

After Annapolis: Next Steps in the Middle East Peace Process

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Articles & Testimony

The Annapolis meeting was an impressive event. It brought nearly fifty nations together ostensibly in support of Arab-Israeli peace. While the Syrians came to emphasize their agenda on the Golan Heights, the other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, came in response to an American invitation to resume the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. After seven years with no process, it is unquestionably a good thing to see negotiations resumed, particularly when both sides are committing themselves to try to achieve an agreement on all the permanent status issues by the end of 2008.

Will their commitment be different than previous commitments we have seen to reach agreements? Recall that the roadmap to peace, accepted by both sides, was to produce agreement by 2005. Recall as well that President Bush declared that we would "ride herd" over its implementation. Declarations on Middle East peace are not new, but translating them into reality require more than giving speeches or hosting events.

As stagecraft, Annapolis was certainly stellar -- well organized, presented, and impressive pictures. One unnamed Israeli official referred to it as the "mother of all photo-ops." Stagecraft can serve statecraft if it uses imagery to foster momentum and a new psychology. But it cannot substitute for what is required for effective statecraft. Statecraft requires marrying objectives with means; it depends on knowing where both openings and points of leverage may be and how to take advantage of them; and it demands intensive communication and negotiation to identify where progress can be made but also where critical problems must be overcome.

In the case of Annapolis, what comes next is critical. We have had a launching, but will there be effective follow-through that marries objectives and means? President Bush announced that there will be an Israeli-Palestinian steering committee which will meet on December 12 to organize the negotiations process. After that, the leaders will meet on a biweekly basis. Since the steering committee and such biweekly meetings were adopted months ago, one might have expected from Annapolis much more in terms of creating a structure for the negotiations. Why not working groups for each of the permanent status issues? Why not an agreement that the working groups will present jointly to the two leaders every two weeks? After all, when each side briefs its leaders independently they inevitably emphasize everything they are doing and how the other side is not responding.

To be sure, mechanics guarantee little other than that time will not be wasted on trying to develop the right modalities for the negotiations. With time limited, there is not much to be lost. Still the larger issue is what must be done to create a context for the negotiations to have a better chance of success. The joint statement that was issued shows how little the two sides -- even after several months of quiet negotiations -- are able to agree to in public at this stage. Each remains very concerned about not appearing to have made compromises prematurely. That is completely understandable. But, again, what is going to change to make it possible for each side to begin to take on the existential issues of permanent status?

At a minimum, something must change on the ground to convince the publics on each side that there is a reason to restore their belief in peace-making. Presently, there is great cynicism on each side; polling indicated a virtual mirror image with 2/3 of both the Israeli and Palestinian publics supportive of going to Annapolis and yet a somewhat higher percentage on each side expressing doubt that anything would come of it. (Having just come from Israel, I can tell you that the skepticism remained after Annapolis as well.)

If the context is going to be changed to make it possible for Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas to actually make historic compromises and not just talk about the need for them, their publics must regain their faith in peace-making.

Again, this will not happen because of declarations. For Israelis who withdrew from Gaza and have not seen even one day without Qassam rockets being fired from it, why would they believe withdrawal from the West Bank would produce anything different -- with the far worst consequence that every Israeli community would then be susceptible to such daily fire. For Palestinians, if they cannot move easily from Nablus to Jenin, why would they believe that they will gain sovereignty and the Arab part of Jerusalem?

One can hardly gain public support for compromise on the existential issues of Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements, water, and security if neither side sees any changes in the day-to-day realities. That is why the critical measure now is implementing the phase one obligations in the roadmap to peace.

Secretary Rice is right to put a new emphasis on this. Recall that in the 2003 roadmap the Israelis were supposed to withdraw the military and the barriers that were repositioned after the beginning of the intifada in September 2000, freeze all settlement activity, and dismantle unauthorized settler outposts. The Palestinians were supposed to begin to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, prevent all attacks against Israelis, overhaul their security organizations and reform their political institutions.

Had some or all of these obligations been met, the context would be very different today. Indeed, had the Secretary's objective starting last January been to organize an international meeting to launch negotiations, she would have been well-advised to try to get implementation of at least some of these obligations months ago. That would have changed the context and psychology for the negotiations and made the effort appear far more credible.

