

Annapolis: the good, the bad and the ugly

Henry Siegman
Director of the US/Middle East Project
& non-resident researcher at FRIDE

The Annapolis proceedings have taken the Middle East peace process out of its prolonged state of morbidity in three respects.

The Annapolis understandings are getting underway with negotiations over “all of the core issues, without exception,” as stated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush. Before Annapolis, Israel refused to consider negotiations for a final status accord before Palestinians implement their obligation under the road map to dismantle “the infrastructures of terror” and disarm Palestinian militants. The demand constituted the mother of all oxymorons, since no Palestinian leader could end violent resistance to the occupation in the face of Israel’s refusal to reveal how much Palestinian territory it intended to retain until after negotiations begin. Having lost to Israel fully half the territory recognised by the UN in its partition resolution of 1947 as the legitimate patrimony of the Arab residents of Palestine, Palestinians are not about to renounce the right to fight, if necessary, to retain the 22 percent of Palestine that was left them.

By relinquishing Israel’s demand that Palestinian implementation of the road map’s obligations precede negotiations, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gained the right to demand that the actual implementation of an agreement can only come after Palestinians have met their road map obligations, a demand that President Mahmoud Abbas accepted. This too was an important advance, provided an impartial third party monitors and judges compliance by both sides.

The parties accepted the US decision to serve as “monitor and judge of the fulfillment of the commitments of both sides,” a role that until now Israel’s government had arrogated to itself. A major obstacle to the implementation of all previous agreements was the absence of a third party monitor. Whether the US can indeed be an impartial arbiter remains to be seen. As indicated below, it has gotten off to a very unpromising start.

In combination, these accomplishments represent potentially important breakthroughs, even if they remain highly problematic for reasons I will get back to. By themselves, however, they cannot overcome Annapolis’ failure to deal with a number of major remaining obstacles to an eventual peace accord:

(1) President Bush, Secretary Rice and National Security Council head Stephen Hadley, in an effort to reassure Israelis, repeatedly declared that the US role will be limited to “facilitation.” Given the discrepancies in power, wealth and influence that mark the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, a final status agreement is inconceivable if the US refuses to redress the imbalances between the

two through its active intervention. The notion that American “facilitation” alone will enable the parties to bridge their vast asymmetries is patently absurd.

(2) That no agreement is conceivable between such radically uneven adversaries without US intervention is underlined by Bush’s insistence - echoing Olmert’s insistence - that the success of the peace process launched in Annapolis depends on Palestinian willingness to match Israeli “concessions.” It is a demand that is stunningly insensitive to the fact that Israel is an occupier of Palestinian land and Palestinians are a people under occupation. As such, Palestinians have little to offer Israel by way of “concessions” other than their continued subjugation and dispossession.

Of course, Palestinians are obliged to do everything they can to bring violence under control. As for Israel, what is expected of it are not “concessions,” but that its government meet long-standing obligations imposed by UN resolutions, international law and agreements with the Palestinians. To call these Israeli obligations concessions is to undermine the negotiations before they begin, for they imply that Israel and the US can demand that Palestinians forego their rights under existing agreements and international law if they are to deserve an end to Israel’s occupation.

The position of Olmert’s government has been - and continues to be, even after Annapolis - that Israel will not return to the pre-1967 border; that Israel will remain the sole sovereign in Jerusalem, and that not a single refugee will be allowed back into Israel. Allowing that Palestinians will have to show flexibility in the implementation of their rights, particularly with regard to the demand for a significant return of refugees to Israel, it remains the case that these indeed are Palestinian rights, as defined by UN resolutions, the road map and international law. Israel is being asked to cease its violations of these rights, not to make concessions. For the US to characterise Israeli demands for Palestinian giveaways as reciprocity for Israeli concessions is to add insult to injury. It constitutes US intervention, but on the wrong side of the scale.

(3) These obstacles aside, the US must abandon the fantasy that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement can be reached and implemented in the face of the deep internal divisions between Fatah and Hamas that have shattered Palestinian unity, divisions Israel and the US have deliberately fostered. Palestinian acceptance of “painful compromises,” not to speak of implementation, will be extraordinarily difficult in the best of circumstances. They are impossible without Palestinian unity.

