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Rice's Way: Restraint In Quest For Peace

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Three weeks ago, in a windowless conference room in the David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice confidently dismissed the Middle East peacemaking attempts of her predecessors. "It hasn't worked," she told reporters traveling with her. "So, with all due respect, I'll try it my way."

This week, the Condoleezza Rice way toward reaching a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians got off the ground. It will take a year to find out if Ms. Rice's way will succeed in reaching a goal that has eluded secretaries of state for 60 years.

But one thing is clear: the Rice approach to Middle East diplomacy is far more restrained than that of her predecessors, and it consists of pushing Israel — as well as her boss, President Bush — only so far, while putting off the big, hard fights until the end. That strategy won Ms. Rice a conference in Annapolis, Md., on Tuesday, one that resuscitated peace talks over the entrenched final status issues that have bedeviled peace negotiators for decades. Even some of Ms. Rice's strongest critics acknowledge that the revival of the talks is at least a step in the right direction.

But she chose not to prod Mr. Bush to push Israel in turn into defining the principles that would govern the final status issues.

Mr. Bush's speech, while calling for a Palestinian state and promising that he would do whatever he could to help things along, was notable in that he explicitly took on only one of the core issues, the fate of Palestinian refugees, and, on that issue, sided with Israel.

Negotiations are about compromise, and some foreign policy specialists say Ms. Rice should have pressed Mr. Bush to back the Palestinians on something in return. For instance, Mr.

Bush could have followed up his comments referring to Israel “as a homeland for the Jewish people” with language about territorial compensation, or land swaps, for some of the large Israeli settlement blocks in the West Bank that Israel would like to keep. He did not.

Mr. Bush could have said Jerusalem would serve as the capital of two states. He did not.

He could have said there would be compensation and resettlement for the Palestinian refugees. He did not do that either.

Middle East specialists are saying that if Ms. Rice is to succeed in actually brokering a peace deal, she will have to get Mr. Bush to push Israel to agree to all of that and much more in the give and take of the haggling to come.

“The Israeli and Palestinian experience with Rice is that she can be quite tough,” said Martin S. Indyk, a former United States ambassador to Israel. “When she’s pushing, they pay attention. She’s not pushing because she doesn’t feel that she has the solid backing of the president.”

Mr. Indyk, a veteran of the Clinton negotiations of 2000 and early 2001, said that he believed there was a chance that Ms. Rice’s way could work. “It’s not a bad instinct, because you live to fight another day,” he said. But he added that Ms. Rice had made her eventual job harder by backloading everything.

All sides agree that there would have been no conference in Annapolis — and no decision for the United States to re-engage in peacemaking — were it not for Ms. Rice, who made eight trips to Israel in the last year. The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, made a point of singling her out for thanks in his speech.

Ms. Rice’s backers point out that she has received Arab backing for the peace initiative, including the highest-level contact between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which do not have diplomatic relations. Ms. Rice made more than three dozen telephone calls to Arab leaders in the week before the Annapolis meeting to make sure that Arab officials, including the Syrians, would attend.

When Syria demanded that its points of contention with Israel be included on the agenda as a price for its attendance, she pressed the White House to agree, something many national security hawks in the Bush administration were not wont to do. As a result, the Annapolis peace effort has already achieved something that President Bill Clinton did not: Arab buy-in at an early stage.

“Having watched this with different secretaries of state over many years, I have to say that each one has a different style,” said C. David Welch, the assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs. “Presidents and foreign ministers are people too, and they’re going to have their own way of doing things. You’ve got the people who comment who are sometimes so embedded in their way that they forget that people have different approaches.”

A senior administration official said Ms. Rice and Mr. Bush decided before the president’s speech in Annapolis that he “would not stake new ground” during his speech.

“It would have been too close to taking positions on negotiations,” said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the issue. “There was a balance struck there, and we struck it on the side of caution. Our view, shared

by the White House, was that this speech should envelop the process and be encouraging, but it should not be directive.”

That hands-off approach is a marked contrast from the one taken by Mr. Clinton, who got so involved, including many meetings with the longtime Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat at the White House, that even Arab officials joke that Mr. Clinton was personally negotiating the terms for which roads and intersections in Jerusalem would be Palestinian and which would be Israeli.

But those same officials say Ms. Rice has now reinforced the belief in the Arab world that the United States will side with Israel on the tough issues.

“Surprise! The U.S. is more attuned to Israeli interests,” said Ghaith al-Omari, a former Palestinian negotiator who is the director of advocacy at the American Task Force on Palestine, a nonpartisan group that supports a Palestinian state. “The question now is, what happens next? Will we see an engaged American diplomacy in a constructive way?”

Some Israeli officials say Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will actually need public American pressure to silence critics at home who will undoubtedly complain that he is giving away the store. “She hasn’t even pushed them as far as they want to be pushed,” said Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator.

“A smart American administration understands that this is very difficult for an Israeli prime minister,” Mr. Levy said, “and sometimes they need to be able to say, ‘Washington is holding my feet to the fire on this.’”

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