

For Mideast Talks to Work, Rice Must Move the Goalposts

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Secretary of State Rice is again shuttling back and forth to the Middle East, with plans to convene an international meeting in Annapolis later this month with the Israelis, Palestinians and leaders from a number of Arab countries. Her aim is to have the participants endorse a joint statement on the core principles for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The secretary believes such a "political horizon" will benefit President Mahmoud Abbas in his competition with Hamas. Hamas may control Gaza today, but Rice is betting that if Abbas can show that he offers a pathway to achieving Palestinian national aspirations and Hamas offers only failure, Palestinians will eventually reject Hamas.

In theory, what Rice is aiming for makes sense. But in practice, it does not square with political reality. For the talks to have any honest chance of success, she will need to adjust her strategy.

For Rice's theory to work, the Israelis and Palestinians must be prepared to make compromises now on the four core issues of the conflict: Jerusalem, refugees, borders and security. This means that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Abbas -- neither of whom has a strong political base -- must be prepared to take on history and mythology. And they must be prepared to do so simultaneously.

But Olmert can only justify to the Israeli public such existential compromises on Jerusalem and borders if he can point to the Palestinians surrendering the right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel. And Abbas can only justify giving up the right of return if he can show that he has achieved what Palestinians seek on Jerusalem and borders.

Unfortunately, the two sides now are far apart, with each wanting ambiguity on what they must concede and specificity on what they will get. Israelis are not ready to be specific on Jerusalem and borders, but they want Palestinian specificity on refugees. Palestinians want the opposite -- seeking Israeli specificity on Jerusalem and borders while they remain vague on refugees. They also differ on who must go first and when a complete deal should be done.

The gaps should come as no surprise. First, they reflect the impact of the last seven years on both sides. The Israeli and Palestinian publics are each deeply suspicious about the other's intentions. Second, the gaps reflect the stakes involved. Issues like Jerusalem and refugees go to the heart of self-definition and identity and are excruciating to

contemplate. Third, the gaps are what one would expect at an early stage of negotiations. Neither side will show its cards before they have a better sense of where this process is going and whether the other can actually deliver.

Rice should have no illusions about producing an agreement on the core concessions in the next few weeks. I know she is hopeful based on her private discussions with the two leaders. But the leap from private conceptual discussions to public concrete agreements is huge and, even if possible, never comes quickly or easily.

So what should she aim for now? Having raised expectations that the meeting will be a transforming event in peacemaking, she cannot suddenly fall back to launching negotiations with no follow-through. That argues for waiting -- and convening the meeting only when she has a clear "day after" strategy for what will follow it.

The content of the meeting matters; setting an arbitrary deadline for it should not.

As for the content, she should aim for agreement on principles that would represent a step forward without pushing for what neither side can do today. Three principles might be doable and meaningful. First, Israelis will commit to withdrawal and Palestinians to security. Second, on Jerusalem, each would accept that there would be two capitals for two states. Third, on refugees, each would agree that the issue must be resolved in a way that is consistent with a two-state solution.

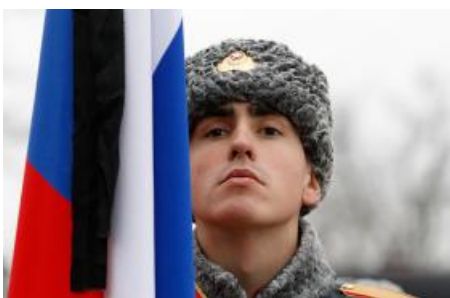
These principles would not resolve the conflict -- but would create a negotiating framework for doing so over time. Given where we are today, that would be a real contribution.

Ross, who led Mideast peace negotiations under Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, is author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>. ❖

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