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Confidence Building after Annapolis

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In recent weeks, the United States has reduced expectations that the upcoming Annapolis peace conference will culminate in a diplomatic breakthrough for all parties after almost seven years of terror, violence, and non-engagement. Instead, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice seeks to revive the moribund 2003 Roadmap, and introduce a new dual-track approach. She wants the parties to implement the first phase of the Roadmap, which deals with modifying the behavior of both sides, while simultaneously -- rather than sequentially according to the 2003 plan -- negotiate the third phase, which deals with the final status issues such as Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and security.

Generating Momentum for Annapolis

Rice's diplomatic mission since the start of the year has been devoted to the third phase, known as a "political horizon," as a means of defining the end of the conflict. When Rice realized in the last month that the parties could not agree on the conceptual tradeoffs necessary to reach any finality, she shifted gears to the dual-track approach.

The main hope for Rice is to generate enough momentum to leverage the one element that has not existed since the start of the peace process in 1991: a belief that the other side is genuine. Although there has never been more skepticism among Israelis and Palestinians about the capacity of their leaders -- Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas -- there has never been more optimism between leaders about each other's genuine motivation to seek peace. This is something that never existed between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat.

Constructing a Post-Conference Strategy

Rice needs to devise a strategy to maximize that relationship towards a favorable end. Capacity can be enhanced by outside assistance, but third parties cannot manufacture a sense of mutual trust. Therefore, a sturdy post-Annapolis structure is needed to enhance the leaders' trust in each other, while also building confidence between Israeli and Palestinian publics.

Rice's idea of reconfiguring the first phase of the 2003 Roadmap emerged from a critique of the past. Previous negotiations were viewed as too divorced from what was actually happening on the ground, whether it was the Palestinian failure to combat terrorism or the continued Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. Instead of building confidence between the parties, the Roadmap's first phase was viewed as an instrument to launch mutual recriminations, not build mutual confidence. Therefore, Rice should confer with Olmert and Abbas and ask them about the challenges of the first phase: if they are overwhelming, implementation will not be realistic; if the commitments are too few, they will not be viewed publicly as credible. Finding a balance is required. Wherever possible, creative solutions should be sought to avoid zero-sum situations. For example, the issue of roadblocks needs to be addressed differently from the past. The focus used to be on reducing the number of roadblocks, but should have been on expediting the movement at those roadblocks. Therefore, Israel should consider ways to place more Israeli soldiers at roadblocks, thereby removing bottlenecks for Palestinians without harming Israeli security.

To monitor the commitments from both sides, the Bush administration reportedly is planning to appoint a U.S. security official to observe and publicly announce violations -- thus making any failure have considerable consequences.

Domestic Implications for Olmert and Abbas

Focus on the first phase of the Roadmap could put pressure on the Olmert coalition. Two parties -- Yisrael Beiteinu and Shas -- have been worried that Olmert will be too conciliatory at Annapolis, and together they can deprive Olmert of his governing majority. After the conference, the two may be concerned that Israel will have to make too many concessions on settlement activity, while less may be expected of Palestinian security forces that are only located in two Palestinian cities. The new focus could also impact Olmert's relationship with his defense minister, Ehud Barak. Before Olmert became prime minister, the "two Ehuds" had good relations and shared comparable pragmatic views. Their relationship, however, has changed recently. Since both are vying to lead the center of Israeli politics, and since Olmert's popularity has gone up sharply to around 40 percent largely in the wake of Israel's recent strike on Syria, there is speculation that Barak may leave the Olmert government to position himself for the next election. But since Barak is the head of a party that views peace as its signature policy, he is politically constrained from leaving a government engaged in a peace process.

For the Palestinians, an international effort to boost the Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayad is currently underway. Special envoy Tony Blair announced several economic projects this week, while an international donor conference will follow in December. Crucial support, however, is still missing from the Arab Gulf states, which have provided scant economic support to the Palestinians despite the dramatic increase in oil revenues since 2003. Such support would be key in helping Abbas and Fayad maintain their momentum. A recent poll conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre echoed other polls in its claim that 43 percent of Palestinians believe Fayad's government has performed better than the Hamas government, while 25 percent think the opposite. Moreover, a quarter million Palestinians held a recent demonstration in Gaza that Hamas interpreted as hostile. Taken together, Hamas has lost considerable popularity and is unable to break the restrictions of the international community. The first phase of the Roadmap could threaten Hamas since Palestinian security forces are expected to take steps against the group in the West Bank. If Hamas continues to lose public support, it may permit a stepped-up Qassam rocket campaign, thereby provoking an Israeli incursion into Gaza after the conference and portraying Abbas and Fayad as indifferent.

Conclusion

The Annapolis launch of a "Roadmap Plus" strategy is likely to put domestic pressure on both Israelis and Palestinians as each side undertakes more obligations. As the parties take on this greater burden, Arab states need to reinforce the progress. For example, when Israel negotiates on core issues, the Arab states must also negotiate with Israel over normalization of relations, as suggested by the third phase of the roadmap. Also, Arab economic assistance to the Palestinians could buffer Abbas and Fayad against any Hamas countermeasures. "Roadmap Plus" obligations should not fall just on Israel; after Annapolis, Arab states could be crucial in protecting both parties from potential backlash.

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