

ANNAPOLIS: GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, he and his main policy makers resolved to avoid being dragged through the mud of another false Israeli-Palestinian peace production. But almost seven years later, on the eve of the Annapolis summit meeting, they appear to have reversed course. Annapolis is being presented as the most important regional peace gathering since the 1991 Madrid conference, with invitations going to dozens of leaders in the Middle East and around the world.

The main reasons for this change have nothing to do with the Palestinians and Israel the core of American policy lies in Iran and Iraq. To counter Teheran's rush to acquire illicit nuclear weapons, the US is attempting to construct a coalition that includes Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, and perhaps even Syria. This anti-Iranian coalition, which is central for Israeli security and regional stability, is necessary because of the failure in Iraq and the weakening of American unilateral influence in the region. And in order to forge such an unusual political structure, the Arabs (particularly the Saudis) have demanded some progress in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere. And this torturous path has led to Annapolis.

This is also the basis for assessing the success or failure of this effort -- if the group picture includes a Saudi prince or senior minister, as well as other Arab rulers, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice can declare success and use this framework to increase pressure on Iran, including the threat of a military strike. And if the Saudi presence is minimal, this will signify the final breath of the so-called "Saudi peace plan", first presented in 2002, and largely forgotten for five intervening years.

Of course, the statements made by Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian leader Abbas will also be of some importance at Annapolis. The initial and entirely unrealistic expectations for an immediate end to 60 years of Palestinian terror and incitement were never realistic. There is now some cautious hope that this rejectionism, as reflected by Arafat in the July 2000 Camp David summit, can start to be changed through a vague joint statement about resuming negotiations on the core issues. Abbas and what is left of his Fatah movement are too weak (or perhaps unwilling) to lead Palestinian society to discarding the myths of refugee claims and accepting the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state, in the context of a two-state solution.

Furthermore, while the American invitation, as well as the rhetoric and slogans to be heard at Annapolis, emphasize the endorsement of a Palestinian state, the reality on the ground demonstrates that this is also not realistic now. Hamas controls Gaza, and if the Israeli military were to leave the West Bank, the corrupt Fatah movement would have trouble holding on to anything outside Ramallah and perhaps Bethlehem. And media hype to the contrary, the events at Annapolis, including another release of terror suspects by Israel will not boost Abbas or Fatah. This power struggle will be decided internally, and may require a federation with Jordan (whose leaders realize the dangers of a Hamas controlled region on their borders.)

Finally, it is worth noting the very low profile of Europe and Russia at Annapolis. Both of these would-be world powers talk incessantly about peace, and Tony Blair is promoting economic assistance that might eventually have some impact if the Palestinians, but this a minor factor. (Europe's counterproductive role is highlighted through its funding for the radical NGOs that promote conflict through demonization of Israel, and the failure of the 25 countries to stand up to incitement in the UN and elsewhere. And in Russia, Putin is reviving the glorious triumphs of the Cold War.) Despite the widespread criticism of the Americans, and the Bush administration in particular, there is no one else on the world stage. If Annapolis succeeds, they will deserve the credit, and if it fails we will again quote Abba Eban on how the Arabs (including the Saudi rulers) never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

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