

PolicyWatch #1323 : Special Forum Report

A Middle East Study Tour: Perspectives from Amman, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv

Featuring [David Makovsky](#)
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Upon returning from the latest Washington Institute Study Tour to the Middle East, senior fellow David Makovsky discussed his findings and impressions at a special Institute Policy Forum. The following is his own summary of his remarks at the forum. Senior fellow Soner Cagaptay addressed the forum as well, discussing his impressions from Turkey; a summary of his remarks was published as [PolicyWatch no. 1322](#).

A group of Institute trustees and fellows recently visited Amman, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv, meeting with policymakers, scholars, journalists, and community leaders. In Jordan, the delegation found widespread concern over Iran's expanding regional influence. In Israel and the Palestinian territories, it seemed apparent that real changes on the ground were necessary to sustain the momentum from Annapolis.

Jordan

Throughout the tour, Jordanian officials gave the impression that an array of Arab states and parties needed to mobilize to contain the destabilizing influence of Iran -- a critique that extended far beyond the issue of its nuclear program. Jordan's containment strategy involves a coalition of Arab states and support for the Lebanese government, the Palestinian Authority, and the Iraqi government -- each which is contending with Iranian proxies, Hizballah, Hamas, and pro-Iranian elements in Iraq, respectively. Moreover, Jordan would like firm U.S. resolve in confronting the Iranian threat.

Over the past year, Jordan has undertaken two diplomatic initiatives to shore up this Arab coalition. To encourage Saudi economic leadership, a top Jordanian official has made numerous trips to Riyadh to improve bilateral ties that were frayed during the first Gulf War. The second initiative involved reaching out to Syria, capped by King Abdullah's recent trip to Damascus, to lure Syria away from Iran's political orbit -- a goal that Israeli defense officials also believe to be well worth the effort. Jordan believes success on this front could have profound implications for Iran's relations with its other allies, Hizballah and Hamas.

From Jordan's viewpoint, Syria chafes at the devolving junior partner role it plays today, unlike the role it had for years as Iran's equal. Jordanians were careful to state they were not certain what was required with Syria, except that no one would yield Lebanon to appease Damascus. It is unclear whether Abdullah was authorized by Riyadh to dangle Saudi assistance as part of this new diplomatic drive.

On the Palestinian issue, top Jordanian officials favor a vigorous peace process in the aftermath of Annapolis, believing the alternative could be a spillover of radicalism across the Jordan River. Indeed, the Hamas takeover of Gaza this summer led Jordanian officials to increase their scrutiny of mosques. In order to halt radical sermons and extremism, Jordanian authorities have sacked Imams over the last two years who were suspected of fostering Islamism. Jordanian authorities said the moral basis for the move was the "Amman message" -- King Abdullah's initiative to enlist Muslim scholars who believe there is no religious basis for the *fatwas* (decrees) issued by radical Imams.

Israelis and Palestinians, Post-Annapolis

Visiting Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Tel Aviv in the immediate aftermath of Annapolis was a curious mix. The leaders were hopeful, the people were disengaged, and it was unclear what would happen next. There was a consensus among Israeli and Palestinian leaders -- and even from a top Israeli opposition leader -- about the importance of moving forward, since the only winners of a collapsed peace process would be Hamas and its patrons in Tehran. The Israelis think the economic context will be key for shaping the new peace process, given the roles of Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayad, former British premier Tony Blair, and the donor conference that pledged over \$7 billion.

However, it also emerged that there is no post-Annapolis strategy to engage the skeptical populations. Revitalization of the constituencies is crucial for peace if the leaders are to be empowered to make historic decisions, since domestic opinion in both societies will be swayed only by changes on the ground. So far, it is unclear whether the newly appointed U.S. envoy, Gen. Jim Jones, will be a "judge" of objectionable behavior for the first phase of the Roadmap or will focus on a long-term security plan for a Palestinian state. Although leaders in the region are careful to avoid criticism of the United States regarding Annapolis, there is a sense that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is more focused on reaching a grand peace breakthrough rather than incremental change on the ground.

The key to sustaining the Annapolis momentum is to find ways for the people, and not just policy mandarins, to see serious progress. First, the old argument over security roadblocks and Palestinian movement needs to change. If Israel were to increase personnel at key arteries, Israeli security and Palestinian movement would be both served and zero-sum outcomes would be averted. Second, there could be value to having the Palestinian Authority (PA) take over the Palestinian side of Gaza's Karni crossing for exports to Israel. (Of course, Israel would man its side of the crossing.) The PA already runs the Erez crossing for humanitarian movement and expanding this to Karni could give the PA a foothold in Gaza. In addition, if the PA were to remove incitement from state-run television, the Israeli public would certainly see this as a positive gesture even though few Palestinians actually watch the station.

One wild card in the post-Annapolis situation is Gaza. To regain popularity, Hamas may step up Qassam attacks on Israel to provoke an Israeli incursion into Gaza to portray the PA as indifferent to Gaza's plight.

Another issue will be the Israeli response to the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). There is a sense of bitterness about the NIE's emphasis on weaponization rather than the ongoing enrichment and missile development. On one hand, Israel has been supportive of international sanctions, but it has obviously pondered other options if sanctions fail. Some argue that the NIE raises the cost to Israel if it acts alone against Iran, since Israel would be seen as reacting disproportionately. At the same time, the NIE may change the dynamics of Israeli decision-making, weakening those who believe that the United States will ultimately act while Israel remains on the side.

Along these lines, it remains unclear whether the NIE will create lingering friction in the intelligence relationship between these countries, despite the sudden visit of U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Israel and the decision to follow up with more talks. If Israel thinks it is being kept in the dark, this could reinforce the Zionist ethos of self-reliance, leading Israel to act on its own before the next U.S. administration potentially engages Iran.

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