

AFTER ANNAPOLIS:

A FRAGILE PEACE PROCESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East Conference in Annapolis brought together a coalition of the besieged. The increasing clout of Islamist movements and Iran has brought about a rapprochement between the US, Israel, and the Sunni Arab regimes. As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, the common interest is limited to resuscitating a vague peace process, however. The chances of resolving the conflict are slim. The US reassessment of the Iranian nuclear program will make no difference in this regard. A failure of the peace negotiations threatens to further strengthen radical forces in the region.



President Mahmoud Abbas at the Annapolis conference, 27 November 2007.

Jim Young/Reuters

The Annapolis peace conference of late November 2007 has left an ambivalent impression. On the positive side, Israelis and Palestinians decided to resume negotiations for the first time after years of violence. The conference also signaled a more active policy of the Bush administration vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which it had long ignored. Furthermore, the declared goal of elaborating a peace treaty by December 2008 gives George W. Bush a broader time-frame than the one available to President Bill Clinton at the Camp David and Taba negotiations in 2000.

It is also worth noting that the resumption of the peace process enjoys remarkably broad support. Annapolis was the first major international Middle East conference since 1991. Around 50 states

and international organizations were represented. Especially important was the attendance of 16 Arab states, which – apart from Egypt and Jordan – do not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel. A final notable factor was the improved methodology of the peace negotiations. While the Road Map of the Middle East Quartet remains the basis of peace efforts, the controversial provisions for phased implementation were dropped. Instead of confidence-building measures – defined as effective Palestinian measures to stop terrorism and an end of Israeli settlement activities – being pre-conditions for final status negotiations, both processes will now take place in parallel. Furthermore, the US will in the future serve as an arbitrator concerning the implementation of the Road Map.

Much process, little substance

However, there is also reason for much skepticism regarding Annapolis. The conference clearly fell short of the desired outcome as originally defined by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Unlike in previous negotiation rounds, the US aimed this time to bring about some Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement in the core contentious issues – borders, Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, and Israeli security – already before the beginning of the conference. These efforts failed in spite of intense pre-negotiations. Instead of being able to present the international community with a basic document laying out substantial compromises on final-status questions, the US struggled until the last minute to persuade Israelis and Palestinians even to commit to a joint statement.

The conference was thus reduced to a largely ceremonial affair at which the parties to the conflict merely stated their willingness to engage in new peace talks. While Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas committed themselves to dealing with all core issues, a specification of the latter was notably lacking in the statement. Instead, the focus was on the definition of the negotiation process. However, a steering group that remains in session continuously, the establishment of topical negotiation teams, and biweekly meetings between Olmert and Abbas will not be sufficient to bring about peace.

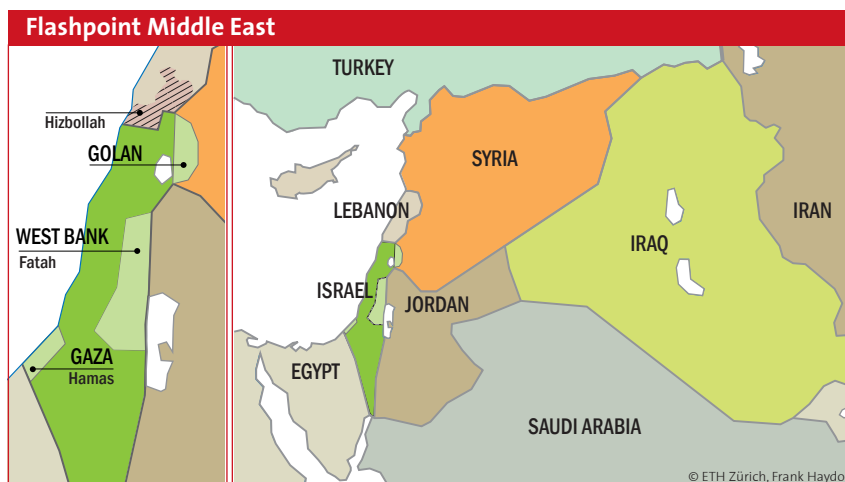
It is questionable whether all actors involved have the will and capability to commit themselves to the outlines of a Palestinian state and to bring about a

corresponding two-state solution. Olmert, Abbas, and Bush – the key actors in the peace talks – are weakened by domestic political factors. Moreover, the common motivation of the new round of negotiations is not so much the desire to resolve the conflict as the wish to counter the regional power shifts in favor of Iran as well as Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah. The consensus of the participants is thus largely confined to the resuscitation of a vague peace process.

