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Low Expectations for Secretary of State Rice's Middle East Trip

James Phillips

On November 5, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is slated to travel to Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, and Egypt in another effort to reinvigorate the stalemated Arab-Israeli peace talks. While in the region she will meet with senior government officials from each of these nations, along with senior officials from the other members of the "Quartet"—the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations.

Together with the United States, these members proposed the "Road Map" for peace in 2003 and have helped mediate subsequent peace negotiations. Rice is unlikely to score a diplomatic breakthrough on the trip because the regional environment, Palestinian political situation, and Israeli political situation are not conducive to forging an agreement. Rather than rushing to patch together an unsustainable final agreement, Rice should temper her ambitions and seek incremental progress on a framework agreement that can keep the faltering peace process alive for the next Administration.

U.S. Engagement Is Not Enough. Rice has made 19 visits to the Middle East in the last two years, including eight visits to the region since the November 27, 2007, Annapolis conference set a wildly ambitious goal of reaching a final status agreement creating a Palestinian state existing side by side in peace with Israel by the end of 2008. Despite Rice's best efforts, Israel and the Palestinian Authority remain far apart on core issues regarding borders, security arrangements, Jerusalem, Israeli

settlements, and Palestinian refugees.

The sad truth is that conditions are not ripe for an agreement, regardless of how much time Rice spends shuttling around the Middle East:

- The Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are too weak and divided;
- The Palestinian extremist Hamas movement adamantly rejects peace and is well positioned to torpedo any U.S.-backed peace plan; and
- There is simply not enough time to overcome the difficult problems and reach a final settlement in the last days of the Bush Administration.

Neither Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's caretaker government, hamstrung by scandals, nor President Mahmoud Abbas's shaky Palestinian Authority is in a position to make major concessions. Little progress is likely until after Israel's February elections at the earliest.

Given the adverse situation and poor prospects for negotiating a diplomatic breakthrough, Rice should avoid attempting to do too much too fast in her remaining weeks in office. Such an approach would only feed unrealistic expectations that could boil over into another explosion of violence, as hap-

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pened after the Clinton Administration's failed Camp David summit in 2000. Instead, Rice should:

- **Keep Peace Negotiations Alive But Do Not Expect a Breakthrough.** The Arab–Israeli problem is too complex to resolve during the waning days of the Bush Administration. The best outcome that Rice can achieve in her remaining time is to pass on a viable negotiating framework to the next Administration.
- **Isolate and Weaken Hamas.** Hamas remains committed to destroying Israel, and as long as it remains a potent force, no durable peace is possible. Hamas should not be rewarded with diplomatic engagement unless it disavows terrorism, agrees to abide by previous peace agreements, and agrees to recognize and negotiate with Israel. Rice should press Arab allies to isolate Hamas while strengthening their support for negotiations with Israel led by the Palestinian Authority. She should also press Egypt to both increase its efforts to halt arms smuggling across the border and cease attempts to broker a rapprochement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which would abort any chances of a genuine peace settlement. Ultimately, peace is possible only if Hamas's strategy of terrorism is defeated, discredited, and perceived by Palestinians to be hurting their own interests.
- **Reinforce the Quartet's Stance against Terrorism.** Russia has undermined the unity and usefulness of the Quartet by recognizing Hamas—deemed to be a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union—and inviting that organization's leaders to Moscow. This recognition has eased Hamas's diplomatic isolation and weakened international efforts to fight terrorism while enabling Russia to score points in the Arab world and build support for convening an Arab-Israeli peace summit in Moscow. Rice should press Rus-

sia to rejoin the Quartet's efforts to isolate Hamas and threaten to block any proposed meetings in Moscow if Russia continues on its unhelpful course. She must also guard against any drift away from the rejection of terrorism by other members of the Quartet—the EU and the U.N.—which have shied away from strong stands against terrorism unless braced by U.S. leadership.

- **Contain Iran's Expanding Influence.** One of the chief obstacles to Arab-Israeli peace is Iran, which exploits the conflict to undermine moderate Arab governments, build its own support among Arab radicals, and divert the attention of the United States and the world from its nuclear program. Tehran provides arms, financial support, training, and diplomatic support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist groups that reject Israel's existence and oppose American foreign policy goals. Rice should use her trip as a platform to urge greater efforts to contain Iran, prevent it from sending more arms to Hezbollah and Hamas, and punish Iran for its continued support for terrorism.

Realistic Goals. Rice should lower expectations and adopt a more realistic policy in pressing for progress on peace negotiations. Rather than rush a final settlement that will be dead on arrival due to Hamas's ability to block implementation of any agreement, Washington should pursue step-by-step diplomacy to forge an interim understanding that can keep the negotiations alive for the next Administration. A flawed agreement would be worse than no agreement at all.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.