

Annapolis: Optimism vs. Pessimism

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"Do you know the definition of a pessimist?" asks Afif Safieh, head of the PLO Delegation to the USA. He answers with a bitter smile: "an optimist with information." In an interview with Akiva Eldar published in *Ha`aretz* back in September 2007, Afif said, "My message to the American society as a Palestinian diplomat is not `give up a friend` but `add a friend.` I don't have a problem with the commitment to Israel's existence; I'm just asking my American friends if you are also committed to Israel's territorial expansion? Do your interests include the Israeli occupation in the territories? For this is it worth it for you to fight with the entire Arab world? I'm saying to my American friends that the U.S. is a wonderful society, pluralistic, and a nation of nations. It absorbed eight million Muslims, of them four million who are Arabs and 400,000 Palestinians... Public opinion polls show that 60 percent of Americans would like to see a more balanced policy toward us... and 70 percent support a solution of two states."

There are grounds for both optimism and pessimism arising from the Annapolis Conference. What is in no doubt is the price of failure. In a letter written to George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice before the Annapolis conference, a group of foreign policy advisors headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lee H. Hamilton, Henry Siegman, Brent Scowcroft, Paul Volcker and other former Washington officials, spell out how "Failure Risks Devastating Consequences". They saw Annapolis as "a genuine opportunity for progress toward a two-state solution. The Middle East remains mired in its worst crisis in years, and a positive outcome of the conference could play a critical role in stemming the rising tide of instability and violence. Because failure risks devastating consequences in the region and beyond, it is critically important that the conference succeed."

If we need no convincing over what is at stake, what are the issues that will determine whether Annapolis is going to herald a breakthrough or turn out to have been a breaking point?

Annapolis: An optimistic view

After a hiatus of seven years Annapolis has the potential to change the map of the Middle East peacefully, bring security to Israel and sovereignty to Palestine. Annapolis was intended to revive the "Road-Map" process originally announced in 2002 which called for a viable and independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The "Joint Understanding" published at the end of the conference by George W. Bush, Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority and Ehud Olmert, the Israeli Prime Minister, stated:

"We express our determination to bring an end to bloodshed, suffering and decades of conflict between our peoples; to usher in a new era of peace, based on freedom, security, justice, dignity, respect and mutual recognition; to propagate a culture of peace and nonviolence; to confront terrorism and incitement, whether committed by Palestinians or Israelis. In furtherance of the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security, we agree to immediately launch good-faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception, as specified in previous agreements."

"The parties also commit to immediately implement their respective obligations under the performance-based road map to a permanent two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, issued by the Quartet on 30 April 2003 -- this is called the road map -- and agree to form an American, Palestinian and Israeli mechanism, led by the United States, to follow up on the implementation of the road map."

"The parties further commit to continue the implementation of the ongoing obligations of the road map until they reach a peace treaty. The United States will monitor and judge the fulfillment of the

commitment of both sides of the road map. Unless otherwise agreed by the parties, implementation of the future peace treaty will be subject to the implementation of the road map, as judged by the United States.”

With Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert agreeing from now on to meet every two weeks to continue their high-level diplomacy, this can only mean progress. In taking sole responsibility for the monitoring and evaluation of progress made by both parties, a role previously assumed by the Quartet (The US, Europe, Russia and UN), George W. Bush has staked not only his own reputation but that of the United States. Claiming a neutral and impartial role for his Administration, must inevitably lead to a change in US foreign policy in the Middle East, which until now has been biased toward Israel. According to the *New York Times*, George W. Bush insisted, unequivocally, “We meet to lay the foundation for the establishment of a new nation – a democratic Palestinian state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and security. So, in welcoming Ehud Olmert, George W. Bush, insisted “I’m optimistic, I know you’re optimistic, and I want to thank you for your courage and your friendship.” If both George W. Bush and Ehud Olmert are optimistic, what grounds are there for pessimism?

Annapolis: A pessimistic view

Writing in the Guardian newspaper under the heading “All we need is a miracle”, Chris Doyle, director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, insisted “We cannot even be sure that a true peace process has been born... just a commitment to the hope of one... the Holy Land will be needing yet another miracle if the US is to broker a peaceful end to a 60-year-old conflict within just 12 months.” In welcoming the participants to Annapolis, George W. Bush nevertheless played down the outcome insisting,

“The United States cannot impose our vision, but we can help facilitate”. Perhaps ‘will not’ would have been more accurate than ‘cannot’ since the US government has found the political and military will to bring about ‘regime change’ in numerous other countries. According to Shlomo Brom of Tel Aviv’s Institute for National Security Studies, “Judging from previous experience, U.S. pressure can be very effective.” However, on this occasion Stephen Zunes observes, “There’s no evidence that the United States plans to use that kind of clout, however, to move the peace process forward.”

