A peace conference that may engender greater conflict

by Leo Rennert

With her more frequent shuttle missions to the Middle East, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is signaling the Bush administration's determination to pull out all the stops to achieve a major breakthrough in efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But the odds for success of her planned peace conference this fall in Annapolis, Md., are virtually nil. In her impatient quest for a peacemaking legacy, Rice is ignoring critical realities on the ground that require patient, step-by-step, confidence-building measures lasting well beyond the expiration date of this administration.

Throwing caution to the wind, the secretary is lurching toward a peace conference to deal with the most intractable issues - Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and borders - which, absent a complete dismantling of Palestinian terrorist groups, are a ticket not only to potential failure but to likely renewal of more bloodletting.

We've seen this movie before: In 2000, at the end of his second term, President Clinton convened his megasummit at Camp David, hoping PLO leader Yasser Arafat would accept a generous Israeli offer of a two-state solution that would have given Palestinians all of Gaza, 96 percent of the West Bank, Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, plus a major chunk of the Old City and its religious shrines. Arafat instead rejected the offer out of hand and went on to preside over a still-ongoing intifada that has claimed thousands of Israeli and Palestinian lives.

When President Bush came into office, he at first was determined not to repeat this scenario. From the start, he laid down two markers of his own - U.S. support for a Palestinian state (the first president to take this official step), conditioned on Palestinian renunciation of terrorism and lingering notions of driving Israel into the sea. As Bush put it, the U.S. would deal only with Palestinian leaders "untainted by terrorism."

Four years ago, Bush fleshed out his peacemaking criteria with a detailed "road map" that required mutual step-by-step, performance-based moves toward eventual Palestinian statehood. The map ruled out any agreement on final-status issues until prior obligations had been fully met.

Today, the Palestinians haven't even taken the first step - a full dismantling of all terrorist organizations and an end to anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish incitement in Palestinian media, mosques, schools and textbooks. Israel's first-step obligation - to freeze settlement activity - was more than fulfilled in Gaza, where Israel went the road map one better and withdrew all its settlements. In the West Bank, its record on settlement activity is more problematic.

What is indisputable is that current facts on the ground are less conducive to peacemaking than they were at Camp David in 2000. Then, at least, Arafat was in total command of his side. Today, his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, has lost Gaza to Hamas, a terrorist group officially committed to Israel's destruction. Left with only the West Bank, Abbas, in whom Rice has invested all her hopes, is seen as a weak, ineffectual leader, unable or unwilling to make the practical, necessary compromises to achieve a two-state solution. While Abbas has been touted by the administration as fully committed to non-violence, he has yet to arrest his first terrorist and his political party, Fatah, fields its own terrorist wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the same group that recently tried to kill Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on his recent trip into the West Bank for a "peace" summit with Abbas.

On the Israeli side, Olmert, after last year's inconclusive war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, has become Israel's least popular leader and could lose his governing coalition if he fails to insist at Annapolis on Israel's existential security requirements. And however obliging Olmert might be to U.S. urgings, he's not about to sign on to any declaration that would leave Israel unprotected against rocket barrages from the West Bank against Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion Airport - not after sustaining terrorist attacks from Hezbollah after leaving Lebanon and near-daily Qassam rocket fire on southern Israel after leaving Gaza. Israel has learned some bitter lessons since 2000 about ceding land in hopes of achieving peace.

Yet, in her dash toward a megapeace deal in Annapolis, Rice has chosen to blind herself to these inconvenient impediments. She effectively scrapped Bush's road map with its insistence on ending terrorism as a prerequisite for peacemaking.

Furthermore, by calling the peace conference without prior assurances of attendance by the Palestinians and Arab nations, Rice allowed the conference itself to become a tool to blackmail the United States and Israel into major concessions. Palestinian, Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders already have threatened not to show up if they don't get their way, banking on Rice's stake in staging this conference to get one-sided deals before it even opens.

The result might not only be a failed conference. Having raised Palestinian expectations to unrealistic highs, failure could become a further pretext for more violence - an end devoutly desired by Hamas in its efforts to torpedo any and all peace conferences that would leave Israel as a sovereign Jewish nation.

So, why the sudden hurry? Hubris and Iraq. Rice apparently is eager to leave office with a Mideast peacemaking feather in her cap. And she and the president seem to have bought into the wishful notion that an Israeli-Palestinian peace is the key to ending historic enmities and conflicts in the Muslim-Arab world, starting with Iraq.

Recent history in Northern Ireland teaches otherwise and points up the basic flaw in Rice's diplomacy. There, British, American and Irish leaders insisted on a complete, verified dismantling of the terrorist Irish Republican Army before there could be political power sharing between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster - the same approach as in Bush's discarded road map.

Gerry Adams, the head of Sinn Fein, the IRA's political mentor, tried mightily to circumvent the demand for the IRA to disband. Each time, he was rebuffed by John Major, Tony Blair, Clinton, Bush and Bertie Ahern. It took a decade of steadfast diplomacy for the Good Friday agreement to come to fruition, but at least it was launched on a firm foundation - not the kind of unrealistic hopes and promises that threaten to turn Annapolis into an ominous failure.

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