

Ways and Means

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The word statecraft is often used and seldom explained. Many use it to describe the tools of governing. Others treat it as a synonym for diplomacy. I see it as the "what" and "how" of our foreign policy.

The "what" translates into what our objectives ought to be. The "how" involves the means -- resources, assets, organizational skills -- that we possess to achieve our objectives. Statecraft done well matches ends with means. Done badly, one sees constant mismatches with profound costs to our interests.

Needless to say, matching objectives with means has not been a strong suit of the Bush administration. In Iraq, our objectives were disconnected from the means we employed -- whether you're talking about the forces needed to stabilize the country or the ones needed for postwar reconstruction. In large part, these mismatches were caused by flawed assessments of the country that the Bush administration made before it invaded. Basically, the major players were convinced that, once Saddam Hussein fell, everything would fall into place; instead, when everything fell apart, they had no idea what to do.

Assessments are crucial for effective statecraft. Administrations must be governed by reality-based assessments, not faith-based assessments. They must see the world as it is and shape objectives and means -- ours and the others we can mobilize to support us -- accordingly. That's not to say that governments should cast aside ambitious objectives; it just means they have to see things clearly to understand how to change them.

The Israeli-Palestinian struggle is another case where a confused assessment is hindering statecraft. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's efforts to make peace are important, especially after the administration has sat on the sidelines for six years. But she has not been driven by a clear understanding of the situation -- the necessary starting point for defining objectives, developing means, and selling the goals in a way that others are likely to accept.

Here's where her assessment goes wrong: Rice says a strategic realignment in the region creates an opportunity for peace-making. She sees the Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and other "moderate" Arabs sharing with Israel a common fear of Iran. For her, this means that the Saudis have incentive enough -- their desire to prevent Iranians from demagoguing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- to nudge the parties toward peace. For the Israelis, recognizing the Iranian threat (and new Arab attitudes) will mean a new desire to compromise.

This assessment isn't entirely wrong. There is a shared fear of Iran, and that does create an opening. At this stage, however, it's just an opening. And, while the Saudis and Israelis may both see Iran as a threat, they have different ideas about how to deal with it. By brokering an agreement between Fatah and Hamas, the Saudis made it clear that intra-Palestinian peace trumps Israeli-Palestinian peace, even if that means accommodating Hamas. Indeed, for the Saudis, trying to wean Hamas away from Iran may be an important end in itself. But, for Israel, there can be no accommodating Hamas which continues to reject Israel's right to exist and remains fervently committed to the "right of resistance." (So much so that, notwithstanding the national unity government, Hamas called on March 25 for prosecuting an adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who publicly advocated security coordination with Israel.)

Rice's assessment errs again on what Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Abbas have the political strength (or the inclination) to accomplish. At this time, neither man is ready to embrace concessions on existential issues (like Jerusalem and refugees) that are preconditions to the "political horizon" she envisions. While it's true that Arab leaders could theoretically assume the political and psychological burden of those compromises by financing them - - thereby giving Abbas political cover and Olmert a moment of opportunity -- there is nothing to indicate they're ready to do so.

Effective statecraft should have led Rice to explore how far Arab leaders were prepared to go. She would have quickly found that the Saudis (and others) are very hesitant, and, for even limited moves, they would want to know in advance how the Israelis would respond. (And the Israelis would want to know what they -- and the Palestinians -- would have to do.) More frequent shuttling would have allowed her to probe their flexibility, test her leverage, and elicit commitments.

Good statecraft also would have revealed that any "political horizon" disconnected from the realities on the ground would not have been sustainable. For Palestinians, life must get better in terms of mobility and standard of living. Otherwise, they simply wouldn't accept any final-status compromises. For Israelis, continuing terrorist attacks, rocket salvos, and Hamas build-ups in Gaza (patterned after Hezbollah's in southern Lebanon) must end before they trigger a major Israeli incursion into Gaza, Nablus, or Jenin -- any of which would sink whatever diplomacy still exists.

Well-considered assessments can sometimes change the objectives of statecraft, and that's what should have happened in the Middle East. Priority number one should be a comprehensive ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians (as opposed to complete resolution of the conflict). This is one area in which even Hamas is likely to share an interest with Israel, in no small part because it could use the respite. Even though this would involve negotiation between Olmert and Abbas (and Abbas would have to ensure that Hamas implements its terms), an effort that forged specific understandings -- the Palestinian Authority would halt attacks against Israelis and stop weapons-smugglers; Israel would make no further incursions or arrests -- might work.

But a ceasefire is a diplomatic means, not an end in itself. A second priority should be to foster a dialogue between Israelis, Palestinians, and the larger Arab world about the responsibilities of a Palestinian state once it is finally created. How will it interact with Israel and the outside world? The dialogue could hammer out specifics about how normalized Israel-Palestine relations could evolve in stages -- and not exist merely at the end of the rainbow.

A third priority -- and ultimately the one that will determine the legacy of the Bush administration's statecraft in the Middle East -- should be to ensure that Fatah gains strength against Hamas. Fatah must clean up its act, and the United States should help. Make no mistake about it, if Hamas wins the next elections in two years (for president and legislative council), the conflict will be transformed from a national conflict into a religious conflict. If that happens, we'll be out of the peace-making business for a long time, and Islamists will be able to dominate the most evocative issue in the region.

I will have more to say about how to prevent that scenario, but, if the Bush administration's own assessments were more grounded in reality, I wouldn't have to. That is a sine qua non for statecraft.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace](http://www.amazon.com/Missing-Peace-Inside-Story-Middle/dp/0374529809/) (<http://www.amazon.com/Missing-Peace-Inside-Story-Middle/dp/0374529809/>).

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