Chris Doyle drily concludes, “The final document was anaemic and vacuous, without even a baby rabbit being pulled out of the hat. It lacked any serious framework or timetable. This was all show over substance, and nobody was allowed to bring up delicate deal-breakers such as Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders and Hamas.”

He points out that “No president has so studiously ignored the need for peace in the Middle East. Bush had abandoned Clinton’s peace efforts in 2001 at the moment of direst need. Those negotiations at Taba remain till this day the closest the two sides have ever got to a cogent deal, but Bush showed sub-zero interest. Desperate to get support for his Iraq venture and at the bidding of Tony Blair and others, Bush issued the Road Map in 2002 that he never even sought to get off the ground. In 2005, he promised Israel that he would accept the annexation of huge illegal settlement blocks in the West Bank - a nail in the coffin of a viable Palestinian state he pretends to support. Having called for democracy in the region, he then refused to accept the results of one of the fairest elections the region has seen when Hamas were elected into power in 2006.”

The weakness of US policy since direct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks began in the 1990’s is inherent in the assumption made that this is simply an internal dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. As Stephen Zunes points out, while both sides have an equal right to peace and security, “there is a grossly unequal balance of power between the occupied Palestinians and the occupying Israelis.” It also ignores the fact that while in the Oslo agreement, the Palestinians recognised the state of Israel on 78% of historic Palestine, the Israeli’s are unwilling to recognise the state of Palestine on the

remaining 22% seized in the 1967 war. As long as the US follows a unilateral approach and ignores or hinders the work of the United Nations, there is little hope of Annapolis achieving anything more than another photo opportunity for George W. Bush. Stephen Zunes continues:

“UN Security Council resolutions 446, 452, 465, and 471 explicitly call on Israel to remove its colonists from the occupied territories. However, both the Bush administration and an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Congress have gone on record that Israel should not be required to withdraw from the majority of these settlements. These settlements, along with the separation barrier snaking its way deep into the West Bank to separate them and surrounding areas from Palestinian population centers, have made a peace settlement impossible, since the apparent goal of formally annexing them into Israel would divide up a future Palestinian mini-state into a series of non-contiguous cantons consisting of as little as half of the West Bank. These Jewish-only settlements connected by Jewish-only highways effectively have created an apartheid-like situation on the West Bank. Any Palestinian state remaining would effectively be comparable to the notorious Bantustans of South Africa prior to majority rule.”

Only when the US administration begins to recognise that Palestinian rights and Israeli security are interdependent and not mutually exclusive will there be any hope of Annapolis being associated with anything positive in the Middle East.

Annapolis: The Har Homa Test

Akiva Eldar, writing in *Ha'aretz* in early December, astutely points out, “It is difficult to think of a place more suitable than Har Homa for holding the first test in the spirit of Annapolis. The comparison between Har Homa Crisis No. 2 and the development of Har Homa Crisis No. 1 can teach us whether the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has indeed started a new track or whether all the players are stuck on the old line.” In February 1997, only a few weeks after signing the Hebron agreement, the Israeli government under Netanyahu began construction of 6,500 homes on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The hill, known in Arabic as Abu Ghoneim, meaning ‘The Green Mountain’, became Har Homa, which is Hebrew for ‘The Mountain of the Wall’. With the subsequent construction of the Separation Wall, dividing Israeli settlers from Palestinian towns and villages, the choice of name seems cruelly prophetic. Akiva writes, “The new neighborhood - or, from one point of view, the “settlement” - which arose on the southern hills of Jerusalem became a mark of Cain on the forehead of the Oslo camp in Ramallah.”

Ten years on, despite signing up to the Annapolis Agreement, Ehud Olmert favours the expansion of Har Homa. An Israeli government spokesman said, “the neighborhood is within the area of the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, over which Israeli law is binding, and therefore there is no prohibition to building there, just as there is no obstacle to building in any other part of Israel.” In something of an understatement, Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice conceded that new construction in the Occupied Territories will not contribute to building mutual trust.

