

Annapolis: Will It Bear Fruit?

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Geneva, Madrid, Oslo, Camp David, Taba and, now, Annapolis. Annapolis has joined the list of names inscribed in the annals of the Israeli–Palestinian search for peace. Will it be remembered as the city that succeeded, at last, in heralding the dawn of peace between those two embattled peoples? If the polls taken one month after the Annapolis conference are to be believed, neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians thought this was likely. Sixty-five percent of the Palestinians polled declared that the chances of a two-state solution emerging from Annapolis were slim or nonexistent. Eighty-nine percent of the Israelis believed that the possibility of an agreement with the Palestinians was low. Both Israelis and Palestinians gave similar reasons for their skepticism: The Palestinians declared that the Israelis would never allow the establishment of a Palestinian state; the Israelis claimed that the Palestinians would never sign a peace agreement.

This lack of trust is the most formidable obstruction on the road to the success of Annapolis. Jibril Rajoub, the former Fatah chief of security and one of the more perspicacious of the Palestinian leaders, told me recently that there was no way peace could be achieved unless hope and trust were first restored. “If we have a political horizon, all Palestinians will be motivated to make peace,” he declared. Similarly, the mistrust of Palestinian intentions is so widespread among Israelis that they did not take the Annapolis conference seriously. “Just a show, nothing more,” was a common reaction. Yet once more there is a mirror-like quality to the reactions of both peoples. Just as Rajoub’s belief that a political horizon could motivate “all Palestinians to make peace,” it is safe to say that if Israelis were convinced that the negotiations following the Annapolis conference could really produce an end-of-conflict agreement, then a large majority of the Israeli population would support it. They do not back it now because they do not believe it possible to reach such an agreement, hence the attitude of “just a show, nothing more.”

On the face of it, this skepticism is understandable. The sad fact is that here in the Middle East, the pessimists are time and again proven right. The difficulties facing

both Prime Minister Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas are formidable. The Israeli premier lacks popular support—there has probably never been a prime minister in Israel with such a low approval rating as that of Olmert. Of late, however, there are signs of an improvement in his standing. Still, the prime minister is burdened with a coalition government, one of whose partners has already made good on a threat to walk out if he makes concessions to the Palestinians. Even in his own party, there is opposition to an agreement that would affect core subjects, particularly Jerusalem. Olmert's promise to implement the first chapter of the Road Map entails the cessation of building in the settlements and the removal of illegal outposts. Settlers and right-wing extremists have promised to violently oppose Olmert if he dares to carry out that promise. Over all that stands the daunting challenge of having to evacuate settlers and dismantle settlements if, and when, he reaches an agreement that will necessitate withdrawal to a permanent border with an independent Palestinian state.

With Olmert's present weak standing in the eyes of the Israeli public, and in the face of such problems, small wonder that Israelis refuse to take Annapolis seriously. With such difficulties, there is no way Olmert can move the process forward. In truth, he is in an invidious position—he is damned if he makes progress, because his coalition could then collapse, and he is damned if he does not make progress, because the solemn undertaking he had made at the Annapolis conference will be seen as worthless. The United States will, in particular, take umbrage if Israel is seen to be dragging its feet in the post-Annapolis negotiations, and Israel can ill afford a crisis in its relations with the US.

President Abbas is in a similar situation. Over the past months there has been a dramatic rise in his popularity. The Palestinian poll taken in November 2007 shows that 50 percent of those polled approve of him; according to the poll, he would win handsomely if an election were held for the position of president, and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyyeh would be his opponent. Yet, as every politician knows, public approval can be fickle and can change overnight if he or she fails to live up to expectations. Abbas' supporters want a peace agreement, but they will oppose concessions on core issues—in particular, Jerusalem and refugees.

The main problem of the Palestinian president, though, is Hamas, and its control over Gaza. No one can clap with only one hand, and no Palestinian can reach a peace agreement that is supported by the West Bank Palestinians but is opposed in Gaza. For the Annapolis process to succeed, its outcome must also encompass Gaza, and not the West Bank and Israel alone. Reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas with the return to a unity government would be opposed by Israel, which has threatened to end negotiations with the Palestinians if that happens. It would also encounter strong opposition from the Fatah rank and file, who have

not forgotten — nor forgiven — the brutal manner in which Hamas ousted Fatah from Gaza.

