

Secretary Rice's Message to Prime Minister Haniyeh

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Adhering to the Bush Administration policy of isolation, US diplomats refuse to meet with the leadership of Hamas. But how then does the Bush Administration transmit important messages to the Hamas leaders? One method is through the public statements of top US officials.

Consider in this regard how Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice chose to answer the following question at her August 6, 2006 press conference in Crawford, Texas:

SECRETARY RICE: "Good morning. I'll take a few questions."

QUESTION: "Israel has arrested the speaker of the Palestinian parliament overnight. Was that a helpful step?"

SECRETARY RICE: "You mean, in the Palestinian Territories. We've expressed concerns about what may be going on in the Palestinian Territories, too, as you know. I went there and saw Abu Mazen. It would be a very good step if, as they have been told to do by everybody in the region, if the military wing of Hamas would release that abducted Israeli soldier. That needs to be done."

"It's probably not surprising that this took place by the military wing of Hamas at the time that Abu Mazen was moving towards some understandings with the political -- the people who were elected from Hamas about how they might move toward Quartet

principles. It's also, perhaps, not surprising that it took place at a time when there was anticipation that there might be a meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas."

"There is a method to what these terrorists and extremist groups are doing -- they are trying to destroy the foundation for democratic and moderate states in Lebanon, in Iraq, in the Palestinian Territories. That's what they're trying to do. And so it's not surprising that people who have no future in a moderate and democratic Middle East would try to destroy it. So that's really the way forward. We're continuing to work with both the Israelis and the Palestinians, as well, even as the situation in Lebanon unfolds."

There's a great deal to be found in these brief remarks. Implicitly, one can find a message from Secretary Rice to Prime Minister Haniyeh that, if it were in the form of a letter, might read like this:

"Dear Prime Minister Haniyeh,

On my recent visit, while I met with Abu Mazen, US policy prevented my having a similar meeting with you. Nonetheless, I would like you to understand several aspects of US policy and thinking:

1. We recognize that Hamas is not a single entity. In saying this, I mean to call attention to more than the familiar distinction between political and military functions. We recognize the distinctness of "the people who were elected from Hamas." We understand that you did not authorize the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier.

2. We recognize that prior to the kidnapping, you and Abu Mazen were making progress in reaching "some understandings" about how it might be possible to 'move toward Quartet principles.' Be

aware then that we are carefully attuned to such movement and take it seriously. Please note that I refer to them as “Quartet principles” towards which noteworthy “movement” is possible.

3. We know that there are those in Hamas who are “trying to destroy the foundation for [a] democratic and moderate” Palestinian state. We do not include you in this group.

4. Indeed, we believe it is quite possible that the kidnapping of the Israeli soldier was deliberately undertaken to thwart the progress that you and Abu Mazen were making.

5. “It would be a very good step if . . . the military wing would release that abducted soldier. That needs to be done.”

6. “A moderate and democratic Middle East” is “the way forward.”

Sincerely,

Condoleezza Rice

US Secretary of State”

This, essentially, is the message Secretary Rice has sent to Prime Minister Haniyeh. It is an encouraging message which suggests an American openness towards working with the elected Palestinian government. A pre-condition for progress is to bring about the release of the Israeli soldier. Once that is accomplished, if Abu Mazen and Ismail Haniyeh can resume their efforts to achieve a coherent governmental structure that moves towards the Quartet principles, the US may be open to working with both President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh in seeking peace and democracy for Palestine.

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