

Condi's Keys

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Secretary of State Rice is planning to convene an international meeting in Annapolis sometime in November. While President Bush has spent little time during his tenure on Arab-Israeli peacemaking, he has embraced Secretary Rice's ambitious desire to use the Annapolis meeting to endorse a statement of principles on how to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Secretary seems convinced that she can put in place a new foundation to guide peacemaking in the future, and, even if this foundation cannot be implemented any time soon, it will provide the essential baseline for a two-state solution when it becomes possible.

Rice returned from her most recent trip to the Middle East enthused that the Israeli prime minister and the Palestinian president are having serious conversations about permanent status issues. She believes these discussions vindicate her decision to pursue a "political horizon" on the core issues of Jerusalem, refugees, and borders.

Perhaps, but these initial discussions have to be translated into mutual concepts and then agreement. And, as the two sides convene small negotiating teams for the first time this week, they will discover how difficult the task is going to be. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert needs to show the Israeli public that Palestinians are not only prepared to make a historic concession and give up the right of return for Palestinian refugees, but that there is reason to believe that Palestinians will actually live up to the commitments they make on fighting terror and stopping rocket attacks. With Hamas consolidating its control in Gaza, words alone will not be convincing to Olmert's countrymen.

For Mahmoud Abbas, the challenge is no less daunting. If he is going to give up what has been the core of the Palestinian narrative -- namely, that Palestinian refugees will have the right to return to their homes -- he must be able to point not only to what Palestinians will get in return on Jerusalem and borders but when they will get it. He (and certainly his negotiating team which is made up of all the key veterans of the Oslo process) will want a timeline and will want it accompanied by other rapid changes on the ground (like lifting checkpoints and releasing thousands, not hundreds, of prisoners) to prove that these are not empty promises.

Conceptually, both sides may know what is required for a deal that will end the conflict, at least in principle. However, after nearly seven years of no process and a great deal of violence -- and rejectionists in control of Gaza --

the price of compromise has gone up, not down, and "delivery" is going to be the real measure for both sides. Do either Olmert or Abbas have the political strength to take the necessary steps?

Secretary Rice may argue, justifiably, that it is worth testing the proposition, particularly at a time when it is essential to show that secular, national Palestinians can offer the Palestinian people a future and the Islamist Hamas cannot. Here again, the instinct may be right, but how one tests the proposition is very important. The Hamas narrative is that diplomacy never works and therefore "resistance" and violence are the only answer. It is paramount that the testing process cannot raise expectations and then fail to deliver anything, lest she prove Hamas right.

The Secretary has rightfully said that the international meeting cannot just be a photo op. Truth be told, the meeting will be a failure even if it produces more than just pictures: If all it creates are generalities and abstractions without some tangible steps and credible follow-on mechanisms, it will be a step back. A "day after" strategy will be essential for proving to both skeptical publics that something credible is now underway.

So, what needs to be done? The Secretary is basically going to have to live with both sides over the next 6-8 weeks. She needs to determine what is bridgeable between the two sides and what is not. This, too, will not be easy; neither side is going to want to concede anything truly important except at a moment when they feel they have no alternative and they are out of time. But here is the rub: it is not clear that either side really believes they have to make existential concessions by November.

One reason the Secretary will need to be shuttling between the two nearly non-stop is to keep pressing to see how far they are truly willing to go and what they need from the other side (and us). What she cannot afford to do is wait and hope that the pressure of the impending meeting will yield what she wants. In fact, she must be careful not to create the impression that she needs the meeting more than anyone else. In such a circumstance, the Israelis and Palestinians will let all the pressure build on her to get something from the other side before they offer anything.

Interestingly, the Saudis, who the Secretary, Olmert, and Abbas desperately want to attend, seem to be playing the run-up to the meeting precisely this way. They have yet to commit to coming; instead, they are laying down the conditions for what it will take for them to participate. Unsurprisingly, their conditions are becoming increasingly more demanding, not less.

In such circumstances, Secretary Rice would be wise to offer bridging propositions once the positions of the two sides become clear, and begin to offer her own fallback objectives if she finds the responses demonstrate that the gaps are unlikely to be bridgeable. One value of using fallback objectives is that they offer another way to see how interested the two sides genuinely are in an agreement of principles on the core issues. Moreover, having the fallback objectives and being able to deliver on them can still make the meeting worthwhile.

Thus, if the Secretary is unable to produce a text that outlines the core tradeoffs on Jerusalem, refugees, and borders, she might go for lesser, but still important, agreement on: the scope of sovereignty, state to state relations, and a process to begin to develop such relations; Israeli territorial withdrawal(s) from the West Bank conditioned on agreed milestones on Palestinian (or others') performance on security; a freeze on expansion of existing Israeli settlements and a commitment not to develop the E-1 area; an ongoing process with agreed criteria on Palestinian prisoner releases to ensure at least some prisoners are released every few weeks; a serious mechanism (with leadership involvement) for ending incitement and the teaching of hatred; working groups to develop options on Jerusalem, refugees and final borders; and implementation committees to ensure all obligations are fulfilled.

Such an outcome might not be everything the President and the Secretary want, but if it were achieved it would transform the current reality between Israelis and Palestinians. Statecraft involves not only developing clear objectives that can be tied to the means that we and others can employ to achieve them, but also knowing what to aim for and when to do so. Let's hope Secretary Rice knows when to press, what to press for, and also when to back

off -- if the alternative is a failed meeting.

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](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

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