From Baghdad to Annapolis

For a long time, Bush displayed no interest in continuing Clinton’s mediation efforts. The attention of his administration was largely devoted to Iraq, the democratization of which was to serve as a starting point for a regional realignment. In the Middle East conflict, the US pursued a course that was biased towards Israel. For example, Washington supported Israel’s rejection of Yasser Arafat as a negotiating partner. After Hamas’ victory at the polls in the spring of 2006, the US boycotted the new Palestinian government, despite having previously pushed for elections. During the war in Lebanon in 2006, the Bush administration attracted the ire of many Arabs by delaying the call for a ceasefire. In the controversial final-status issues, Bush also adopted an unusually partisan stance. He assured then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in 2004 that Israel would be permitted to retain the large settlement blocs in the occupied West Bank and that Palestinian refugees would have no claim to a right of return to Israel.

Two factors persuaded the US administration to at least partially abandon its passive stance vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the summer of 2007. First of all, Washington perceived the grab for power by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the resulting Palestinian schism as an opportunity to isolate the Muslim extremists and to strengthen the secular Fatah movement under Abbas. It is hoped that a new peace process and economic support for the emergency government in the West Bank will demonstrate to the Palestinian population that only support for moderate forces will improve their living conditions. Secondly, the US administration came to realize that the Europeans and especially the Arab countries could only be persuaded to embark on a tough course vis-à-vis Iran in return for US engagement for peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the Sunni rulers in the region, like the US, are increasingly on the defensive as a result of



Tehran’s growing influence after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, they are hardly able to engage in close cooperation with the US against the Shi’ite theocracy without substantial progress regarding the Palestinian question. Washington has simply lost too much credibility in the Arab world since its invasion of Iraq.

A coalition of the besieged

The Annapolis Process, initiated by the US, serves the interests of both Abbas and Olmert, both of whom are under a great deal of domestic pressure. For the Palestinian leader, the peace talks have become a matter of political survival. His emergency government has no control over the almost 1.5 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, has only limited freedom of action in the West Bank, and suffers from a lack of legitimacy. His Fatah party is ineffective and owes its remaining influence in the West Bank largely to the suppression of Hamas by the Israeli security forces. Since the failure of the national unity government in June 2007, Abbas has consistently supported the forced division of the Palestinians by the US, the EU, and Israel. He has thus made himself conspicuously dependent on Olmert and Bush, in a move that he will only be able to justify on the domestic front through progress in the peace talks.

Olmert, for his part, requires a new vision of peace in order to be able to offer new perspectives to the Israeli population after the unsettling experience of the 2006 Lebanon conflict. Charges of incompetence in the conduct of the war and domestic scandals have caused his approval rates in Israel to plummet dramatically. His election promise to continue Sharon’s strategy of unilateral conflict management through a partial withdrawal from the West Bank is obsolete today. Rocket attacks by Hizbol-

lah from Southern Lebanon and by Hamas from Gaza have demonstrated to the Israeli public that a unilateral demarcation of borders without consultations with the Arab neighbors offers no security. Olmert is also likely to expect a new peace process to yield a popularity boost for Israel, which has attracted much criticism in recent years – including from Europe – with controversial measures such as the construction of a security barrier.

The coalition of the besieged also includes the Arab states attending the Annapolis conference. In addition to the growing external threat of the Shi’ite resurgence, the secular Sunni rulers are increasingly confronted by challenges from religious extremists on the domestic front. They believe the decline of Arab nationalism is due to a considerable extent to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which remains unresolved after six decades of violence. They have therefore stepped up their negotiation efforts in recent years. The members of the Arab League in their peace initiative of 2002 offered Israel a comprehensive peace settlement in return for Israel’s withdrawal from all areas it has occupied since 1967.

Limited capacity to make peace

The domestic weakness of the actors involved is not only an important factor contributing to the revitalization of the peace process. It is simultaneously a key obstacle to achieving and implementing a lasting peace settlement. Abbas cannot negotiate on behalf of the entire population, which means that any concessions he may make, for example in terms of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, are highly qualified. The implementation of any potential agreements may fail due to the resistance of Hamas, which does not acknowledge Israel’s right to exist and has threatened

a new Intifada in case the Palestinian side should make concessions.