As Brzezinski and his colleagues noted in their letter to George W. Bush, “It is of utmost importance, if the conference is to have any credibility, that it coincide with a freeze in Israeli settlement expansion. It is impossible to conduct a serious discussion on ending the occupation while settlement expansion proceeds apace.” That is why Har Homa will be the first and perhaps final test of whether Annapolis will go the same way as Madrid, Oslo, Hebron and Wye.

In an article published by the New York Review of Books, entitled, “The Cost of Failure” Henry Siegman warns, “If Annapolis fails, it will be because of Israel's rejection of the single most central condition for success: full disclosure of its definition of viable Palestinian statehood. Olmert has already reneged on his earlier endorsement of Rice's insistence that the meeting must produce a

joint statement outlining a permanent status agreement to avoid becoming a meaningless photo op, and it remains unlikely that any meaningful joint declaration can be reached.”

Annapolis: The key questions

Seven questions remain unanswered since Annapolis. The answers will determine whether the optimists or the pessimists are proved right.

1. What constitutes a viable, independent, contiguous, sovereign Palestinian State? The June 4 1967 borders between Israel and Palestine are the only ones recognised in international law. Any minor modifications to this line must be agreed by mutual consent.
2. What will be the status of Jerusalem? Both Israelis and Palestinians regard it as their capital. The unilateral Israeli annexation of much of East Jerusalem must be revoked.
3. Will the US continue to fund Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine? Israel’s burgeoning settlements, exclusive Israeli-only roads, hundreds of military checkpoints and above all, Separation Wall are only sustainable with US sponsorship. Will the US continue to veto UN Security Council Resolutions critical of Israel or work with the UN to help Israel live up to her international and legal obligations?
4. Does the US Administration recognise that an Israeli withdrawal from the Syrian Golan is not only essential to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement but also wider regional stability? Until now the US has forbidden Israel from taking up any of the numerous offers from Syria to negotiate.
5. What about the status of Palestinian refugees? An answer must be found that is consistent with international law and the two-state solution. Meaningful financial compensation must be provided for those unable to return to their homes and lands.
6. What about Hamas? Will the US respect the democratic choice of the Palestinian people and encourage a national consensus between Fatah and Hamas?
7. Does George W. Bush still believe he can take on Iran without first achieving a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians? War with Iran will well and truly bury any chance of a regional peace deal for years if not decades.

The Israeli journalist Uri Avnery, predicts that Annapolis will only lead to peace if the US administration decides "to exert intense pressure on Israel, to compel it to take the necessary steps: agree to the establishment of a real Palestinian state, give up East Jerusalem, restore the Green Line border (with some small swaps of territory), [and] find an agreed-upon compromise formula for the refugee issue." Time is running out for both sides. There are now three generations of both Israelis and Palestinians who have only known of occupation. A failure to seize this opportunity for peace will not only lead to yet more years of conflict and radicalisation but will probably mark the end of the two-state solution. Henry Siegman summarises the costs of failure:

“The importance of reaching such an agreement now rather than in the future should be self-evident. For if Annapolis fails, the likelihood that Israel will again have a moderate Palestinian interlocutor is close to zero. Not only the prospect of a moderate Palestinian leadership but also the commitment of all Arab countries to normalizing relations with Israel following a peace agreement will be casualties... the growing skepticism in US policy circles about Israel's real intentions in the territories, as suggested by the letter to Bush and Rice by this country's most eminent elder statesmen and stateswomen, is bound to change what has been the reflexive US support that Israel has been able to count on until now, particularly during the past two administrations... Annapolis may well be a historic watershed—the last opportunity to salvage not only a two-state solution but a Jewish state that remains a democracy.”

If recent history is any guide to the likelihood of a peace deal being achieved within the next 12 months as George W. Bush hopes, then it is wise to be sceptical of any positive outcome to

Annapolis. However, Canon Naim Ateek, a Palestinian and director of the Sabeel Liberation Theology Centre, Jerusalem, offers a more long-term perspective:

“Ultimately, peace will come not from the Caesars and all those who trust in their military might and in the arrogance of their power but from the meek that put their trust in God. It is the meek who will inherit the earth. Peace will come from the labor, toil, and hard work of all those who do not glory in their riches or in their power but glory in their love and service of God and in their love and acceptance of others. God’s message of peace still rings true, not from Annapolis that represents empire, but from the small town of Bethlehem, Palestine that still suffers under occupation. The peace that the Caesars of the world give is largely false and deceptive, and it cannot last. Only the peace that God gives, the peace that is based on justice and truth will survive and prosper.”

On balance, that must make me a temporal pessimist but an eternal optimist.

Stephen Sizer

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