Bush at Annapolis:

Hints about the Final Thirteen Months

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Brief Analysis

The Annapolis summit featured an impressive display of international support for renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Beyond the headlines and photo-ops, the most significant aspect of the event was that President Bush offered little sign he plans to devote the final months of his administration to a high-stakes personal quest for a permanent peace treaty between the two parties.

Joint Understanding

When the Annapolis meeting was first conceived months ago, it was intended to celebrate an Israeli-Palestinian agreement to sketch out a "political horizon" for establishing an independent Palestinian state at peace with Israel. Since then, objective reality intruded, forcing down the hosts' expectations. The much more limited result was an agreement principally on process -- which, to be sure, remains a critical aspect of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

According to a six-paragraph statement -- termed a "joint understanding" -- that President Bush read out at the beginning of his remarks, the two sides will, in two weeks, commence "vigorous, ongoing, and continuous" negotiations with the goal of reaching an accord by the end of 2008. One sign in particular pointed to the lack of significant progress between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators before Annapolis: the two sides agreed that the immediate goal was to develop a "joint work plan" for negotiations -- i.e., they still have yet to define fully the scope, parameters, timetable, and modalities for these talks.

The end-of-2008 goal may garner the most headlines, but it is not the most significant aspect of the "joint understanding." That honor goes to the statement's final two paragraphs, which discuss the linkage between a final-status accord and implementation of the two sides' commitments under the four-year-old Quartet Roadmap to Middle East peace. Two points are noteworthy: one, the parties agreed that the United States will "monitor and judge" the extent to which each fulfills commitments, and two, they agreed that "implementation of the future peace treaty will be subject to the implementation of the Roadmap, as judged by the United States."

The emphasis on Washington acting as judge is significant. First, it takes the Roadmap out of the hands of the Quartet (the UN, European Union, United States, and Russia) and places sole responsibility on Washington. Second, the double use of the term "judge" suggests that the Bush administration is prepared to be more active and vocal in

identifying noncompliance than it was in the past. Yet, it is not clear whether the ground rules for judging compliance are in place. Indeed, the joint understanding only noted that all parties "agree to form an American, Palestinian, and Israeli mechanism to follow up implementation of the Roadmap" -- not how that mechanism would actually function.

The linkage between implementation of a future peace treaty and implementation of the Roadmap is also significant on multiple levels. The use of the term "peace treaty" is eye-catching; there is no such reference in the Roadmap itself (there it is called a "final and comprehensive permanent status agreement"), perhaps because treaties are usually reserved for agreements between states. More important, the idea that only "implementation" of a treaty is conditioned on the Roadmap suggests that the authors of the joint understanding entertained the possibility of actually reaching and ratifying an accord while delaying actual execution until the security environment is conducive. Reading between the lines, this strategy appears to be a means of working around Hamas's control of Gaza.

Bush's Measured Words

No less significant than the technicalities of the joint understanding was the measured message delivered by President Bush in his subsequent remarks to the Annapolis gathering. Many participants -- perhaps even U.S. officials -- came to Annapolis to discern for themselves the extent of personal effort, commitment, and zeal the president will place on achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty before he leaves the White House. And his message was clear: the president will not be throwing the dice on a gamble to achieve a legacy of success in the Middle East peace process in the final year of his presidency.

A close reading of the president's remarks shows that he is most concerned with changing the regional dynamic by creating an environment of progress, not necessarily a moment of achievement. He did not repeat, for example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's famous formulation that "now is the time for a Palestinian state." Instead, his formulation was "now is precisely the right time to begin these negotiations." Although he pledged to Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas that he would give his "effort" to "help [them] achieve this important goal," he stated that the job of America and all other third parties is "to encourage" and "support" the Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, on several occasions, he underscored the fact that the parties themselves, not Washington, are responsible for the pace of progress, and that the United States "cannot achieve [success] for them."

Interestingly, at no point did he characterize the need for diplomatic breakthrough as urgent, though he did call on the parties to "show patience and flexibility." He repeated this theme several times, including statements such as "the task begun here at Annapolis will be difficult" and "a lot of work remains to be done." In short, these were not the words of a president who sees the prospect of a peace deal so tantalizingly close that he is prepared to offer the equivalent of a "Bush Peace Plan" in order to achieve it.

Over the next twelve months, President Bush's calculus may change; he would, after all, not be the first president to catch the peace process bug. But taken together, the president's words at Annapolis suggest that he would not consider the lack of an Israeli-Palestinian treaty in a year's time a failure, if the parties were still working cooperatively toward that goal. From that perspective -- and, in fact, by any objective measure -- handing the baton of a functioning peace process to his successor would itself constitute success.

Two Phrases of Historical Note

In his own speech at the summit, Abbas made a special effort to reach out to Israelis with his commitment to a common peaceful future. At the same time, however, he also made two specific references to nakba, the Arabic word for "catastrophe," which is the traditional Palestinian term for the creation of Israel in 1948. Although the current

peace talks are, by mutual assent, defined to resolve "the occupation that began in 1967" -- that is, a negotiation over the disposition of territories taken in that war -- no word is likely to raise more suspicion about true Palestinian intentions than nakba, which refers to Israel's very existence, not its size.

Bush, too, used historically important language at one point, seeming to anticipate the need for a profound statement to affect the Israeli national psyche by surpassing his own previous commitments to the Jewish nature of Israel. Specifically, he promised that the United States would maintain its commitment not only "to the security of Israel as a Jewish state," but also to Israel as "a homeland for the Jewish people." That description -- which gives presidential recognition to the connection that Jews worldwide have with the state of Israel -- goes beyond Bush's own words in his April 14, 2004, letter to then-prime minister Ariel Sharon and harkens back to the language of the landmark Balfour Declaration promulgated by Britain ninety years ago this month.

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