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Rice is History
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Condoleezza Rice's failure in the Middle East is coming to its tragic conclusion. Masking its desire to keep the Palestinians disunited, the Bush administration has used Rice as more ruse than effort. President-elect Obama can learn several lessons from Rice's fruitlessness.

Oh, I'll worry about history a little bit later. I've still got 17 months of very intensive work.

-US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, July 2007.

History is here. Rice is trying to shape it by insisting that her Annapolis process has brought the Israelis and Palestinians closer to peace "than they have been, maybe ever, and certainly in some time."

Really? Then why, at their joint press conference last week, did Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas cite a virtually unchanged list of problems? Israeli settlement activity, roadblocks, incursions, Palestinian prisoners, shuttered Jerusalem institutions, and a "dangerous escalation" of settler attacks against farmers "sometimes in the presence of the Israeli army."

To say nothing of the siege on Gaza and the destruction of its civilization, as former Human Rights Commissioner and Irish president Mary Robinson recently put it.

Annapolis has brought Palestinians no closer to freedom and human dignity. Yet Rice, in her audacity, pretends her efforts are historic.

Her Quartet partners in pretense - the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations - were recently excoriated by 21 international aid agencies for the deteriorating conditions in key areas the Quartet itself had set as benchmarks. Yet the Quartet met again this weekend, issued another pompous declaration, and proposed another meeting. Meanwhile, the suffering continues.

What can the new Administration learn from unmitigated failure?

Lesson One: You can't reasonably expect a people under military occupation to guarantee the security of the occupying forces. Yet since the peace process began in 1993, Israel has insisted, and the world has gone along, that the Palestinian Authority must "crack down on terrorism" while Israel is free to colonize and undertake "incursions."

For instance: The week before Rice's visit, the Israeli Defence Forces carried out 109 searches in the West Bank - the UN says the IDF averages 105 a week. The incursions actually increased in the Jenin governorate. Rice touts Jenin as an American success story in economic and security terms.

Also last week: A 67-year-old man was killed in the West Bank, and six Palestinians were killed in an IDF incursion in central Gaza that sparked fierce retaliation. The ceasefire Israel and Hamas negotiated in June through Egypt's good offices is still holding - but it is fraying.

To avoid Rice's fate, the Administration must insist on a carefully monitored comprehensive ceasefire that binds Israel as well as Palestinians. This is a prerequisite for progress.

Lesson Two: The Bush Administration wasted time and lives by exporting its ideological pursuit of radical Islamists to Palestine. Both Vanity Fair and former UN Special Coordinator for the ME peace process Alvaro de Soto have documented the Bush Administration's determined efforts to crush Hamas and prevent a Fatah-Hamas reconciliation.

Hamas has clearly said it wants a two-state solution. Israel has effectively negotiated with Hamas; the United States too can do so. No meaningful agreement will be reached without a unified Palestinian national movement.

Lesson Three: it is impossible for bilateral negotiations to succeed with a huge power differential between the two parties. Israelis and Palestinians have been sitting around the table, on and off, for 15 years now and Israel has yet to withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territories nor paid a price for its 41-year occupation.

Ironically, it is the settler movement that is now making the occupation costly to Israel by attacking Israeli soldiers and even pipe-bombing an Israeli Jewish peace advocate. This has forced outgoing premier Ehud Olmert to plan a halt to government financing of "unauthorized settlements" - the first meaningful step towards an Israeli pullback in a very long time. (All the settlements are illegal, Mr. Olmert, even your authorized ones.)

The new Administration should take a leaf from Olmert's book and investigate just how much US aid - public as well as private - supports Israel's illegal settlement enterprise

so as to hold Israel accountable.

The United States won't be alone. Finally, Britain is cracking down on settlement exports, which violate Israel's agreement with the European Union. France, speaking as head of the EU, has demanded Israel tackle settler violence against Palestinians. These moves will also make Israel think twice about the cost of its occupation.

There are many calls to preserve the bankrupt Annapolis process. The new Administration should ignore them. Instead, it should support a comprehensive ceasefire, look favorably on Palestinian efforts to unify, and, like Europe, begin adding costs to Israel's occupation.

As for Rice and her farcical Quartet, history will show they will none of them be missed.

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