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LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: WASHINGTON'S PLAYBOOK AFTER ANNAPOLIS BY SCOTT LASENSKY *

In the lead-up to the Annapolis conference, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has been carefully studying past American attempts at Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Has she drawn the right lessons from the U.S. diplomatic experience?

Given that the United States has been deeply engaged in the Middle East peace process for more than three decades, experiencing both historic achievements and spectacular failures, there is little need to reinvent the wheel. A group of former officials and scholars has just completed a year-long series of intensive consultations with dozens of American, Israeli and Arab statesmen and political figures. Following are some of the lessons and recommendations that were identified:

First, U.S. involvement in the peace process must be defined – and seen, both at home, and abroad--as a top White House priority. If the parties sense anything less, they will either ignore or try to subvert American involvement. President Bush's speech at Annapolis went a long way toward dispelling the notion that Washington has its mind elsewhere. But there was too much silence between the July announcement and Bush's speech in late November, leading some to doubt the intensity of presidential commitment. President Bush will not (and

should not) allow himself to be drawn into the day-to-day negotiations, as his predecessor was. But without periodic, unambiguous signals of presidential commitment, the current U.S. initiative risks faltering.

Second, the U.S. must ensure that Palestinians and Israelis move beyond an incremental approach and focus on ending their conflict. In theory, Annapolis -- with its emphasis on launching final status negotiations -- reflects an understanding of this necessity. In practice, however, the Administration continues to resist the notion of U.S. engagement on the most sensitive core issues, preferring a hands-off approach. Such a conclusion draws the wrong lessons from the past. Over the years, Washington's most important achievements have come when it was prepared to take risks and delve into the substantive issues that divided Arabs and Israelis. Annapolis demonstrated that, left to their own devices, the parties cannot take the final step and agree to bold compromises. Indeed, they were unable to agree on the general outlines of a negotiated settlement; their joint "understanding" failed even to list the core issues. Past successes, together with Annapolis's failure in this regard, underscore the necessity for the U.S., at some future point, to put forward bridging proposals.

Third, the U.S. needs to involve key international and regional actors. Arab states were invited to Annapolis, an

indication that the Bush Administration understands there is an opportunity to build a regional structure of support for peace with Israel. This is essential for two reasons: regional support provides political cover to Palestinian leaders while simultaneously offering Israel the prospect of broader normalization -- a goal Israeli and Jewish leaders have long sought. For Arab support to be sustained and deepened, however, meaningful progress will have to be made both at the negotiating table and on the ground.

A key question revolves around Syria. Having succeeded in bringing Damascus to Annapolis, the Bush Administration should now test Syria's and Israel's interest in renewed negotiations. The more Syria develops a stake in this new diplomatic process, the less it will have an incentive to undermine it. Expanding dialogue with Damascus beyond the issue of Iraq remains a highly controversial matter within the Administration, as some officials fear such engagement will come at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty. But that is not inevitable. It should be possible for the U.S. and its European allies to engage Syria, support the Lebanese government, maintain stability along the Lebanese-Israeli border and stand behind the UN tribunal.

Fourth, the U.S. should closely monitor developments on the ground. If there is one lesson that ought to be learned from the past, it is that even the most vaunted diplomatic process cannot long survive without genuine improvements in Palestinian and Israeli lives. This in turn requires a far more serious effort by Washington to monitor and assess each side's compliance with its commitments. Former policy makers unanimously recognized that U.S. failure to establish strict accountability by the two parties had been corrosive, eroding mutual confidence, undermining U.S. standing and allowing destructive developments to proceed unchecked.

When the Road Map was first introduced in 2003, Washington committed itself to monitoring implementation,

going so far as to dispatch an envoy. But the mission quickly was aborted. The Annapolis statement suggests the Administration may have drawn the right lessons in this regard, insofar as it calls on the U.S. to judge the parties' implementation of their Road Map obligations. The Administration now needs to demonstrate its commitment and willingness to assess impartially Palestinian and Israeli performance.

Fifth, the U.S. must stand fast, even in the face of political obstacles. At various times, rejectionists in Israel or among the Palestinians will seek to derail this new initiative. As this occurs, Washington must stay the course. To be sure, the Administration will have to keep a close eye on local developments in both entities. But, equally crucially, no actor should be allowed a veto over the process. From the early 1990s onwards, U.S. diplomacy has tended to pay too much attention to Israeli domestic developments, while paying too little to Palestinian domestic developments. This time, the Administration should seek a better balance, understanding political realities and constraints, but not being paralyzed by them.

Annapolis offers an important opportunity to turn the page, generating momentum on the ground, at the negotiating table and in the region. Drawing the right lessons from past negotiations will be critical to transforming this opportunity into reality.

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