

PolicyWatch #1370 : Special Forum Report

Assessing the Annapolis Process

Featuring Zalman Shoval and Aaron David Miller
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*On April 9, 2008, Ambassador Zalman Shoval and Aaron David Miller addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Zalman Shoval served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from 1990 to 1993 and 1998 to 2000, and represented the Likud Party in the Israeli Knesset for more than a decade. Mr. Miller served as deputy U.S. special Middle East coordinator between 1992 and 2000, and is currently a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. His publications include the recently released book *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (Bantam/Dell, 2008).*

This Policy Forum took place four months after the Annapolis conference was convened and a month before President Bush is slated to travel to the region to assess the progress of the Annapolis process, meet regional leaders, and celebrate Israel's 60th anniversary.

AMBASSADOR ZALMAN SHOVAL

Despite having been practically stillborn, the Annapolis peace process is not dead and has recently shown artificially induced signs of life. It has been continually retooled in order to maintain a chance of producing something by the end of President Bush's term.

Prior to the conference, the insufficient coordination between the United States and Israel resulted in more than a few misunderstandings, including the issues of Israeli security measures and ongoing settlement construction in and around Jerusalem. Bush's April 2004 letter to Ariel Sharon, as interpreted by the Israeli public, suggested maintaining defensive borders in the Jordan Valley, and distinguished between settlement blocks adjacent to urban areas and other scattered settlements. Yet, neither of these ideas was affirmed at Annapolis. The conference's most fundamental error, however, was trying to put the cart of Palestinian statehood before a weak horse.

For those who actually believed, or said they believed, that a final agreement would be reached by January 2009, time is running out. Everyone seems to have backpedaled from the notion that creating a "viable, democratic, Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel" sealed with a full-fledged peace treaty is possible at this time, not least because of the situation in Gaza. The goal now has been downgraded to achieving a framework agreement or some declaration of principles -- something that cannot be rule out this year. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas could show his people that he has not given up on any previous positions, and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert could point to this small success and insist that without him in power, progress will not be sustained.

Depending on whom you ask, intense, even detailed, talks have occurred concerning the core issues: Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and settlements. However, even if an agreement were reached on some or all of these points, implementation is not imaginable under present circumstances. A real and permanent peace agreement must have the support of a substantial majority on both sides, and this is not the case today. Given the intractability of many of the issues, but especially the Palestinian refusal to accept Israel's right to exist, the expectation of a "Benelux-like" peace is an illusion. The best one could hope for, and strive for, are modus

vivendi or de facto agreements.

Olmert may think that, as the saying goes, "paper is patient" -- that one could create a document only to be discarded later -- but it may not be that easy. Any document will become the starting point for any future negotiations, thus hampering peace talks before they begin. If things remain on paper without implementation, as they are bound to, Palestinian frustration and violence are likely to increase. On the other hand, Abbas's reach is practically zero, and if it were not for the presence of the Israeli army and other security organs in the West Bank, it too would turn into a Gaza. Not only does Hamas rule Gaza, but as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak recently said, Iran is also in Gaza. And since Iran is in southern Lebanon as well, the Islamic Republic would be in the West Bank and Jerusalem if Israel were to withdraw.

Of course, we should strive to strengthen moderates and pragmatists in the West Bank, but not by dangling a quick Israeli withdrawal. Instead, there should be an effort to create governmental and legal institutions within a regional framework, especially with the involvement of the international private sector to create economic growth and development.

AARON DAVID MILLER

Currently, there is no conflict-ending solution or agreement addressing all four core issues, and it is difficult to tell even if one is possible in the future. All sides should abandon the illusions of past agreements and recognize that not all of the issues are going to be solved diplomatically.

Annapolis has gone well beyond anything tackled before in addressing the crown jewels of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the issues of territory and identity. It is important to accept, however, that we were never "this close" to a true solution to the conflict, and that there is no peace process "tooth fairy" to deliver one anytime soon. (The Syria track bears mentioning here: in the 1990s, we could have done a better job on that track; a better strategy could have led to a peace deal with Damascus. The Palestinian track was more important, but a deal there was perhaps impossible given Yasser Arafat's involvement.)

Those involved in past and present peace processes have been prisoners of constituencies and situations. Neither Abbas nor Olmert at this point have any credibility with their constituencies and have done nothing to buoy their success -- success that would otherwise generate power and constituent confidence.

It is a fantasy to believe that a peace treaty is possible by 2009 given the obviously serious time constraints. Furthermore, a successful implementation of such a treaty would cost billions of dollars and require the deployment of (mostly U.S.) troops to the Jordan Valley for fifty years. One could speak at length about Israeli responsibility, but the most serious problem facing the peace process post-Annapolis is that the Palestinian "Humpty Dumpty" has fallen and seemingly cracked irreparably. These scattered and fragmented pieces pose a huge challenge to any current or future peacemaker.

A main reason for Palestinian impotence is Abbas's lack of monopoly over the use of force, and hence lack of actual power in his own territory. This has further eroded any credibility he once maintained with his Arab neighbors. Simply put, why would the Israeli prime minister make concessions to someone who does not control the guns? Given this problem, the trick to solving the impasse, or at least to making incremental progress, is to bypass Abbas and talk to Hamas.

The irony of the situation is that by January 2009, we could very well see the production of a document. The text will be essentially meaningless despite an honest and friendly relationship between Olmert and Abbas, an element that should not be discounted. The real problem will arise when the text meets reality. It is very difficult to see how the two sides, no matter how affable, would agree on key identity issues with respect to Jerusalem and the right of return. The time simply is not right for any solution given the potent presence of Hamas and Hizballah, as well as the clear emptiness of deterrence revealed in the summer 2006 war.

These factors all beg the question: where exactly does the situation stand today? At best, the process is at a point where the outgoing Bush administration could hand off a working document to whoever next graces the White House. Above all, at this point, the administration should focus on the adage, "Above all, do no harm." President John F. Kennedy was an idealist without illusions, whose example showed that one should not give up on prospects and possibilities, but should do so with open eyes looking forward.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Audrey Flake.

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