe that withdrawal from the West Bank would produce anything different -- with the far worst consequence being that every Israeli community would be susceptible to such daily fire? For Palestinians, if they can't move easily from Nablus to Jenin, why would they believe that they will gain sovereignty and the Arab part of Jerusalem?

Perhaps, Secretary Rice's new emphasis on implementing the phase one obligations of the "road map to peace" -- by the original plan, we were supposed to be done with phase three over two years ago -- reflects her awareness that negotiations cannot go anywhere if the realities on the ground don't change. Recall that in the 2003 "road map," the

Israelis were supposed to freeze all settlement activity, withdraw the military and the barriers that were repositioned after the beginning of the intifada in September 2000, and dismantle unauthorized settler outposts. For their part, the Palestinians were supposed to begin to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, prevent all attacks against Israelis, overhaul their security organizations, and reform their political institutions.

Had even some of these obligations been met, the context would be very different today. Indeed, had the Secretary's objective starting last January been to organize an international meeting to launch negotiations, she would have been well-advised to try to implement at least some of these obligations months ago. That would have changed the context and psychology for the negotiations and made the effort appear far more credible.

Unfortunately, getting movement now on the first phase of the "road map" will not be easy. There is hardly an obligation that Israelis and Palestinians understand the same way. Ask the Palestinians what a freeze on Israeli settlement activity means, and they will tell you that it means a freeze on all construction (including the "wall"), on any additional settlers moving to the territories, and on all subsidies and financial incentives for the settlers. Ask the Israelis, and they will say it means building no new settlements and expropriating no additional territory -- but not stopping construction within the boundaries of existing settlements. The gap in perception and definition is enormous.

The gap may be even wider on the Palestinian obligation to begin to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, with the Israelis having very expansive requirements (including the dismantling of the terror organizations, their arms, and recruitment apparatuses), and Palestinians believing far less is required of them. The problem is that each side defines their own obligations minimally and the other side's maximally.

Just as the Secretary found when she first pressed both sides to commit to the core compromises on Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and security this year -- when each party sought specificity from the other while it offered ambiguity -- so, too, on the "road map" does each side want the other to be responsive first. If nothing else, this should remind Secretary Rice that the parties could easily spend the coming year doing little more than trying to negotiate common definitions of the first phase obligations of the "road map."

To avoid that outcome and to shape the right context and day-after strategy, Secretary Rice should convey to the Israelis and Palestinians (and announce at the end of the Annapolis meeting) that she will discuss with each side what its short- and long-term obligations will be. She should make clear that she will not surprise either side about what the standards of performance will consist of, but she should also be adamant that those standards be articulated soon and that working groups will be created to ensure them.

The Israelis and Palestinians must also walk away from Annapolis having agreed to form working groups that explore options on the issues of Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and security (actually deciding what the solutions should be is too much to ask for the groups -- that must be the work of leaders). Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas will have to determine if they have enough of a taste for the fundamental tradeoffs that are required. Hopefully they will, because such a group will not only create a basis for them to consider the tradeoffs between options, but it will also give the U.S. a basis to explore possible bridging ideas.

One other working group should also be announced at the conclusion of Annapolis: one comprised of Arab states. With the U.S. working with it, the group could create their own "road map" that will help these states normalize relations with Israel, while also having them provide material support to the Palestinians. For instance, as the Israelis and Palestinians fulfill their first phase obligations, the Arab states would both reach out to Israel and help underwrite the Palestinian's budgetary needs and job creation projects. Such steps by the Arab states would show life is getting better as a result of the peace process and could create greater political cover for both Olmert and Abbas to make the tough decisions that will be required down the line.

Finally, as important as it is to resume a credible peace process, the measure of Annapolis will ultimately be whether it leads anywhere. With the politics in Israel uncertain, Hamas ensconced in Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority lacking security capability, President Bush and Secretary Rice are unlikely to see a permanent status agreement reached in their last year in office. If that is the legacy they are seeking, they are bound to be disappointed. But serious follow-through after Annapolis could produce progress and even limited agreements; belief in peacemaking's ability to actually bring peace may be restored after a too long hiatus. And while not exactly historic, that would certainly be a welcome contribution to the next administration.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#)

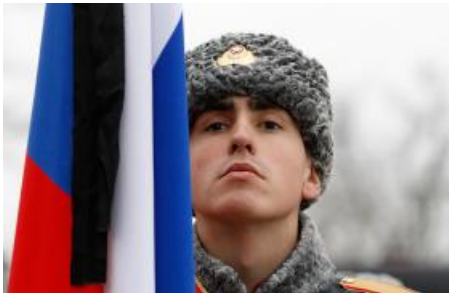
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