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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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From: Toiv, Nora F
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Eyes on Hillary Clinton as She Leads Mideast Peace Talks

Opinions Are Split on Whether Secretary of State Has Skills Necessary for Negotiations

By JAKE TAPPER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 2, 2010 —

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton today stepped into the international spotlight, assuming the day-to-day responsibility of trying to broker a Mideast peace that has eluded her predecessors for decades.

Seated between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the State Department, Clinton heralded the first direct negotiations between the parties in nearly two years.

Whether both sides can overcome a history of failed negotiations and dashed hopes will depend in large part on the individual leaders making difficult concessions, Clinton said.

"We cannot and will not impose a solution. Only you can make the decisions necessary to reach an agreement and secure a peaceful future for the Israeli and Palestinian people," she said.

Clinton appeared to embrace the opportunity and the symbolism of the moment — speaking slowly and authoritatively, embracing her partners on both sides, and reminding the world of the difficulties to be expected on the road ahead.

"Those who oppose the cause of peace will try in every way possible to sabotage this process, as we have already seen this week," she said, referring to the killing Tuesday of four Israeli civilians by Hamas.

But "the core issues at the center of these negotiations -- territory, security, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements and others -- will get no easier if we wait, nor will they resolve themselves."

The talks, which also included Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, represent a formidable challenge for Clinton, who has spent months coaxing both sides back to the negotiating table.

They also raise the stakes for President Obama, who has set a goal of creating a two-state solution. He met with Netanyahu and Abbas in private sessions at the White House Wednesday and said he was "cautiously hopeful" a deal could be reached one year from now.

But experts say success in the months ahead will also depend on Clinton's skill as a diplomat and mediator.

"I think she has credibility. Now whether that translates into diplomatic skills, I don't know," said Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat professor for peace and development at the University of Maryland. "Frankly, she's untested as a mediator."

Other observers see Clinton's **experience as a politician** as an asset because she will be able to not only discuss the policies but understand the politics of how Palestinian and Israeli leaders "sell" the negotiations to their peoples at home.

In an ABC News exclusive interview, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Clinton has the best type of political mind. "[It] knows where you meet the point of principle and knows where you need the subtlety and the compromise," he said.

1979 Camp David Accords: the Gold Standard

Ahead of the talks, Clinton had requested historical background materials concerning past efforts at peace in the region, the ultimately unsuccessful one led by her husband, a source close to the secretary of state said.

"She has this relationship with this fellow who has spent some time talking to leaders -- you know President Clinton -- and she has benefitted from his direct experience," said State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley.

Clinton regards President Jimmy Carter's 1979 Camp David Accords brokered between Israel and Egypt as the gold standard for negotiations, the Clinton source said.

When then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin refused to authorize the dismantling of any Israeli settlements, Carter's team suggested having the Israeli Parliament make the decision -- and it did. Carter has credited thinking outside of the box and being innovative as the key.

"You have to be innovative and get a lot of outside help to find some alternative route that might bring you to the same goals," Carter told interviewer Don Richardson in "Conversations With Carter."

"You really need to look at life or the negotiation as if it were a chessboard. Anticipating what the next move is and what the next move is after that," said Aaron David Miller, an adviser on the region to six secretaries of state.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who negotiated an end to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, said that audaciousness was part of testing the limits.

"The art of statesmanship is to find a position between stagnation and overextension, hopefully at the outer limit of what is possible," he said during a June 2008 interview on CNN.

Former President Clinton once suggested that willpower also comes in handy. In his autobiography, "My Life," he described one very late night at Wye River -- where he conducted his own Mideast peace talks -- where his "strategy for success had now boiled down to endurance; I was determined to be the last man standing."

What the negotiators are doing when they're not negotiating might also play a role, Carter has said. By holding peace talks at Camp David, "it was a harmonious environment because Egyptians and Israelis who had been devoting their adult life to killing each other were required to swim in the same swimming pool, watch the same movies, play on the same tennis courts, throw horseshoes together, sit on the same rock and talks. That was all part of it."

ABC News' Kirit Radia, Enjoli Francis and Devin Dwyer contributed to this report.

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