

The Day after Annapolis

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Today, nearly 50 nations and organizations will convene in Annapolis, Md., to talk, in theory, about support for Israeli-Palestinian peace. I say in theory because the Syrian deputy foreign minister, for example, will have a different agenda -- an agenda related to the Syrians' insistence that only a "comprehensive settlement," including their demands for the Golan Heights and withdrawal to the borders of June 4, 1967, can produce any possibility of peace. Other Arab delegations will almost certainly support this Syrian demand out of habit, belief and the lowest-common-denominator instinct that often shapes such large gatherings.

While the size of the meeting makes it easier for many of the Arab participants to attend, making this more like a gathering of the United Nations and minimizing the appearance of dealing with Israel, there is still value in having a show of international support for the resumption of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And that is what Annapolis is about. It will not produce a conceptual breakthrough to peace; it will not be a forum for negotiation (only speeches are possible in such settings); and it will not provide the political horizon for ending the conflict that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice established as her objective in January.

Instead, it is a political process, not a political end game, that the Bush administration is trying to launch. After nearly seven years of no peace process, this is a welcome development.

No Agreements Yet

But neither the Annapolis conference nor the negotiations have an agreed basis. The Arab participants come with expectations, not understandings, of the key principles or parameters for the subsequent talks. Even the Israelis and Palestinians have yet to agree on the real guidelines for the talks. Is it the American "road map" to peace? Is it the U.N. Security Council resolutions? Is it the Arab peace initiative that offers Israel full diplomatic relations after withdrawal to the 1967 borders and agreement on a just resolution for Palestinian refugees?

Ask Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, and they will tell you that they haven't agreed on the basis for the negotiations. If there is a strategy for what comes next, it is not clear to those participating in the meeting. As such, Annapolis looks to be more of an international event than the actual launching of a process. What will it take to make it a true new beginning?

For starters, the conference must conclude with a statement spelling out the next steps. President Bush will undoubtedly give a speech that again offers a vision for a two-state outcome, but it will be Rice's task at the end of the conference to outline who is going to be negotiating, on which issues, at what levels and on what schedule.

She has already indicated that after the conference, there should be negotiations on the permanent status issues of Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security and water -- the issues that were to be resolved in what is known as Phase Three of the road map to peace -- while simultaneously the road map's Phase One obligations should be implemented.

Sounds good, but it won't just happen.

The road map dates from 2003 and has been moribund since. The obligations of the first phase -- Israelis freezing all settlement activity and removing the impediments to Palestinian mobility, and Palestinians beginning to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and reforming their institutions -- have altogether different meanings on the two sides. Each party defines its obligations minimally and the other side's obligations maximally.

If the secretary links implementation of the Phase One obligations with the negotiations on permanent status, and little happens on the former, it will inevitably affect the latter. Even appointing a U.S. official to monitor who is or isn't fulfilling obligations will fail unless the secretary is prepared to establish a standard of performance on each obligation.

Rice's To-Do List

This will not prove as straightforward as it sounds given the difficulties both sides will have in acting on their obligations. The secretary should declare that after discussions with the two sides, she will do three things:

- Offer definitions of what constitutes fulfillment of the obligations.
- Set up U.S.-Israeli and U.S.-Palestinian groups to work on implementation of these obligations.
- Have these groups report to her at least once a month.

On the permanent status issues, Rice should announce that there will be Israeli-Palestinian working groups on Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security and water, and they will have their first meetings within two weeks of the end of the conference. Foreign ministers on each side should be responsible for the organization and coordination of the working groups, and reports on the progress or problems in the working groups should be presented jointly to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas every two to three weeks. The leaders need to be prepared to give guidance together (and make decisions as necessary) if progress is going to be made.

Though all this might sound overly mechanical, one thing is certain: The parties will end up haggling on modalities for a long time if this is not mandated from the beginning. None of this will guarantee success because historic compromises have to be made by leaders (Olmert and Abbas) who face real opposition and profound constraints.

But if Annapolis is to be an act of statecraft and not stagecraft, what happens after it will be far more important than what transpires at it.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He was U.S. envoy to the region under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. His new book is **[Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>). ❖

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