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# The Roadblocks To Another Mideast Summit

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spent four days in the Middle East this week to drum up support for an international summit that the US hopes will push the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process forward.

While there were positive signs from her shuttle diplomacy throughout the visit – Israeli and Palestinian officials described the conference, expected for late November or early December, as an important opportunity, and Egypt and Jordan lent some support to the idea – obstacles to getting all sides to the table remain, as has long been the case with the Palestinian-Israeli peace process.

But the Bush administration has not yet exhausted all efforts to lay the groundwork ahead of the Annapolis, Md., gathering. It is banking on this conference to kick off formal talks to create a Palestinian state, and to help salvage a Middle East policy battered by the Iraq war and muddled by the Iran nuclear dilemma.

Ms. Rice is expected to return to the region for more premeeting talks at the end of this month or in early November. President Bush is also sending security adviser Stephen Hadley to meet with Israeli and Palestinian counterparts next week.

"There's a clear change; the administration is now more willing to devote intensive amounts of diplomacy and capital and address the core issues," says Scott Lasensky, a senior analyst at the US Institute of Peace. "Right now failure is not an option. Condoleezza Rice is fully invested in this."

But Rice's seventh visit to the region this year yielded plenty of evidence of the odds against this high-profile gambit into Middle East peacemaking. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas

says he still wants Israel to agree to negotiations on specific issues such as final borders of a Palestinian state. Israel is seeking to keep the agenda vague.

US allies Egypt and Jordan did throw their weight behind the idea, but cautioned that meetings that fail to yield specific timetables on the three core issues – ownership of Jerusalem, permanent Palestinian borders, and the return of Palestinian refugees – could discredit the process.

Almost 15 years after the US-sponsored Oslo accords that are now generally viewed as a failure by both Israelis and Palestinians and after seven years of almost daily violence between the two sides, little goodwill exists.

Arabs and Israelis generally subscribe to precisely opposite reasons for the failure of Oslo – the "other" side didn't keep its word – but their beliefs have left everyone in the same place with less trust and less patience.

Israeli skeptics, who include Defense Minister Ehud Barak, worry that any concessions Israel makes will simply become the new preconditions for later negotiations, essentially getting nothing for something. That's in part because while Mr. Abbas wants to move forward quickly, politically he remains weak. His rivals in the militant Islamist Hamas movement, who control the Gaza Strip, aren't necessarily eager to see Palestinians rushing to the table.

"There's a gap between the genuine desire of the Palestinian leadership to move forward, and [their] capability to do so," says foreign ministry spokesperson Mark Regev. "To ignore that gap is to ignore reality."

Arab and Palestinian officials say that without specific timetables and agendas, Israel will drag out meaningless talks and continue to create facts on the ground, a position expressed by Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit after his meeting with Rice.

"Some in the Arab world, and there are so many actually in the Arab world, that see that there are attempts ... to run out the clock and to maneuver and to go around and beat around the bush in order not to achieve the objective," Mr. Gheit said. "We cannot just negotiate endlessly."

The preconference document "has to answer, 'What is our vision about Jerusalem and how will we solve the refugee problem,' " says Said Zeedani, a Palestinian political analyst. "In the absence of that ... this is not going to work."

"The Palestinian people in general are looking to see something on the ground," says Lt. Mohammed Shekuna, a police officer at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, hours after Rice visited the holy city. "They've been watching a lot of meetings, but the people want jobs and to move without roadblocks. Everything is still being negotiated."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is hardly stronger politically than Mr. Abbas. Mr. Olmert's political judgment has been attacked since last year's war with Hizbullah in Lebanon and his coalition relies on two right-wing parties that might withdraw their support if he makes too many concessions.

Washington has pressed the peace issue before, though not as hard. In 2003, President Bush took up the "road map" peace blueprint, which called for simultaneous Israeli and Palestinian gestures as a way to build confidence.

When the document's milestones were missed, the administration backed the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, hoping that could get peace talks back on track. Instead, Gaza, with Hamas in complete control, is internationally isolated.

Now, Annapolis is being seen as one final push for the Bush administration to show progress in what Rice has called a new "moment of opportunity" for the two sides.

"Nobody knows what we are going to get out of this," says Meir Javedanfar, a Tel Aviv-based Middle East analyst. "This is their last-chance saloon. With elections coming, they're gambling all or nothing. They are going for it."

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