

David Ignatius, WSJ: Rice's Bridge To Peace

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It's an unlikely recipe for peace: Take one unpopular Israeli prime minister still suffering from setbacks in Lebanon; add one politically weak Palestinian president who has lost control of part of his territory; fold in lukewarm support from Arab states. Now, beat the mixture with an energetic secretary of state and cook over high heat.

The diplomat in the chef's hat, Condoleezza Rice, hopes to produce something palatable in time for a big peace conference in Annapolis in late November or the first half of December. The conference will bring together Israelis and Palestinians, along with a coterie of Arab and international officials. The goal is a document that will commit everyone to creation of a Palestinian state and recognition of the state of Israel.

Will it work? The answer will become clear during the next several weeks as Rice pushes both sides to draft the document that will open the conference. But already, Rice is adjusting the recipe -- making the process simpler and less demanding -- in ways that lower expectations and, in that sense, make success more likely.

Here's a summary of what's cooking, drawn from U.S., Arab and Israeli sources. What's clear is that Rice's strategy has shifted slightly in the past several months, as she has encountered some of the realities of Middle East diplomacy. She now views the Annapolis meeting as the beginning of final negotiations, rather than as an end in itself.

Rice's goal when she launched this new diplomatic initiative in the spring was to move toward discussion of the "final status" issues that would determine the shape of a Palestinian state. The working assumption was that both sides understood the basic outlines of the final deal: Israel would withdraw to roughly its pre-1967 boundaries; there would be an exchange of territory to allow Israel to keep its big settlements around Jerusalem and to give the Palestinians a corridor between the West Bank and Gaza. And, on the toughest issues, Israel would cede control of much of Arab East Jerusalem, and the Palestinians would accept that refugees could return only to the Palestinian state.

As Rice began prodding the two sides to draft language on the shape of the deal, she concluded that if she pushed too hard for compromises in the run-up to the Annapolis conference, the process might implode. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas would be denounced by more militant Israelis and Palestinians. The issue wasn't simply the Annapolis document, she decided, but what would come the day after.

Rice also realized that it would be necessary for the United States to offer its own "bridging language" on key issues. That was partly because the two sides had such different views of what the document should contain. The Palestinians wanted a lengthy blueprint for their new state; the Israelis wanted a postcard-size announcement of everyone's commitment in principle to a two-state solution.

The bridging process has been evident over the past month as the two sides sought to marry the security guarantees promised in the existing "road map" with the Annapolis document and its "political horizon." The hang-up was that, under the road map, the Israelis demanded security measures as a condition for further movement. To break the logjam, Rice's team drafted compromise language that would allow the United States to act as arbiter of whether the road map's security conditions are being met.

The hope is that during the next several weeks, negotiators can craft a document that commits both sides to ending the conflict through creation of a Palestinian state and Arab recognition of Israel. The document would list the issues that must be resolved as part of this final deal. But it wouldn't force Israeli and Palestinian negotiators to walk the plank on Jerusalem and refugees, for now. Agreement on these deal-breakers would come later.

To bring a measure of international support, it's possible that the Annapolis statement of Israeli-Palestinian support for a two-state solution would be incorporated into a new U.N. Security Council resolution. Arabs also hope that the Annapolis declaration will include confidence-building steps, such as a moratorium on Israeli settlements, easing of West Bank checkpoints and release of Palestinian prisoners.

Rice's journey down this road is just beginning, and the hardest parts are still ahead. But she is discovering that just as this conflict has its own momentum, so does the process of negotiation. Having started, she cannot now stop.

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