Israel and the US have treated not only Hamas but also Syria as lost causes, part of an irredeemable “axis of evil” led by Iran. Ironically, Annapolis has exposed the shallowness of that thinking. Syria defied Iran and attended Annapolis despite Iran’s bitter opposition, and Hamas refused to attend an Iranian conference scheduled for Teheran intended to counter and discredit Annapolis, forcing Iran to cancel it. Neither Syria nor Hamas has an interest in furthering Iran’s Shiite agenda or in encouraging Iran’s hegemonic designs. Their association of convenience with Iran can easily be undone if their respective legitimate interests (as opposed to their destructive impulses) are taken seriously by US and Western diplomacy.

But instead of seeking to heal this Palestinian breach, the US - not to speak of Israel - has sought to widen it, in the unrealistic expectation that showering economic and other “gifts” on Abbas in the West Bank while strangling Gaza will lead to the defeat of Hamas.

For starters, promises to empower Abbas by removing obstacles and checkpoints that have shattered Palestinian life have been made repeatedly in the past only to be repeatedly ignored

by Israel's security and military establishments. Ehud Barak, Olmert's defense minister, has left no doubt this will not change. Neither Palestinians nor Israelis any longer take these promises seriously; if Bush believes them, he is the only one who does.

Furthermore, continued strangulation of Gaza in the face of the promised West Bank prosperity would only further weaken Abbas, who will be portrayed as a Palestinian Petain, and fuel violence and terrorism that, at their first manifestation, will predictably serve as Israel's pretext for abandoning the Annapolis-launched negotiations.

Despite these formidable obstacles, optimists insist that if negotiations between Israel and Palestinians proceed in good faith, it is just possible that a new and more positive chemistry between the parties will somehow enable them to prevail and reach commonly desired objectives. Perhaps so. But the problem is that instead of good faith, unimaginably bad faith has been manifested even before the ink of Annapolis' joint statement has dried.

Olmert and his predecessor, Prime Minister Sharon, have promised the US, the Palestinians and the international community - over and over again since 2003 - that they would dismantle and remove every last "illegal outpost" and freeze settlement expansion in the West Bank. It is the very first of the several obligations imposed by the road map on Israel. To this day, Israel has been in flagrant violation of those promises.

The only thing Olmert ever seems to recall about the road map - other than its requirement that Palestinians fight terror - is Bush's opinion that Israel should be able to hold on to its settlement blocs in the West Bank, the road map's provisions to the contrary notwithstanding. Bush has no more standing to unilaterally alter an international agreement than have Olmert or Abbas.

In the event, Olmert solemnly undertook at the Annapolis meeting to finally act to freeze settlement construction and to dismantle the illegal outposts. This undertaking was a condition for the participation of Arab countries in the meeting. But Ha'aretz revealed two days after the adjournment of Annapolis that Olmert's colleagues - several deputy prime ministers and cabinet ministers - far from preparing to remove the outposts and freeze settlements are instead surreptitiously planning to "launder" the outposts' illegal status, enlarge them, and provide government support for their evolution into permanent settlements. As to the freezing of settlements, Peace Now and Israeli human rights groups have documented how Olmert gets around this inconvenience by simply attaching the names of old settlements to the new ones and calling them extensions of existing settlements.

What is astonishing about these deceptions is not only their flagrancy and extraordinary bad faith, but the silence of Bush, Rice, and Hadley even after they declared the US would assume the role of "monitor and judge" who would call the shots as he sees them, without fear or favour. Their silence should tell Abbas, and the Arab leaders who attended Annapolis at Bush's urging, all they need to know about what to expect from America as the negotiations proceed.

It also exposes the fatuousness of the Quartet and the innocence of those who lecture Palestinians on the priority they need to assign to institution building. We know what was the half-life of the institutions Palestinians built that were successful. Only their rubble remains, and it should serve as a reminder of the futility of such efforts in the absence of political understandings that show some awareness of the Palestinians' ongoing dispossession and respect for their political rights.

FRIDE's Comments provide a brief and concise analysis of current topics in international affairs in the fields of peace and security, democratisation, human rights, and humanitarian action and development. Further information about FRIDE, as well as its publications can be found at www.fride.org

The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE.
If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org

Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org