

# Annapolis: three lame ducks in search of peace

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The recent gathering in Annapolis was another attempt to find a lasting solution to a conflict that has gone on for more than half a century.

The Bush administration's major objectives are directed at answering both internal and foreign policy concerns. President Bush is in the last period of his mandate. As of January 2008 the primaries begin in the US presidential campaign. As a "lame duck", Bush is in desperate need of a foreign policy success, especially in light of the disaster in Iraq. So far the war there has resulted in the deaths of more than one million Iraqis and more than 3,000 US soldiers. And then there is the enormous financial cost of the war, calculated at around one trillion dollars so far.

By convening the Annapolis meeting the Bush administration had the following objectives:

(1) Enhance the image of the US as a major player in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite its losses in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration still holds major tactical cards to help Arabs and Israelis re-engage on the road to peace

(2) The Annapolis meeting is also an answer to urgent proddings by America's major Arab allies to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When Bush took over the White House seven years ago the question of Palestine was downgraded. It was replaced by the neo-con agenda of forcing a democratisation agenda in the Arab Middle East. This policy was highlighted by Condoleezza Rice's famous speech at the American University in Cairo (2005) when she stated that the US had for years sacrificed democracy for the sake of stability in the Middle East. Implementing the democracy agenda came at the cost of heavy blows when the radical Islamist enemies of the US won popularly contested elections especially in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood) and Palestine (Hamas). This led many of America's Arab friends to warn of the nasty and destabilising consequences of forcing democracy on the Middle East. Another result of the policy is the current and bloody split between Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (under Hamas) and the West Bank (under the Palestinian Authority). The Bush administration would like to see the divisions within Palestinians ended and enhance the stature of Palestinian president Abbas. With US, Arab and European support the Israeli Defense Forces have been given a free hand to weaken and destroy Hamas's rule in Gaza

(3) The third objective was to isolate Iran. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 the Islamic Republic has been a constant source of preoccupation for the Bush administration and its Arab and Israeli allies in the Middle East. The Iranian leadership has skilfully played on the internal contradictions in Iraqi society and enhanced the power of the Shia majority in the country. Iran has provided military, economic and political support to the Shias of Iraq especially in the southern part of the country. In any future settlement in Iraq the US will have to contend with the regime in Teheran, even if this is not considered a palatable solution in Washington. Moreover, buoyed by its success in Iraq, the Iranian regime is mobilising the Shias across the Middle East all the way from Bahrain to Lebanon. A related matter is Iran's ongoing policy of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. This issue has become a major concern for Americans, Arabs and Israelis. The summer 2006 war in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel was the first war by proxy between the Jewish state and the Islamic republic. Bush and his Arab and Israeli allies are worried by the expanding Iranian influence and would like to put a stop to it. It could be that Annapolis - with the presence of Saudi and other Arab delegations - was a first step towards isolating Iran for a possible military operation in spring 2008

(4) The fourth objective of the Bush administration in Annapolis was to create a wedge between Iran and Syria. These two countries have a strategic alliance and recently Iran has been providing the Assad regime in Damascus with money, oil and weapons. Iran has also been instrumental in funding the budding Syrian nuclear program. This gambit by the US and its Arab and Israeli friends to drive Syria away from Iran could be dangerous and have a boomerang effect. Damascus and Teheran are not at odds despite the heavy criticisms the latter aimed at the Annapolis meeting. Iran and Syria are playing good cop bad cop in the Middle East. Syria allows a free hand to Iran for its strategy in Iraq, while the Islamic Republic supports Damascus's re-entry into the Lebanese arena. In effect, the two countries have divided up their roles and are now biding their time till the end of the Bush administration

(5) The presence of a Syrian delegation in Annapolis, even at a lower level, is an important development. After years of chastising and isolating the Assad regime the Bush administration is willing to re-engage Syria in order to have it play a positive role in Lebanon. The neo-cons wanted a regime change in Syria and the advent of a democratically elected government. This has receded from the US agenda. Today Bush and his French friend Nicolas Sarkozy would like to see a stable Lebanon and avert the country sliding into another bloody civil war. What came from the discussions in Annapolis was a conditional return of Syria as a major player in Lebanon. Nevertheless, Damascus's rule will be checked by international supervision that includes the European Union (Spain, Italy and France have troops with UNIFIL in South Lebanon), the USA, and moderate Arabs such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Where to from Annapolis? The most important thing is that the meeting took place at a high level with the presence of delegations that have no diplomatic relations with Israel (ie: Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria). The other important development is President Bush's personal commitment to keep the process moving. Lastly, there is the will by both Olmert and Abbas to reengage and explore a possible agreement on the issues that have dogged negotiators since Madrid: Israeli settlements, the status of Jerusalem, the question of borders, Palestinian refugees and their right of return, in addition to the question of water sharing and security. Bush, Olmert and Abbas are three lame ducks faced with daunting internal and external challenges. Will the spirit of Annapolis work miracles this time? People in the Middle East lost faith in miracles a long time ago. Can they be proven wrong?

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