

Challenging future after Annapolis

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The US-sponsored peace summit in Annapolis between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has produced one surprising outcome and several foreseeable ones. The surprise is the declaration that all permanent status issues affecting the conflict will be dealt with and that a specific timeframe has been set for concluding an agreement. At the same time, as was to be expected, these core issues are not specifically mentioned (settlement expansion, right of return for Palestinian refugees, the status of Jerusalem, the borders for a future Palestinian state).

The political will to reach an agreement by the end of 2008 is noteworthy, although at the same time it would appear to contradict calls made at the conference to use the negotiation methods the Quartet (US, EU, Russia and the UN) has been using since 2003. In fact, the Quartet had proposed a gradual and accumulative negotiating strategy, placing special emphasis on the security reforms that the Palestinian Authority could guarantee Israel: the more security Palestine could guarantee, the more Israel would be prepared to concede on issues such as freer movement for Palestinians, fewer reprisals and the release of prisoners.

The idea of negotiating on all the core issues at the same time has not been clearly defined. If it were possible, it would be a huge step forward. However if the condition for a successful negotiating process is the total security that Israel has been demanding for the last 20 years, then the chances of it failing are very high.

The security issue is key for two reasons. On the one hand because it is a concept that should be extended to include both sides: it is just as important to avoid and penalise terrorist attacks, as it is to avoid violations of Palestinian human rights by Israel. Neither is it acceptable that when a group that is not controlled by the Palestinian Authority carries out an attack, Israel should retaliate against the Palestinian population, as has happened on so many occasions.

On the other hand, the internal fracture in Palestinian society and politics is very deep and this could lead Hamas, which already feels isolated and persecuted in the Gaza Strip, to continue missile attacks on Israeli settlements. At the same time, Hamas' political strategy involves gradually gaining hegemony in the West Bank with the aim of forcing Fatah out of power. Their strategy may be two-fold: to strengthen their position in the West Bank and resist in Gaza with the aim of being considered an actor to be reckoned with. At the same time, they may wish to torpedo the Annapolis process in order to delegitimise President Mahmoud Abbas and hasten his fall.

Both the Israeli and Palestinian governments now face stiff internal resistance to any agreement. There are serious doubts as to whether they have the power to overcome this opposition, supposing that they do decide to pursue the negotiations in more depth.

This conference has been a success for the US because, despite their failure in Iraq, growing instability in Afghanistan and the ineffectiveness of its Middle East democratisation plan, it can still appear to be the facilitator of a potential peace agreement in one of the most lengthy and serious conflicts in the international system. At the same time, having convinced Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to attend means that George W Bush's plan to divide the Arab world between friendly, moderate countries (especially Sunni Muslims) and Iran has been furthered. In this context, the fact that Syria attended the Annapolis conference is viewed by Washington with interest. The logic is that, if a peace process could open the door to negotiations about the Golan Heights (occupied by Israel since 1967), Damascus might then distance itself from Iran. This would lead Syria to maintain a less radical position in Lebanon.

Some analysts consider that it was a mistake to not invite Iran. This regional power could collaborate with or boycott the negotiation. Its economic power and influence in the region is great, and if it participated it would also be a way of including it in a regional negotiation framework that would enable it to dialogue, albeit from the fringe, on the issue of its nuclear programme.

Washington's calculated policy sounds better on paper than in the complex reality of the region where non-state actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad have their own agendas that go beyond whatever support they may receive from Syria and Iran. At the same time, radicalisation in Arab society has more to do with the lack of democracy in these countries than with American or European designs.

The chances of success for the negotiations will be limited by two considerations. First, if the core issues are not addressed it is highly likely that no agreement will be reached. But if a bad agreement is made, the Palestinian Authority could fall or become more fragmented or weakened and Hamas could gain control of the Occupied Territories. A bad agreement would be a Pyrrhic or failed victory for Israel.

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