

What Rice Must Do to Pave Way for Mideast Peace Deal

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is in the Middle East on a trip designed to help prepare for the meeting she intends to convene with Israelis, Palestinians and Arab states at the end of November. She has a great deal of work to do and not a lot of time to do it, particularly given her objective.

Rice hopes to have the meeting endorse a short textual agreement between Israelis and Palestinians on the core principles for settling their conflict. While the Clinton parameters of December 2000 outlined the core trade-offs on Jerusalem, refugees, borders and security -- thus removing the mystery of what might be required -- the ability to cross such historic thresholds and make historic compromises remains a daunting task. This is especially so when there has been no serious peace process for the past six years, and when the Israeli and Palestinian publics are profoundly cynical about each other.

When asked in a recent poll about the November meeting, 57% of Palestinians expected it to fail while only 24% thought it would succeed. This is not a case of low expectations. Instead, it reflects disbelief in the likelihood of any meaningful agreement. That should set off an alarm bell for Rice because it signals that an agreement appearing too abstract and having vague commitments is likely to produce a cynical response.

Perhaps this is why Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qureia declared last week that the meeting should not be convened unless the parties know what the substantive outcome is going to be. Unfortunately, that presently seems like a distant possibility because there is very little concrete agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, even if they are having serious negotiations for the first time in more than six years.

The secretary needs to use her current trip to do several things:

- First, explore the nature of the gaps between the two sides on the principal issues. She will discover that the Israelis seek Palestinian specificity on their readiness to concede the right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel and on their obligations on security. The Palestinians want Israeli specificity on borders and Jerusalem. Each wants details on what matters to them and ambiguity on what they need to concede.
- Second, Rice needs to probe possible fall-back objectives and options. She could already have in mind a more limited objective of a conceptual breakthrough that ties Israeli concessions on the border -- meaning the 1967

border with modifications on both sides of it -- with Palestinian concession on refugees. Sounds good in theory, but such a formula is probably insufficient for either side. Will Palestinians really concede the right of return on refugees without getting a large package of Israeli concessions on borders as well as Jerusalem? Will Israel really concede the border in return for something vague on refugees and nothing concrete on security? Absent that, there will be the spin of a conceptual breakthrough but the reality of both sides contradicting each other on what they have actually conceded. That cannot be the outcome.

- Third, the secretary needs to lower expectations about the meeting and do more to prepare for it. High expectations that cannot be met will set back peace-making and validate the Hamas argument that diplomacy is futile. One way to lower expectations without appearing to retreat from her own commitment is to say that there are serious negotiations underway, and that the timing for the meeting or meetings will be determined by where the parties are in their discussions and not by an arbitrary deadline.

Statecraft is about identifying meaningful objectives and the means that we and others can employ to achieve them. Rice still needs to determine the right objectives and not only find the ways to achieve them, but also work with others so their achievement is seen as meaningful.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He was U.S. envoy to the region under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. His new book is [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270). ❖

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