

Six Critical Questions for Annapolis and Beyond

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Brief Analysis

The purpose of the Annapolis summit now is to launch negotiations within the framework of the Roadmap to Middle East peace, the dormant and often maligned plan that provides neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians a setting to establish a "political horizon" for a future Palestinian state. With lowering expectations over the past few weeks, the event itself is -- almost by definition -- doomed to succeed. Only a few days remain before the conference begins, but the following critical questions remain unanswered:

Strategy. After a short-lived romance with the possibility of reaching a full-scale Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the core issues -- Jerusalem, territory, security, and refugees -- the Annapolis hosts realized that the step-by-step philosophy embodied in the Roadmap was essential. Given this reality, how does this "new realism" affect what President Bush hopes to achieve while still in office? Is U.S. diplomacy animated by the idea that Annapolis inaugurates a process whose ultimate act -- a final status accord -- occurs on President Bush's watch? Or is the president content to hand the baton of a functioning peace process to his successor, which itself would be no small feat given the state of the intifada and the inflamed peace process in January 2001?

Concept. Five years ago, President Bush articulated a two-state vision for peace. This goal was predicated on a Palestinian Authority (PA) that would move away from corruption, ineptitude, and the rule of armed gangs and toward accountability, efficiency, and the rule of law. Indeed, the administration argued that Hamas's January 2006 legislative victory was a result of popular dismay with the failures of the Fatah-led PA, and not of the popularity of Hamas's political program of terror and rejectionism. In recent months, however, the administration's rhetoric has changed; it has argued that a "political horizon" -- and not a more accountable and effective government -- was the key piece missing from the peacemaking puzzle. With the PA now under leaders who seem committed to those objectives but clearly far from achieving them, how does Washington prioritize the relationship between Palestinian capacity, Palestinian execution, and diplomatic progress with Israel? And operationally, what is the relative importance of Tony Blair's mission to build Palestinian capacity and institutions, compared to the State Department's diplomatic agenda?

Security. The hosts of the Annapolis conference can celebrate an important procedural concession -- Israel's acceptance that negotiations for the third phase of the Roadmap (creation of a Palestinian state) can proceed without the full compliance on the first phase's security obligations -- as a breakthrough that could lead to real progress. But

however much U.S. officials would like to broker agreements on the core issues, it is clear that the focus is on devising a mechanism to define, execute, and monitor the security related terms of the first phase. Washington tried this before in 2003 and failed. What new approach, commitment, or formula is being formulated to ensure success of the current effort?

Incitement. Phase one of the Roadmap includes the agreement that both parties cease incitement activities but, as with the case of security, it offers no mechanism for enforcement or monitoring. The Roadmap actually marks a step backwards from the mechanism established in the 1998 Wye River Accord, which called on Palestinians to take active measures against incitement and also created a "U.S.-Palestinian-Israeli committee [to] meet on a regular basis to monitor cases of possible incitement to violence or terror and to make recommendations and reports on how to prevent such incitement." Does the Bush administration believe, in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary, that the incitement problem no longer exists? Or, as it defines a new formula to monitor security commitments, will the administration call on the parties to breathe new life into an existing formula or define a new "anti-incitement" mechanism?

Arab states. The State Department envisions a counterpart benefit to Israel's acceptance of the Roadmap sequence: a parallel change in how Arab states approach the issue of normalization. Specifically, U.S. officials expect Arab states will no longer insist on normalization at the end of the process, as outlined in the Arab League peace initiative, and instead implement aspects of normalization in parallel with Israel's early discussion of final status issues. In a major tactical error, however, the United States did not invite the Arab participants until they could judge whether the event was worthy of their attendance, instead of creating a process in which the Arab states shared responsibility for the event's success. Washington now says it wants the Arab states to do more after stating that Annapolis is going to produce less. What is the U.S. plan to solve this puzzle?

Gaza. The most striking aspect of the Annapolis conference is the fact that a large chunk of Palestinian territory is under the control of an adversarial power that opposes the very notion of peace with Israel. Some argue that this situation demands that Hamas be brought into the negotiations regardless of its avowed commitment to destroy Israel, its holding of an Israeli hostage, and its role in firing missiles into Israeli towns. This would allow Hamas to meet a far lower standard for diplomatic inclusion than was ever required of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and would undermine the standing and legitimacy of the existing PA leadership. Some argue that this situation provides the best rationale for an alternative strategy -- pursuing the Roadmap's phase two concept of "provisionalism." This path would lead Israel and the PA to negotiate a provisional arrangement that recognizes that the latter only controls about two-thirds of the Palestinian population. The parties do not want to embrace this approach at the moment, but may return to it if Hamas continues to hold onto power. If neither of these options becomes feasible, how will U.S.-led diplomacy grapple with Hamas's control of Gaza? What is the mechanism on either the ground or at the bargaining table for restoring legitimate rule in Gaza? Is it even possible to conceive of diplomatic progress without a change in Gaza?

Although these do not represent the only questions regarding Annapolis, they are six pressing issues that the American hosts need to address if they are to minimize future problems and maximize the potential for success.

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