Olmert is similarly constrained when it comes to making peace. Resistance from within his coalition was instrumental in ensuring that the Annapolis Declaration remained largely devoid of substance. It is questionable whether he would be able to win the elections that would inevitably follow any major concessions he might make. The resistance of the influential settler lobby and of other nationalist and religious circles against territorial concessions is very strong. Olmert's policies will most likely also be opposed from within his own Kadima party, which was founded in 2005 on the strength of Sharon's personality and his strategy of unilateral withdrawal and which is now internally divided. The fact that Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of the national-conservative Likud party, currently has the best approval ratings reflects a widespread desire for security among the Israeli population. Netanyahu not only stands for a policy of the iron fist and settlement expansion, but also contributed to the failure of the Oslo Process in the second half of the 1990s. There is nothing to indicate that he is more favorably disposed towards the Annapolis Process.

Diverging priorities

There is also reason for pessimism in view of the disparate interests regarding the purpose of the new peace process. Abbas is crucially dependent on the peace talks bringing forth rapid and substantial progress. International economic assistance alone will not be sufficient to shore up his position. A failure of the talks would be a triumph for the radical forces within Palestinian society. For Olmert, on the other hand, the process itself is more important than the rapid realization of a two-state solution. Many Israelis believe that even a dismantling of roadblocks in the West Bank means a deterioration of their personal security. It is also questionable whether Israel has the political determination to make the concessions necessary for creating a contiguous Palestinian state entity. Through its continuous settlement construction in recent decades, Israel has created facts in the occupied territories that make it enormously difficult to implement a solution that is acceptable for the Palestinian side. Since the beginning of the Oslo Process in 1993, the number of settlers has risen from 281,000 to more than 460,000, which has caused a high degree of geographic fragmentation in Palestinian society.

Key dates: Occupied territories and peace negotiations since 1967

- 1967: Israel occupies East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Sinai
- 1978: Peace treaty with Egypt, Israel returns the Sinai peninsula
- 1980: Israel declares Jerusalem "whole and united", to be "the eternal capital of Israel"
- 1991: International Middle East conference in Madrid
- 1993: Oslo Peace Process: Mutual recognition of PLO and Israel, limited Palestinian autonomy in West Bank and Gaza
- 1994: Peace treaty with Jordan
- 2000–01: Negotiations between Arafat and Barak in Camp David and Taba
- 2002: Peace initiative of Arab League, Road Map of the Quartet (US, EU, UN, and Russia)
- 2005: Unilateral withdrawal from Gaza
- 2007: International Middle East conference in Annapolis

Furthermore, one may question whether a majority of Israelis would accept the designation of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. As far as the right of return for more than four million Palestinian refugees to Israel is concerned, it is probably the Palestinians who will have to make most concessions. Since this question is, however, their strongest bargaining chip, they will not make compromises before reaching a package deal as the result of negotiations. By making the recognition of Israel as the "State of the Jews" a precondition for final-status negotiations after Annapolis, Olmert has narrowed down the scope for diplomacy at an early stage. This is very much in accordance with the wishes of the numerous Israeli decisionmakers and analysts who believe that containing Iran is more important than a historic compromise with the Palestinians.

Washington's reassessment of Iran

Another reason why the peace talks are unlikely to return substantial results is that Bush, like Olmert, seems to be mainly interested in sustaining the process. The US president has issued a clear signal that he will not be directly involved in the negotiations and that it is up to the parties to the conflict to find a solution. It is also worth noting that he again adopted pro-Israeli positions in Annapolis by referring to Israel explicitly as the "State of the Jews" and only calling for an end to settlement *expansion*. The Arab side was further disillusioned by the fact that the US returned immediately after the conference to its traditional policy towards Syria and made a peace track with Damascus conditional on a change of Syria's policies towards Iran and Lebanon.

The fundamental reassessment of Iran's nuclear program by the US intelligence agencies, which was published in early December 2007, is unlikely to make any difference to the limited role of the US in

the peace talks. It is true that the assessment, according to which Tehran probably already ended the military part of its program as early as 2003, raises new questions concerning the reliability of the intelligence services and the credibility of the Bush government. However, while this appraisal excludes the option of military strikes for the time being, it does not yet imply a more active involvement of Bush in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although deescalation with Iran gives the US new options in the Palestine question, it also diminishes the pressure to make peace.

A failure of the Annapolis Process would further strengthen the radical forces in the region. On the other hand, a peace process that gambles on an even deeper division among Palestinians is not helpful with a view to the declared goal of creating a Palestinian state. A rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas seems indispensable for achieving sustainable progress in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US alone is unlikely to facilitate such a move, however. Switzerland, which was the only Western country to bank on dialog with the Islamists and intra-Palestinian reconciliation after the Hamas election victory in 2006, was visibly absent from the list of invitees to Annapolis. Even if an independent policy of peace promotion in the Middle East has become more difficult in the context of the US "War on Terror", efforts to mediate the formation of a new Palestinian unity government still deserve to be given high priority.

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