

# Rice's Obstacles on the Road to an Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough

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## Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently visited Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to get personal briefings from each leader regarding their sensitive discussions on peace. Such briefings are designed so that Rice can identify the existing gaps between the parties and fashion U.S. strategy in advance of a planned November meeting in Washington. These gaps will likely determine the scope of her potential shuttle diplomacy during her next visit to the region in the coming weeks. They will also become increasingly clear as Israeli and Palestinian delegations meet and begin drafting a potential declaration of principles (DOP) within ten days time, as a senior Israeli official has reported.

### Obstacles in Rice's Path

Rice's diplomacy most likely has a personal dimension, given that an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough could transform her legacy from one centered on the Iraq war. In addition, she genuinely seems to share the sentiment of those who fear that failure to make progress could lead to gains for Hamas, which could ultimately transform the nationalist dispute into an uncompromising religious conflict. The obstacles in her path will be difficult to surmount, however.

First, there is little time between now and November to define a diplomatic objective, reach an understanding between the parties toward this objective, and ensure a successful meeting.

Second, the scope of the objective is unclear. Abbas favors a full-fledged declaration of principles to deal with all final-status issues, including refugees, Jerusalem, security, and territory. For his part, Olmert has stated that Israel does not seek a "full" DOP but would consider anything between a partial DOP and something far more vague (e.g., a "declaration of intentions"). A full DOP could overload the domestic political circuits for Israelis and Palestinians alike. At the same time, some argue that the potential for achieving tradeoffs may evaporate if the issues under consideration are limited -- particularly if Israeli concessions on territory are not matched by Palestinian concessions on refugees, for example.

Third, the public is not optimistic about success. Due to various factors, Israelis and Palestinians are suspicious of each other's intentions and have doubts about their own leaders. From the Israeli perspective, the Palestinians can

neither agree to nor implement key compromises. Moreover, two developments have caused many Israelis to believe that peace efforts actually make them less secure: the continuation of Qassam rocket attacks in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, and the rapid Hamas victory over Abbas's forces in Gaza. For their part, many Palestinians seem to ascribe malevolent intent to Israel. They believe that Israel seeks only domination, and that the prospects of a diplomatic breakthrough will therefore always be bleak. According to a September 17 poll conducted by the Nablus-based al-Najah National University, 57 percent of Palestinians believe the latest effort to negotiate will fail, with only 24 percent believing it will succeed.

Fourth, the planned November meeting could be derailed by renewed Israeli-Palestinian or Fatah-Hamas violence. Hamas may want to torpedo the meeting to show that negotiations are ineffective in securing Palestinian rights, and that violence is the only answer. The group may calculate that a failed meeting will undermine the progress of Prime Minister Salam Fayad's government and lead to another Fatah-Hamas power-sharing arrangement as existed under the February 2007 Mecca accord. The fear of renewed terrorism contributed to the Israeli security cabinet's recent announcement that it views Gaza as a "hostile entity" and will conduct a legal review on whether it is possible to cut electricity and fuel to the territory while avoiding a "humanitarian crisis."

Fifth, each side is acutely aware of the problems it would face in selling any agreement to its own people. Olmert would like to maintain his seventy-eight-member Knesset coalition and avoid a situation in which the Yisrael Beitenu Party (led by cabinet minister Avigdor Lieberman) and the Shas Party each withdraw, leaving him with fifty-five core members in the 120-member legislature. Olmert seems to be counting on the hawkish Yisrael Beitenu's platform of removing Arabs in Jerusalem from Israeli jurisdiction as providing domestic political leeway for negotiations. He has also apparently tasked his closest political confidante, Deputy Premier Haim Ramon, with floating trial scenarios to condition the Israeli public while he himself maintains his distance. In a recent article published in Yediot Aharonot daily, Ramon wrote a letter to a Jerusalem councilman (and Kadima Party member) outlining his plan to yield Arab neighborhoods and share the Old City of Jerusalem for peace.

Sixth, it will not be easy to persuade certain Arab states -- particularly Saudi Arabia -- to come to the November meeting. Saudi participation would provide Abbas with an Arab imprimatur for any terms worked out between the parties and a sign that they welcome Israel into the region if these terms are reached. It should be noted that the Saudis just ended their informal boycott of Abbas by hosting him in Jedda. They had been upset about the collapse of the Mecca accord, which they brokered. It is unclear whether they will now follow through on last year's promise to send Abbas \$500 million.

The Saudis are also reportedly pressing for Syria's inclusion at the event, which they believe could diminish the latter's interest in using Damascus-based Palestinian rejectionist groups to sabotage the effort. In contrast, the United States has sought to isolate Syria for a variety of reasons, including its failure to police the Iraqi border, which has led to the death of U.S. servicemen. So far, the United States has not publicly confirmed whether or not it will invite Syria.

#### Reasons for Guarded Hope

Despite being viewed as weak leaders in recent months, Olmert and Abbas have both undergone a potentially beneficial resurgence in popularity. Olmert's approval rating has increased from single digits to 35 percent since the September 6 air raid against Syria. Israelis approve of the action and also the way Olmert avoided complications for Israel by not seeking public credit for the move.

Moreover, polls by al-Najah University and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) show that Abbas has his highest approval rating since taking office in 2005. According to the PSR, if Abbas were to face Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh in an election, he would win by a 23-point margin. Similarly, Fatah is out-

polling Hamas in Gaza. This suggests that most Palestinians do not approve of the Hamas coup in Gaza and support Abbas's bold stand against the group. Headed by Fayad, Abbas's government has closed more than a hundred Hamas-linked charities and reportedly cut approximately 250 imams from its Gaza payrolls, accusing them of delivering sermons promoting radicalism.

Nevertheless, Rice faces daunting challenges on the road to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations this fall. The low expectations that have accompanied her diplomacy until now have given the key players -- Olmert, Abbas, and Rice herself -- a chance to hold talks away from the public eye. The question now is whether Rice will be able to identify the key gaps and then find ways to formulate clear, achievable objectives in an exceedingly short period of time, all while managing varying public expectations in the United States and Middle East alike. This is a tall order, and the odds are not on her side.

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