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One Mistake In The Fall

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We can start from the end: It was a mistake. Not necessarily the decision to convene an Israeli-Palestinian peace summit in Annapolis or a "meeting," as the Americans insist on calling the event, but the early announcement of the planned timetable.

Whoever promised to hold the meeting in the fall will be forced to accept one of three possibilities, or perhaps a combination thereof: a postponement or cancellation, which will be interpreted as a failure; convening a meeting that is not ready, which means failure; and giving in to external pressures, which will lead to failure. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a mistake, and also tripped up President George W. Bush, when she dragged him into accepting this timetable.

On her way to Tel Aviv, Rice told the journalists accompanying her: "I tend to be, myself, rather suspicious of timetables in almost anything in diplomacy."

On Tuesday she said: "I understand as well as anybody that there are risks to announcing a meeting and then doing the hard work."

These are lessons that she should have taken to heart, but like many before her, Rice failed by demonstrating the arrogance of the mediator - the absurd assumption that all that is lacking in order to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict is the charismatic presence of an experienced diplomat.

From the moment the expectation was put into words, the rules of the game were established: Rice wanted to force the sides to accelerate their meetings and to advance their understandings, but ended up a victim of her strong-arm tactics. Each of the potential invitees now has the power to cause the failure of the summit - in other words, Rice's failure. Thus, they can pressure her more than she can pressure them. This is true of Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Arab League, the European partners,

and UN officials. Nothing in Rice's career has prepared her for this Middle Eastern bazaar. It is hard to see how she will emerge from it with a valid achievement in hand.

The U.S. secretary of state in recent years has moved between too much interference in petty matters: on the one hand, as in her decision to make the effort to achieve the "crossings agreement" in Gaza, which was never implemented; a lack of concentration regarding important core issues on the other, as in her unrealistic agreement to enable Hamas to participate in the Palestinian elections.

In both cases she twisted Israel's arm, and in both she was mistaken. Even in the current administration, there are already some who are counting Annapolis as a mistake of the second, serious type. Their main fear is that failure will strengthen Hamas among the Palestinian public, and will open a window for its entry from Gaza to the West Bank.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is not particularly interested in quarrelling with Rice, but nor does he have a vital need to maintain excellent relations with her. This is true as long as he is convinced that Bush does not intend to change his policy. Bush already made it clear in the speech announcing the conference that this is Rice's playing field. He does not share the messianic enthusiasm she brings to the Palestinian arena. He is sufficiently clear-eyed to see that chief among those who are calling on him to intervene, to apply pressure, are his opponents and those who wish him ill. Bush's friends, aside from Rice, are telling him that this is not the appropriate time or place for action. And nevertheless, Rice insists that Bush strongly supports her moves. Maybe she knows something that others don't see yet.

It is no coincidence that Olmert sent Shas leader Eli Yishai and Defense Minister Ehud Barak to the meetings with Rice. These two, who represent the left and right wings of his coalition, differ on many issues, but are united in their suspicion of Rice's initiative. Both came to Washington this week in order to strengthen the opinion that was already prevalent here: The Annapolis meeting has a very slight chance of fulfilling Rice's ambitions.

Pessimistic observers already believe that it would be better to postpone it to a more propitious time, while the more optimistic are trying to propose means of saving it from collapse. Therefore, as the tired joke goes, the principle has already been laid down. Now all that remains is to argue about the price that all the parties will pay for this mistake.

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