

The Art of the Possible Peace

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will travel to the Middle East this weekend and hold a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Her stated purpose is to discuss permanent-status issues with an eye toward producing an agreement on a political horizon for ending the conflict. For many, such a political horizon has been long overdue; with it, they argue, both Israelis and Palestinians will know how the conflict ends and find it easier to confront those who oppose peace.

Many, including Rice, see Saudi, Israeli, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders as sharing a perception of Iran as a threat. With such common fears, the thinking goes, the leaders should be willing to accept the necessary hard compromises and end the Palestinian conflict (or show how it can be ended) so Iran can no longer exploit the conflict to build its following and put the region's moderates on the defensive.

The assessment of the common threat perception is correct. But basing policy only on this misses an important regional reality. Priorities differ on how best to respond to the Iranian threat. For the Saudis, weaning Hamas away from Iran and producing intra-Palestinian peace is more important than trying to forge peace between Palestinians and Israelis. For the Israelis, however, an intra-Palestinian peace that entails accommodating Hamas (and that does not require Hamas to change its hostile posture toward Israel) is hardly a basis for reaching out to Palestinians in a way that would satisfy the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians.

And one sure way to threaten intra-Palestinian peace is to push now for a political horizon that inevitably will mean Palestinian compromises on core issues such as refugees. Will Hamas accommodate giving up the Palestinian right of return? A political horizon that purports to outline the endgame will require such a concession, and Hamas is not going to accept it or a process likely to produce it.

Of course, the compromises won't be one-sided. But is Israel likely to contemplate excruciating concessions on Jerusalem or territory with a Palestinian government led in part by those who refuse to acknowledge its existence or renounce terrorism? My point is that the political options available for peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians have been reduced. And Rice's efforts have to be guided by what is possible, not by what is most desirable.

In Middle Eastern terms, what is logical and possible is intra-Palestinian peace and Palestinian-Israeli calm. That

would argue for a comprehensive cease-fire to be negotiated between Abbas and Olmert. A deal would require all Palestinian attacks against Israelis to stop and all smuggling of weapons into Gaza or the West Bank to end. In return, the Israelis would stop all incursions, targeted killings and arrests. As Palestinians demonstrate that they are fulfilling their responsibilities, checkpoints would be lifted and crossing points opened, making economic revitalization possible.

This agreement would differ from previous cease-fires in that it would be negotiated with clear understandings of what constitutes a violation and penalties for violations. Israel might be willing to accept such a deal because Hamas would have to enforce the cease-fire -- not merely observe it. Hamas's readiness to enforce it would mean for the first time that Hamas was acting to prevent "resistance," which would signal that its fundamental credo might be changed.

Hamas might be willing to accept such a cease-fire for two reasons: First, it needs a respite. Second, in an atmosphere where life is improving and conflict with Israel is deferred, Hamas is likely to believe its superior organization will allow it to supplant Fatah and dominate Palestinian society.

For his part, Abbas has long favored a comprehensive cease-fire, and he, too, might believe that Hamas would be transformed by having to fulfill responsibilities.

In any case, a comprehensive cease-fire could change the atmosphere between Israelis and Palestinians and lead to a negotiation designed to pursue the vision that Olmert originally campaigned on -- an extensive Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Only this withdrawal would not be unilateral and would depend on Palestinian performance on security obligations.

A comprehensive cease-fire won't be hammered out without intensive U.S. brokering. Even Rice's more ambitious desire for a political horizon need not be surrendered. But to accomplish it, she must get the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians to publicly embrace basic trade-offs on the core issues, even if Arab leaders must get out in front of Abbas and Olmert on stating their acceptance of the compromises. Both leaders are politically weak; Abbas needs Arab political cover if he is to accept historic concessions on refugees and security, while Olmert must show that the Arab world has adopted unprecedented compromises if he is to justify crossing historic thresholds on Jerusalem and borders. Absent that, Rice will need to change her horizon for what is possible in the Middle East.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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