

Empty Benches

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I applaud Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's commitment to renewed activism on Arab-Israeli diplomacy. I have worried that her focus on the political end game was misplaced, particularly given that realities on the ground were likely to threaten to undo any political process. Thus, at least in theory, her decision to present a "benchmark" plan to the Israelis and Palestinians could have been a good thing. In it, the Israelis would lift their checkpoints at Beit Iba Huwwara, Awarta, Sheve Shomron, and Beit Furik and permit movement of people and goods into and between Gaza and the West Bank, specifically in the Bethlehem 1 and 2 clusters, the Hebron 1-8 clusters, and the Nablus 1-4 clusters. The Palestinian Authority, for its part, would deploy forces to prevent Qassam rocket firing and arms smuggling.

Some, no doubt, will criticize this plan for putting the Bush administration in a position in which it is micro-managing Israel's security posture. Others may also criticize it as asymmetric for requiring specific obligations on the Israeli side and only generalities on the Palestinian side. My problem, however, is that the plan was conceived and executed in a way that ensures it is dead on arrival.

From the beginning of Secretary Rice's decision to pursue a "political horizon" between Israelis and Palestinians, I have argued that no political process will be credible or sustainable if it is divorced from the day-to-day realities of Palestinian and Israeli life. Palestinians have to see that the indignities they experience will stop and that their catastrophic economic circumstances will improve, and Israelis have to see that Palestinians will cease their rocket fire, their arms smuggling, and their ongoing plans to carry out suicide bombings in Israel.

Rice's recent efforts might have made sense if she could produce a willingness on the part of Arab leaders to embrace the core tradeoffs involved in a political end game for settling the conflict. With their readiness to assume the burden of justifying compromise, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas would have political cover for acting, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would have an argument other than his need for political survival to justify Israeli activity for peace. Today in Israel no one will take Olmert's word for why potential Israeli compromises are necessary, but few would resist responding to a dramatic Arab initiative to reach out to Israel. But that too is lacking. The Arab League has demonstrated that its members are prepared to create an umbrella for starting negotiations but not yet for concluding them. If nothing else, this argues for developing a political process but also trying to deal

with the escalating potential of the daily conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Statecraft is about concepts and implementation. It is about recognizing what is needed and fashioning plans that can actually be carried out. I am afraid the benchmark plan -- designed to affect the grim day-to-day realities and their potential for escalation -- suffers from what we have all too often seen with the Bush administration: an attempt to get by on the cheap. Rather than working out (indeed grinding out) with both sides specific agreements as to what will be done, by whom, when, and with what consequences for non-performance, the administration has simply produced a new roadmap.

Much as it did with 2002's "roadmap to peace," the Bush administration has given the two sides a set of rhetorical guideposts, not operational objectives -- no understandings, no agreed obligations, no need to be responsive. As administration spokesman Tom Casey said, "These are suggestions and ideas that we have circulated; it's not any kind of formal agreement nor is it something that is being enforced on anybody." Is this what the two sides need now? The fact is we don't need benchmarks that can be ignored because no one has a stake in them and there is no consequence for non-performance.

Instead, the option now for affecting the day-to-day realities on the ground is a comprehensive ceasefire brokered with the two sides. This would require direct negotiations between Olmert's office and Abbas's office. And Abbas would obviously have to deal with Hamas as well. Is Hamas ready for a ceasefire in which it would have responsibilities and would have to enforce any such deal? Are Fatah and Hamas even capable of reaching a true ceasefire between themselves?

The answers to both questions are unclear. Abbas has indicated repeatedly that he wants to avoid a confrontation and civil war at all costs. Hamas's attitude is less clear, but it is not indifferent to the very strong Palestinian ethos against civil war. If nothing else, Hamas will not want to be seen as being responsible for ongoing civil strife. My bet is that the current fighting in Gaza will come to an end like the previous episodes and that Hamas, in fact, is quite interested in having a respite from Israeli incursions, arrests, and targeted killings. But they cannot achieve an end to any of these Israeli behaviors without fulfilling responsibilities on their side. Abbas will have to work out what Palestinians will be obligated to do and what happens if they don't.

When the current internal Palestinian fighting in Gaza comes to an end, the United States should press for serious negotiation on a comprehensive ceasefire and not waste time on benchmarks that will neither be implemented nor respected. And, if the current intra-Palestinian fighting does not end soon, the challenge for American statecraft will be to fashion a strategy with the members of the Quartet and the Israelis to ensure that Hamas does not succeed in using violence to subdue their rivals in the Palestinian Authority.

Benchmarks without consequence offer measures only of what is not happening. As an act of statecraft they make little sense.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.

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