

PolicyWatch #1302

Annapolis and a Dual-Track Peace Process

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November 8, 2007

Public remarks by top U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian officials this week indicate that the character of the upcoming Middle East peace conference in Annapolis has changed. First, instead of the expected pre-conference declaration of final status -- principles and conceptual tradeoffs on core issues such as Jerusalem, borders, security, and refugees -- Annapolis will only mark the beginning of negotiations on these issues. Second, the November conference will attempt to revive the moribund Quartet Roadmap laid out by the United States, UN, European Union, and Russia in 2003, with particular focus on the plan's first phase: cooperative on-the-ground action by both sides to improve Palestinian security performance and curb Israeli settlement activity, among other issues. Finally, the United States will seek to use Annapolis as a means of galvanizing international support for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas.

Implications of the New Agenda

For the first time since 1993, the peace process is being taken up by two leaders who seem to believe that the other side is serious about creating peace -- in sharp contrast to the open enmity between their predecessors, Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat. It is precisely this underlying respect between Olmert and Abbas, alongside the fear of a Hamas-led alternative government, that seems to give Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hope that Annapolis will be a success.

Her most recent trip confirmed that it was impossible to score a quick, shuttle-diplomacy breakthrough based on tradeoffs on the core issues, since other factors are also at work. For example, the Palestinians insisted that they would not make concessions on the refugee issue in return for an Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank unless they received major Jerusalem concessions as well.

Now that the nature of Annapolis has been clarified, it is clear that the United States will use the intervening weeks to coax Arab states to the table. Washington will also make the case that it stands behind the improved Roadmap, with an intense focus on the first phase. But unlike the past, the parties have agreed to simultaneously negotiate the third, final-status phase while implementing the first phase. This leaves open the question of the second phase, which outlines a Palestinian state with "provisional borders and attributes of sovereignty." Palestinians are deeply unnerved by this phase because they believe it averts the core issues of the third phase. For their part, the Israelis are wary of sacrificing territorial cards with no concessions in return.

Some argue that this new emphasis on Annapolis is a setback for Rice because the conference will not mark a breakthrough, leading many to pin their hopes on the post-Annapolis period. In response, she would likely argue that the Roadmap's first-phase obligations will build the requisite confidence for final-status talks, thereby reinforcing the dual-track process. Conversely, if the parties cannot handle the first phase, which is predicated on behavior modification, the odds are that they would fail at the weightier final-status issues anyway. There is concern that pushing for final-status negotiations, progress on security, and settlement issues simultaneously could embolden extremists on both sides to undermine the process after Annapolis. A diplomatic breakthrough at Annapolis could have the same effect, however.

In practical terms, the dual focus of the negotiations will mean that the United States will be called on to simultaneously guide final-status talks and monitor implementation of the first phase. It is the second task that will test the United States on how to measure compliance and how to enforce judgments. The last time Washington tried to do so, in 2003, it forbade its envoy from publicizing the compliance judgments, thus eliminating the parties' main incentive to comply.

Confidence Building Before and After Annapolis

Do the parties have the political resolve and capacity to fulfill their obligations under the first phase of the Roadmap? To demonstrate its security capabilities, the Palestinian Authority will likely emphasize its closure of more than a hundred Hamas-related charities, its warnings to 800 imams regarding radical sermons, and its very recent and novel security deployment in Nablus. But these positive developments must be viewed in light of the current situation in the West Bank -- namely, Israel is in charge of the territory, and extended Palestinian security control is not the norm. In contrast, during the second half of the 1990s, when the Palestinians controlled all West Bank cities, many security violations occurred.

Regarding wider Arab participation, Washington will likely argue for a new flexibility in the Roadmap's dual-track process to facilitate the timing of Arab initiatives. For example, if Arab states offer normalization with Israel in the early phases of the process, Israel will have extra incentive to make concessions to the Palestinians. Yet, any U.S. calls for greater Arab participation will come at a time when there are low expectations about Annapolis. Therefore, Arab states will likely press Israel for action on issues such as settlement activity or prisoner release before they can justify their presence at Annapolis. Israel will invariably cite the release of Palestinian tax revenue and the freeing of hundreds of prisoners as a sign of goodwill. There seems little doubt that the United States would like to see exchanges of confidence-building measures among all parties before the conference to improve the atmosphere at the event.

It should also be noted that President Bush repeatedly -- and with little fanfare -- called for a "comprehensive" Middle East peace during a recent interview with the Arab satellite channel al-Arabiya. Such language is favored by Syria, which may yet be invited to Annapolis. Although the focus of the conference is on the Palestinians, Washington believes that an invitation would give Syria an incentive to discontinue its alleged assassinations of Lebanese parliamentarians, thus enabling the ongoing Lebanese presidential election process to proceed. Nobody can prevent Syria from raising the Golan Heights issue in Annapolis, but Damascus must realize that there will be no negotiations on that question at the conference.

Conclusion

The changing character of Annapolis is designed to avert failure or an immediate Israeli-Palestinian crisis over core issues. It remains to be seen, however, whether the United States can align expectations in the post-Annapolis process while defining itself as a monitor and arbiter in the short time before the conference. The looming deadline alone may have succeeded in producing a commitment to negotiate final-status issues, but it has not been useful in forcing decisions on core, self-defining issues. And the United States will be tested no less than the parties themselves in the post-Annapolis phase. All in all, the new dual-track process will either instill confidence in both parties and stave off the ascendancy of Hamas, or simply serve as a way of parking the Israeli-Palestinian issue until the end of the Bush administration.

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