

Mixed Message

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Articles & Testimony

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, America's most politically powerful pianist, delivered a virtuoso performance in Cairo on Monday. She struck just the right notes in a speech calling on Arab states to implement a long list of democratic reforms. Two days earlier in Ramallah, however, Rice's tune was uncharacteristically flat -- so much so that neither Israelis nor Palestinians really understood her message on the critical issue of fighting terror. The result was that Israelis took matters into their own hands yesterday, arresting 50 presumed jihadists against whom the Palestinians themselves had refused to take action. Increasingly the prospects for deepening bilateral coordination in advance of Israel's disengagement from Gaza this summer look bleak.

Let's start with the good news: Rice's speech in Cairo injected clarity and vigor into the administration's "forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East. Ever since a first-term President Bush sketched the broad outlines of his near-messianic commitment to spreading democracy in the world's least democratic region, this idea has prompted among the Middle East's residents a mix of bemusement and bewilderment. Indeed some of the White House's staged efforts in this initiative -- like last year's Forum for the Future in Rabat, Morocco -- have been the-emperor-has-no-clothes events, in which all the participants seem to humor the hyperpower while snickering behind his back.

Rice's speech may change that dynamic. If there was any doubt about the centrality of democratic change to Washington's Middle East policy, Rice erased it by taking her message forcefully to the capital of the most populous and most powerful Arab state. Addressing the American University in Cairo, she outlined in terms more specific and credible than ever before the administration's rationale for pursuing a "different course" in Middle East policymaking, one dedicated to giving the peoples of the region what she termed "the power to choose."

Rice was stunningly blunt. In a city where female political activists have recently been manhandled by police, she underscored the essential role that women must play in public life -- not once, but three times. In a country that has been ruled under virtual martial law for nearly a quarter-century, she did not ask for change, she demanded it: "The day must come when the rule of law replaces emergency decrees -- and when the independent judiciary replaces arbitrary justice." In fact, in reference to Egypt, she used the word "must" on eight separate occasions, not the usual diplomatic parlance for a guest.

At the same time, however, Rice kept some powder in reserve. She made no hint of conditioning economic or military aid on political progress, nor did she imply that President Mubarak was part of the problem rather than a potential agent of progress. There is enough time in the months and years ahead to inject both ideas into the policy mix, if circumstances warrant. This was a smart move given the fact that democratization in Egypt -- if done right -- will be an evolutionary process that takes years to succeed; persistence, not brinkmanship, will be key.

Some of the most important moments of Rice's speech were the powerful blows she landed against Islamist radicalism. Instead of calling for "freedom of religion," for example, she made the more precise demand for "the right to worship as you wish," implicitly dismissing the idea that there is only one brand of legitimate Muslim practice. And in characterizing America's mission as securing "natural" and "universal" rights, she implicitly

skewered the Islamists' triumphalist, self-congratulatory view of the world. For an administration so friendly to religious rhetoric, this was a remarkably secular speech. Indeed, the absence of any reference to God -- who usually makes at least a cameo appearance in the president's speeches -- could not have been by accident.

Rice's address in Cairo was a smash because of her refreshing candor, her thoughtful delivery, and her sheer courage in speaking truth to power. And it was the absence of these qualities from her visit to Ramallah that made her performance there so unsatisfying.

Here's the setting: In less than 60 days, Israel will start its evacuation from Gaza and the northern West Bank. The Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, has the historic opportunity of taking advantage of Israel's departure to build the foundations of a Palestinian state, thereby beginning to fulfill the political aspirations of his people. While many factors will affect the level of prosperity and satisfaction enjoyed by the citizens of independent Palestine, only one will determine whether the state exists at all: the willingness of the central government to maintain security and preserve law and order. This is essential not only to ensure the safety of individual Palestinians but also to convince the world -- especially but not only Israel -- that Palestine merits entry into the community of nations. If, as President Bush has rightly argued, a two-state solution is the answer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, then America has a powerful interest in seeing the imposition of law and order by the Palestinian Authority.

The problem is that anarchy, not security, reigns today in the Palestinian areas. Terrorists lob missiles over Gaza's fences and shoot at Israelis on West Bank roads. Hooligans, armed with AK-47s, ransack police stations, hospitals, and even the house of the Palestinian prime minister.

Why don't Palestinian security forces deal with the problem? Because Abbas's political strategy is based on being nice to the terrorists and the hooligans -- members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and even his own Fatah party's most violent wing, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades -- rather than actually implementing his own principle of "one authority, one law, one gun." Indeed, when one radical group threatened to break what passes for a ceasefire last week, Abbas didn't threaten its leaders with jail; he ordered the release of nine terrorists from jail.

In her visit to Ramallah, Rice had the chance to give Palestinians -- both leaders and their constituents -- the same dose of straight talk that she would later deliver in Egypt. She could have reminded Palestinians that no state survives long when militias, terrorist groups, and gangs run unchecked through the streets; she could have added that President Bush's two-state vision does not extend to the creation of a terrorist safe-haven on Israel's southern and eastern flanks.

Alas, she said none of that. Yes, she repeated the standard line about Hamas as a "terrorist organization [with which] we have no contact." But that is just a descriptive phrase, nothing like the prescriptive measures she called for in Cairo. In fact, there was no public hint that America disagrees with any aspect of Abbas's strategy of trying to co-opt the terrorists.

This is tragic. With each passing day, the situation in Gaza and much of the West Bank seems to grow more like Jordan circa 1970-71, when King Hussein felt he had no choice but to cede authority to emboldened Palestinian fedayeen, then led by Yasir Arafat. Eventually, Hussein's own army forced him to take tough action against the militants, lest his regime perish. In the Palestinian areas, however, it's not even clear there are enough officers and soldiers itching to do the job; the Abbas regime -- a noble experiment in popularly elected government -- may perish without a fight.

Strong words from Washington -- even now -- could help reverse this deteriorating situation. Elected with a resounding 62 percent of the vote just 6 months ago, Abbas enjoys a mandate to lead, but so far his government has put a higher premium on consensus than leadership. Unfortunately, rule by consensus can never work if the consensus is abused by a few at the expense of the many.

Unless Abbas is prodded to use the power of his position to impose -- through force, if necessary -- the principle of "one authority, one law, one gun," then Palestinian statehood stands no chance. Down the drain too would go the much-prized Palestinian democracy, the nurturing of which has been a signal achievement of the Bush administration. If that happens, then everyone who has been betting on a two-state solution will really have to face the music.

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