

Rice's Middle East visit: Bullying and intimidation dressed up as diplomacy

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's much trumpeted meeting on Monday, February 19 with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas was a calculated public humiliation of the Palestinian president.

Far from being a new diplomatic initiative designed to bring about a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rice used the occasion to dictate Washington and Jerusalem's terms for any future Palestinian government.

Following separate talks with Olmert and Abbas, the three met, without aides other than Rice's Arabic translator, in a West Jerusalem hotel before adjourning to Rice's suite.

Rice told the Palestinians in no uncertain terms that Abbas's proposals for a new Palestinian government did not meet with her approval, the concessions offered by Hamas were totally inadequate and until the Hamas government completely renounced its programme, no Palestinian state was on offer. She made clear that the only terms acceptable to the Bush administration were the total suppression of all opposition to Israel's plans for a Greater Israel, based on the permanent retention of its settlements in the West Bank.

The talks lasted a mere two hours and ended with a terse 90-second statement from Rice. Abbas confirmed his position as a US puppet by dutifully lining up alongside Olmert to endorse her remarks.

Rice said that the three had discussed the changed political circumstances arising from the proposal for a Hamas-Fatah government; the meeting had been "useful and productive," and she would be back in Jerusalem "soon." She left without taking any questions from reporters and there were no announcements from either the Israeli or Palestinian leaders.

A Hamas spokesman set the record straight. Ismail Radwan said the meeting was a failure and that its purpose was to put pressure on Abbas to pull out of the proposed National Unity government and take on Hamas. "Rice did not succeed in pressuring President Abbas to withdraw from the unity government. We call on the US administration to respect the Palestinian people's will and recognise the [Hamas-led] government and open a dialogue," he said.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of an agreement brokered by Saudi King Abdullah in Mecca between Hamas, led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, and Fatah led by President Mahmoud Abbas, that were on the point of outright civil war, to form a National Unity government.

The electoral victory of Hamas in January 2006 had led, on the insistence of the US and Israel, to an economic boycott and isolation of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Quartet, the US, European Union, Russia and the United Nations, cut off all direct aid to the PA, bringing the Palestinian economy to a halt and its people to the brink of starvation, while Israel illegally withheld the tax and customs it collects on behalf of the PA.

Israel's demands on Abbas to suppress all Palestinian resistance to its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and its all-out war on Gaza last summer only served to increase the tensions between the rival parties.

The Mecca agreement, which Abbas announced on February 9 after two days of talks, was widely welcomed within Palestine. It follows his failed attempt to mount a political coup at Washington's behest last December, when he said he would dissolve the Hamas government and call new presidential and parliamentary elections. That unconstitutional move

threatened a civil war and was unlikely to lead to an election victory for Fatah.

While this latest arrangement is a reflection of Abbas's unwillingness to take on Hamas with either guns or at the polls, it achieves the same ends: the unseating of an elected government. The Hamas government has now resigned and Haniyeh has five weeks to form a new National Unity government, which he will head, as set out under the agreement.

The aim is to end the factional fighting between the two parties, terminate any militant resistance to Israel and secure the international recognition that will restore economic aid to the PA. The Saudi Kingdom has pledged \$1 billion to counter Iranian and Shiite influence and restore its own position in the region.

Hamas will cede six cabinet posts to Fatah and four to so-called independents, including the most powerful portfolios and the only ones with any real power: interior, finance and foreign relations.

It made major concessions to Fatah and Israel's key demands: the acceptance of Israel's right to exist, the renunciation of violence, the acceptance of previous agreements between Israel and the PA—a reference to the Oslo Accords that make a future Palestinian state dependent upon negotiations rather than the Israeli withdrawal from land seized in the 1967 war. Specifically it agreed to recognise Israel as a "reality" and respect or honour previous agreements, having dropped its previous insistence that any agreements be "in the higher interests of the Palestinian people."

The new government would adopt the so-called prisoners' charter, drawn up by both Fatah and Hamas last year calling for a Palestinian state within the land captured by Israel in 1967 with its capital in Jerusalem. It further called for Hamas to work towards joining the PLO, the umbrella group dominated by Fatah which has recognised Israel and would be responsible for negotiating future agreements with Israel.

Even Mohammad Dahlan, Fatah official and warlord, a fierce opponent of Hamas and an Israeli favourite to assume the interior ministry, said that with such an agreement in place Israel could no longer use the excuse that there was no Palestinian "partner for peace." He pointed to the change in government, a long period without much militant opposition to Israel and the Mecca agreement between Abbas and Haniyah.

Hamas's leader in exile in Syria, Khalid Masha'al,

one of the participants in the Mecca talks, used the *Guardian* to publicly renounce Hamas's long held call for a Palestinian state on the whole of Mandate Palestine (Israel and Palestine). He offered a resolution of the conflict based on a Palestinian state within its 1967 borders of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and Gaza.

This was rejected by Zvi Heifetz, Israel's ambassador in London, writing in a comment piece in the *Guardian* headlined, "Hamas has not delivered."

Washington and Jerusalem do not want negotiations with Hamas, but total surrender and the suppression of all opposition to Israel's expansionist agenda. To this end, the Olmert government has sanctioned the transfer of arms to Abbas and the White House has sought financial resources from Congress for military aid to Abbas to suppress Hamas, to be channelled via Israel and Egypt.

Israel used the run-up to the meeting with Rice to pile the pressure on Abbas. While Fatah officials and Palestinian commentators acknowledge that Hamas has shifted its position, an Israeli official said, "The fact is Hamas moved a little bit, which is positive. But we don't think it moved far enough. Mahmoud Abbas moved towards Hamas, which we don't like."

Tzahi Hanegbi, the head of the foreign affairs committee of Israel's parliament, went further. He said that Mr. Abbas had awarded "a significant victory to Hamas."

On Friday before the talks, Olmert announced that President George W. Bush had assured him that the US would continue to boycott any new Palestinian government that failed to recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept agreements. It signifies that the US will accept only a Palestinian state whose sole function is to police the Palestinian people and prevent any opposition to Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.



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