The idea of an end-of-conflict agreement between Palestinians and Israelis is anathema to the hard-line Hamas fundamentalists. In mosques, schools and in their media they have preached jihad against the Jews. Jihad is presented as a religious *diktat* to which every Muslim must prescribe, because when infidels occupy or rule over Muslim lands, holy war is the answer. For Hamas, all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean is Muslim. The religious necessity of jihad is interpreted as meaning that there can be no compromise with Israel. The duty of every believing Muslim is to take up the sword against the Jews and fight them until they are expelled from the holy Muslim land of Palestine.

The decision of the Fatah leadership to work for an independent Palestinian state to exist side by side with Israel is viewed as treason by the extremist wing of Hamas, which, it should be stressed, represents only a minority of Hamas members. For this minority, however, there can be no compromise, and it is this extremist, fundamentalist wing of Hamas that sets the tone for Hamas policy and prescribes it.

An offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Hamas moved away from the universalistic, pan-Islamic goals that characterized the Brotherhood and adopted, instead, Palestinian nationalism. That nationalism, however, is embedded in a vibrant Islamic ideology that calls for a Palestinian government dedicated to *Sharia* law and to Muslim precepts. The Hamas Covenant rejects any possibility of peace with Israel: “There is no solution for the Palestinian problem other than jihad. All the initiatives and international conferences are a waste of time and a futile game.” The Covenant spells out what Hamas thinks of the Jews, who seek “to overthrow societies, destroy values, undermine alliances, trample morality, and destroy Islam.”

Small wonder, then, that Hamas refuses to recognize Israel and is adamantly opposed to the Annapolis process. The most extreme among its members identify with the aims of Islamic Jihad, whose spokesman, Abu Hamza, declared at the beginning of December 2007, “We will continue to bring terror and destruction and death among the Zionists until we uproot them from our land.”

President Abbas has pledged to implement the first chapter of the Road Map, according to which the Palestinians are required to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism by disbanding terrorist and militant groups outside the official security forces. In order to do this, he will have to confront Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of which are internationally recognized as terrorist groups. The only possibility

for his eventual success in this endeavor is to hold new elections with the hope of a convincing victory for Fatah over Hamas. In the words of Jibril Rajoub, “If the negotiations with you give us hope for peace, we will have new elections, which will bring a big victory for Fatah and for all Palestinians who want peace with Israel.”

The fulfillment of the Road Map conditions, however, need not precede negotiations; it must come before any agreement is implemented. President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, together with their negotiating teams, can therefore continue to make progress before building in settlements ceases, before illegal outposts are removed and before terrorist infrastructure is dismantled. Once agreed upon, the fruit of their negotiations will then be “shelved” and only become operative after the Road Map conditions are met.

Once the concessions on core issues made by both sides are reported by the media, these negotiations will, in all probability, be derailed, even though these concessions are imperative in order for progress to be made in the negotiations. On the Israeli side, the settlers’ movement and other right-wing elements will pressure the two right-wing parties in the government to bolt the coalition if, for example, the Israeli negotiators agree to give up parts of East Jerusalem. The government is prepared to make such a concession in order to allow for a part of Jerusalem to serve as the capital of an independent Palestine alongside the Israeli capital. For the negotiations to have any chance of progressing, there will have to be a quid pro quo—a package deal—in which Israel will have to be flexible about the Arab quarters of East Jerusalem in return for an abrogation by the Palestinians of their demand for a “Right of Return” for the Palestinian refugees, a demand that no Israeli negotiator will ever accept.

The problem of dealing with the core issues is compounded by the fact that the opening position of Israel on borders, refugees, Jerusalem, water and other vital subjects has not yet been discussed at the governmental level. Thus, any concessions made by Prime Minister Olmert or Foreign Minister Livni will automatically be challenged by Minister Eli Yishai, the hawkish leader of the right-wing Shas party that remains in the government. The other right-wing party, Yisrael Beitenu, that threatened to leave has already jumped ship.

