

Annapolis's Fading Hope

By David Ignatius
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The Annapolis peace conference last November was a good moment for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She seemed to be getting serious, finally, about using American diplomacy to push for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement whose basic parameters are understood by everyone -- but which requires U.S. follow-through to make it happen.

Since then, that crucial ingredient -- American follow-through -- has been sadly lacking. As a result, the [Annapolis](#) process has languished to the point that over the past two weeks, some Israelis and Palestinians warned it was near collapse. Rice's critics have argued that this failure to follow up on big initiatives has been her biggest weakness in her years in Washington. She's running out of time to prove her critics wrong.

To move the Annapolis peace process forward, Rice knew she had to make progress on the "road map" issues of security. Palestinians and Israelis needed to see signs of change -- al-Jazeera television footage of the [Israeli army](#) dismantling illegal settlements in the [West Bank](#) and Israeli television reports that Palestinian security forces were dismantling pieces of the terrorist infrastructure. But this hasn't happened.

A big problem has been foot-dragging by the Israeli military. Defense Minister [Ehud Barak](#) doesn't trust the peace process endorsed by his political rival, Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#), and it shows. Of the illegal outposts on the West Bank, estimated by the Israelis at 24 and the Palestinians at about 80, the Israeli Defense Forces so far haven't dismantled a single one, according to a senior administration official. And while understandably worried about terrorist attacks, the IDF has not made any significant efforts to ease the West Bank checkpoints that are a daily headache and humiliation for the Palestinians.

"What they [the Israeli military] said they would look at hasn't happened," said the senior administration official. "The IDF has been doing stuff the same way [on checkpoints] for seven years, and they haven't bothered to change." According to the official, the Israeli military has also vetoed some Palestinian security operations -- preferring to have the IDF raid a money-changer in Nablus last month, for example, rather than let the Palestinians do it.

In the absence of such confidence-building measures, hard-liners on both sides have gained ground. [Hamas](#) rockets have kept flying into [Israel](#), the Israelis have kept retaliating and the peace process has gone nowhere. Then came Thursday's gruesome terrorist shooting in [Jerusalem](#) that killed eight rabbinical students. Left to itself, the horrifying cycle of violence never seems to end.

What's sad is that Rice knew precisely what was needed to make the process work. Annapolis called for a tripartite commission in which a U.S. representative would sit with both sides to monitor progress in improving security and living conditions. The Israelis even agreed that the U.S.

representative should decide whether the road map conditions had been met. [President Bush](#) named Air Force Lt. Gen. William Fraser III to this mediating post in January. But so far, his commission hasn't had a single three-way meeting. The first one is scheduled for Thursday, but there's no plan to make a public report.

Rice also appointed a distinguished personal representative, retired [Marine Corps](#) Gen. [James Jones](#), back in November to study a framework for mutual security in a future Palestinian state. Jones has made just one fact-finding trip so far, and [State Department](#) officials believe that his mission hasn't made much progress.

Lurking behind this stalemate is the sinister hand of Hamas. It was Rice who insisted that this militant Islamic group be allowed to participate in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, over strong protests from both Israelis and moderate Palestinians. Rice argued that the Islamic militancy represented by Hamas had to be given a political voice. But when Hamas won and predictably continued to reject Israel's right to exist, the United States had no coherent follow-up strategy. A new article in [Vanity Fair](#) says that Washington secretly egged on the rival [Fatah](#) movement to stage a coup in [Gaza](#), but Hamas moved first with a countercoup that expelled Fatah security forces. The Hamas militants kept firing their rockets, goading the Israelis toward the reinvasion of Gaza they launched Feb. 27 that nearly scuttled the post-Annapolis peace process.

What's needed is some sort of cease-fire between Hamas and Israel. But Washington and Jerusalem stoutly insist that they will never negotiate with a terrorist organization. Meanwhile, they are quietly blessing an Egyptian effort to broker just such a cease-fire package. I'm sorry, but that is a lame strategy -- letting others do secretly what you refuse to do openly.

Rice keeps insisting that she is serious about achieving an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough before President Bush leaves office. But progress requires disciplined follow-through. Without it, you can add Annapolis to the dustbin.

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