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The Annapolis Peace Conference: Cloudy Prospects for Success

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The long-delayed Annapolis conference, proposed by the Bush Administration to revive the dormant Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations, is slated to be convened on November 27. But the countries that will attend; the issues that will be addressed; and what, if anything, can be achieved at the conference all remain obscured by a thick diplomatic fog. The conference was originally conceived as an international forum to reach agreement on a “political horizon” for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Lately, however, it has been downgraded to a ceremonial diplomatic kickoff for final status negotiations due to the failure of Israeli and Palestinian diplomats to negotiate a common vision of the horizon. The continuing threat posed by Hamas, backed by Iran and Syria, also makes a sustainable peace agreement unattainable for the foreseeable future. Approaching the final year of its tenure, the Bush Administration must bear this in mind as it presses for realistic step-by-step negotiations to mitigate, rather than overly ambitious efforts to quickly resolve, the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Prospects for Success. The diplomatic uncertainties surrounding the Annapolis conference reflect the tremendous difficulties inherent in reaching an agreement on thorny questions related to final status issues, including security arrangements, the delineation of borders, Jerusalem, Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the fate of Palestinian refugees, and water rights. Moreover, the glacial pace of bilateral negotiations reflects the fact that the situation is not ripe for a diplomatic solution. The chief

threat to peace, the radical Islamic Hamas movement, not only rejects negotiations with Israel but also continues to actively seek its destruction.

After months of negotiations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority still have not been able to hammer out a joint statement. The Palestinians want the conference to produce a detailed blueprint for a final settlement with a well-defined timetable for Palestinian statehood, to be established in as little as six months. Israel seeks a less ambitious agreement on a statement of principles that will guide future negotiations. Progress reportedly has been blocked because Israel wants a Palestinian acknowledgement of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, while Palestinians have refused, insisting that such a statement would infringe on the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees to Israel rather than to the proposed Palestinian state. As long as Palestinians cling to this unrealistic demand, little progress is possible.

Neither side presently trusts the other to deliver on its promises. And neither Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert nor Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have enough domestic political support to actually fulfill the terms of a final status agreement, if one could be reached. Olmert has

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been undermined by the disastrous results of his government's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the failure to decisively defeat Hezbollah in the 2006 war in Lebanon, and ongoing criminal investigations into his past. Even if Olmert could strike a deal with the Palestinians, his weak coalition government would likely implode and be replaced if it sacrificed continued Israeli control over Jerusalem.

Abbas, a protégé of Yasser Arafat who broke with the Palestinian leader in the final years of his corrupt and thuggish rule, suffers from a lack of personal charisma, his failure to reform the Palestinian Authority, and the defeat of his followers by Hamas in Gaza in 2006. Abbas is not in a position to effectively fight terrorism, which is the chief obstacle to peace. If Israeli forces withdraw from the West Bank, there is a considerable risk that Abbas and his Fatah followers would be defeated by Hamas, as they were in Gaza.

Moreover, Abbas has not established full control over the Palestinian Authority's unreliable security services, which would be called upon to enforce any agreement. Last summer, Israeli intelligence foiled a Palestinian assassination plot against Prime Minister Olmert that included members of the Palestinian security services. The plotters were arrested by the Palestinian Authority but subsequently released from jail, apparently without the knowledge of President Abbas. The continuation of Arafat's "revolving door" detention policy for Palestinians plotting to kill Israelis is only the latest reminder that Israeli negotiators cannot count on their Palestinian counterparts to fulfill all their commitments under previous peace agreements, let alone new ones.

The Problem of Hamas. Hamas, which continues to rain rockets down on Israeli civilians living near the border with Gaza, is in a position to explode the chances for a genuine peace. Backed by Iran and Syria, it is fortifying its Gaza stronghold and preparing for war, bolstered by tons of weapons smuggled across the border with Egypt. Sooner or later, Israel will be compelled to defend itself by invading Gaza, which will further cloud the prospects for peace. But as long as Hamas retains its stranglehold over Gaza, no stable peace is possible.

Washington has tried to finesse this situation by broadening the conference to include as many countries and international organizations as possible, highlighting the fact that Hamas is isolated in its rejection of negotiations with Israel. The State Department has invited Syria to participate, despite the fact that Damascus continues to support Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups dedicated to Israel's destruction. Saudi Arabia has also been invited to attend, but its participation remains uncertain. The cautious Saudis reportedly have engaged in secret talks with Israel in the past but are reluctant to publicly sit down with Israel until a diplomatic deal has already been consummated.

The Olmert government recently has made confidence-building concessions to attract Saudi and other participants, including the release of 441 Palestinian prisoners, a pledge to dismantle unauthorized settlement outposts in the West Bank, and the removal of some security checkpoints that have restricted Palestinian movement. But this may not be enough for President Abbas, who fears being criticized as being soft on Israel by Hamas and by hardliners within his own fractious Fatah movement. Some Palestinian sources have indicated that the Palestinian Authority may not participate in the conference unless it obtains the blessings of the Arab League, which has scheduled a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Egypt for later this week.

Avoiding a Rush to Failure. The Bush Administration must be careful not to try to do too much too fast at the Annapolis conference. This will only feed unrealistic expectations that could boil over into another burst of violence, as happened after the Clinton Administration's failed Camp David summit in 2000.

The Administration should adhere to a more incremental strategy that takes into account the lessons of the failed Oslo peace process in the 1990s. As that experience showed, the chief barrier to peace is Palestinian terrorism, which understandably erodes the willingness of Israelis to make concessions that entail considerable security risks. Proceeding on a step-by-step basis, with strict monitoring of performance-based compliance before the next step is undertaken, would build confidence on both sides over time.

President Abbas currently does not have the capability to effectively crack down on terrorism. He needs the support of Arab states and the West to isolate and weaken Hamas. As long as Hamas remains a potent threat to a genuine and sustainable peace, only conflict mitigation and management, not conflict resolution, is possible. Therefore, Washington should not push for a rushed agreement that would result in a flawed and unstable cease-fire, not a durable permanent settlement.

Also, the Administration should not impose unrealistic deadlines for negotiations. Peace will take a generation to build. It is highly improbable that a lame duck Israeli government and a shaky Palestinian Authority can conclude a final settlement in the last months of the Bush Administration.

Washington also should seek to avoid excessive American intervention, which leads both sides to negotiate with Washington rather than each other, as the Clinton Administration quickly discovered. Most of the major breakthroughs in the Arab–Israeli peace negotiations were achieved through bilateral diplomatic efforts such as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s 1977 visit to Jerusalem and the 1994 peace

treaty with Jordan. Multilateral conferences, such as the 1991 Madrid Conference, can provide important symbolic international support for negotiations, but are cumbersome affairs that often lead to diplomatic dead ends.

Conclusion. The Annapolis conference, if it is successful, will only be the first step in a long, grueling negotiation. Washington should not rush these negotiations, as it is more important to get them right than to get them done quickly. As long as Hamas is free to continue its terror campaign, it is virtually impossible for Israel to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinian Authority. The Annapolis conference ultimately will be seen as a success only to the extent that it helps reduce the power and potential threat of Hamas and other radical Palestinian factions that continue to seek the destruction of Israel.

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