It follows, therefore, that the only way that progress can be made toward an end-of-conflict agreement is if secret negotiations are conducted on a second track parallel to the negotiations that are reported in the media. These secret talks are, in effect, already taking place between Olmert and Abbas. There is nothing exceptional in such a situation. Certainly in the Middle East secret diplomacy has been the rule rather than the exception. President Sadat, Prime Minister Begin and President

Carter would never have reached their historic agreement at Camp David in 1978 if every evening the media had been apprised of the deliberations that had taken place during the day. Begin, himself, would never have given his assent to the publication of the details that were being worked out by his team—Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizman, Aharon Barak—together with Sadat and Carter. Begin, at the time, was inhibited by, and afraid of, his own Likud status quo constituency in Israel. Therefore, he kept the details from them until an agreement was reached. The same was true of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for the Oslo Accords.

For the Annapolis process to succeed, Olmert and Abbas will have to act in the same fashion—keeping the details from the politicians and the public until an agreement has been attained, and only then going to the public with new elections. In Israel, there is no legal provision for holding a referendum. Elections would be held in lieu of a referendum on the agreement. While it is highly possible that the outgoing government and Knesset would refuse to vote for the agreement, it is very likely that a majority of the voters would embrace it. Similarly, on the Palestinian side, if Jibril Rajoub was correct in his prediction, a large majority of Palestinian voters would also support it.

Much has been written about the weakness of Olmert and Abbas. It is said that they are too weak to reach an agreement. Yet there exists a notion of “the power of the weak.” Neither of them has anything to lose by going for the full kitty of peace. Indeed, Olmert’s only chance of surviving the next elections is to demonstrate that he can bring peace to our troubled land, and display a proposed end-of-conflict agreement to prove it. The Palestinians would still have to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure (and Israel would have to stop building in existing settlements and remove illegal outposts) for the agreement to be implemented. These moves would make it much more attractive for the electorate. As for President Abbas, he presumably has no intention of standing again for elections. His Fatah party would have a much greater chance of trouncing Hamas in an election if a peace agreement could be brandished in the election campaign.

Yet, it must be stressed that the difficulties facing the negotiators are enormous. For there to be any real chance of success, outside players, and in particular the United States, will have to play an active role.

The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was only made possible by the hands-on policy of the US Administration, which reached its climax at Camp David. Israel insists that the Annapolis negotiations be bilateral, yet the US will clearly have to accompany, encourage, smooth the way, help solve crises and, in general, act as nursemaid for both sides. The Arab states that participated in the Annapolis conference, similarly, will have to make the Palestinians feel their encouragement.

The European Union, for its part, will have to give full backing to the Quartet's envoy, Tony Blair, in his efforts to transform the Palestinian economy and to overhaul Palestinian governance.

Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas get on well together. They trust each other. The Palestinian leaders—Mahmud Abbas and his prime minister Salam Fayyad—are opposed to violence. They are committed to making peace. Olmert, for his part, is equally engaged. In contrast to some of the previous prime ministers of Israel, he is opposed to the status quo, which he considers to be a danger for the future of the Jewish state. He has gone on record saying he believes the two-state solution to be essential for the future of Israel. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, published on January 1, 2008, he declared that if Israel “will have to deal with a reality of one state for two peoples,” it “could bring about the end of the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.” No other prime minister in Israel has ever said anything remotely comparable to this, or to Olmert's other statements, such as “will we live eternally in a confused reality where 50 percent of the population or more are residents but not equal citizens who have the right to vote like us?” His primary task as prime minister, he insisted, was to ensure that such a situation would not happen.

Can Ehud Olmert survive the many hurdles obstructing his path? Can Mahmoud Abbas restore his authority over Gaza? Can Annapolis succeed? The year ahead holds so many imponderables that no accurate prediction is possible. A Qassam rocket could hit a kindergarten or school, predicating a massive military operation in Gaza; a suicide attack by Palestinian terrorists could exact a large number of lives, creating a new reality of opposition to the peace process, or extreme right-wing settlers, in an attempt to sabotage the peace process, could take violent action against Palestinians. These words are being written on the eve of the publication of the findings of the Winograd Commission investigating the failings of the 2006 Second Lebanon War. Olmert's coalition might crumble as an after-shock. But another Kadima minister would then be appointed in his place. These are but some of the possibilities affecting the success of that fragile plant, Annapolis. Only time will tell if it weathers the storms ahead and eventually bears fruit.