Unfortunately, getting movement even now on the phase one obligations will not be easy. There is not one obligation that Israelis and Palestinians understand the same way. Ask the Palestinians what a freeze on Israeli settlement activity means and they will tell you that it means a freeze on all construction (including the "wall"), on all roads, on any additional settlers moving to the territories, and on all subsidies and financial incentives to the settlers. Ask the Israelis, and they will say it means building no new settlements and expropriating no additional territory -- but not stopping construction within the boundaries of existing settlements. The gap in perception and definition is enormous.

The gap may be even wider on the Palestinian obligation to begin to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, with the Israelis having very expansive requirements (including the dismantling of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, their arms, their financing and recruitment apparatuses) and Palestinians believing basically that

collecting some weapons and having these groups off the streets is what is required of them. The problem is that each side defines its own obligations minimally and the other side's maximally.

Just as the Secretary found when she pressed both sides to commit to the core compromises on Jerusalem, refugees, borders and security--where each sought specificity from the other while it offered ambiguity--so, too, on the roadmap does each side want the other to be responsive first. If nothing else, this should remind Secretary Rice that the parties could easily spend the coming year doing little more than trying to negotiate common definitions of the roadmap's phase one obligations.

President Bush announced that we would monitor and judge the implementation of the obligations. But how can we do so if there is no clear standard of performance? While Secretary Rice should move to define such a standard, she should do so only after having established US-Israeli and US-Palestinian working groups in which there are first discussions of the obligations and what is required to carry them out. Each side should know what is coming before she presents publicly -- not privately -- the standards on each obligation.

And, here there should be no illusions: a clear standard of performance does not guarantee that the obligations will be fulfilled. Note, for example, that one of Israel's obligations in phase one is to return to the security positions it held at the beginning of the intifada in the fall of 2000. That would mean the removal of all barriers around Palestinian cities and on roads; there is almost no likelihood of that happening if the Israelis do not see unmistakably both the capability and the will on the Palestinian side to ensure that its territory will not be a platform for attacks against Israel. Obviously, if the Palestinian Authority could really dismantle terrorist infrastructure the way the Israelis define it, the Israelis might be more willing to run risks in this regard, but even the most optimistic and sympathetic observer of the Palestinian Authority would be hard-pressed to say that the PA will be able or willing to do this any time soon.

The difficulty of carrying out many of the obligations on each side cannot be an argument for relaxing or redefining what is required. But it does argue for a strategy for dealing with the obligations, not simply declaring what the standard for implementing them will be. For example, on security, maybe the starting point should be having joint Israeli-Palestinian security working groups and teams to pick selected areas in which they agree what will be required of Palestinian security forces in certain test areas and if there is Palestinian performance, there would be a lifting of Israeli barriers and checkpoints and a repositioning of Israeli forces in these places. A meaningful Israeli freeze on settlement activity might make it far easier for the Palestinians to do more on security even as they take steps on obligations like incitement that would show the Israeli public that something is changing.

If we are looking now for signs that this process will be different, the place to start is, in fact, on implementing at least some of the phase one obligations. This must be done with our eyes open and with a very well thought out strategy for doing so. It should be accompanied by a new phase one for Arab obligations that should run parallel with Israelis and Palestinians fulfilling their responsibilities. Even now, before the Israelis and Palestinians begin to fulfill these responsibilities, the Secretary of State should be working with Arab states on steps they will take. She should not wait to begin such discussions. She should be forging parallel obligations for Arab states in terms of reaching out to Israel and materially investing in the Palestinian Authority as the two sides begin to carry out their phase one responsibilities. (Quite independently of the peace process, it is remarkable that, with oil having increased in price by \$70 barrel in the last five years, the Gulf States are providing nothing additional to Palestinians.)

It is ironic that, even though the roadmap has been moribund for four and a half years, the meaningful implementation of its phase one obligations might well spell change now -- might well make Annapolis a true new beginning. That said, if we do not see any meaningful implementation of phase one obligations, do not expect Annapolis to have been anything more than an act of stagecraft. Good intentions count for something but, in the Middle East, they must be married to a strategy with the kind of intensive effort that lets no one off the hook. ❖

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