

SPECIAL ANNAPOLIS EDITION Hard Questions, Tough Answers with Yossi Alpher



Q. What did the Annapolis conference say about Israeli-Palestinian peace?

A. The conference officially renewed the Israeli-Palestinian peace process after a seven year hiatus brought about by the failure at Camp David, years of violent intifada and the Bush administration's reluctance to engage. This is a significant achievement.

Q. How did the concept of this conference develop over the past six months? Was renewing the peace process its original intent?

A. Last July 16, President George W. Bush proclaimed "an international meeting" to "review the progress that has been made toward building Palestinian institutions" and "provide diplomatic support for the parties in their bilateral discussions and negotiations". The idea was that, by the time the parties got to Annapolis, the Palestinians would have made some progress, with the help of Quartet envoy Tony Blair, in institution-building, while Israel and the PLO would have registered substantial gains in peace negotiations.

In fact, little if any such progress was registered--to the extent that, a few weeks ago, PM Ehud Olmert was referring to Annapolis as merely an "event". Then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice introduced the concept of Annapolis "launching" negotiations and reintroduced the roadmap as a guide. She adopted the idea (which originated with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni) of early roadmap phase III negotiations on final status in parallel with phase I implementation of confidence- and institution-building measures. Finally, having succeeded at the eleventh hour in bringing together an impressive group of Arab and other foreign ministers, the administration designated Annapolis a "conference".

Q. What stood out at the Annapolis conference as particularly significant developments from the standpoint of Israel's strategic interests?

A. The unexpected permutations that emerged in the last weeks and days leading up to the conference: the representation at foreign minister level (except Syria) of 16 Arab states, with its implied solidarity with the US (and to some extent Israel) against the Iran-led extremist camp; Syria's presence, however reluctant; the (anticipated) pressures on PM Ehud Olmert from within

his coalition to dilute the substantive content of any pre-conference joint Israeli-Palestinian declaration; and the renewed focus on the roadmap, long considered a dead-letter, albeit with a new twist of working in parallel on phases I and III.

Q. What characterized the Bush, Olmert and Abbas opening statements and the last-minute "joint understanding"?

A. On the one hand, no new ground was broken. Significantly, there was no substantive mention in any of the statements of positions regarding "core" or final status issues like refugees. This reflected the apparent total lack of progress on these issues in pre-Annapolis negotiations. On the other hand, there were some interesting nuances.

Olmert, for example, spoke with considerable empathy about Palestinian refugee suffering, some of it at Israel's hands. And he referred to the Arab peace initiative very positively. These are positions intended to win over Arab confidence. On the other hand, Olmert's appeal to the Arabs to normalize relations with Israel immediately undoubtedly fell on deaf ears insofar as it contradicts the Arab interpretation of the Arab peace initiative.

Bush, interestingly, referred to the current governmental crisis in Lebanon--an important subtext in negotiations with Syria over its participation--but did not mention Syria or a potential Israeli-Syrian peace process, thereby sending a negative message to Damascus.

The "joint understanding" statement was, as expected, cobbled together at the last minute under considerable American pressure. As expected--because Palestinian negotiating tactics seem to dictate an unending series of advances and reversals in negotiations, with final concessions made at the eleventh hour. And also as expected, the statement broke no new ground and largely went through the motions of inaugurating a negotiating process. Still, from Israel's standpoint, two interesting nuances that reflect Israeli concessions stand out in the joint statement.

For one, the parties agreed "to confront terrorism and incitement, whether committed by Palestinians or Israelis". Not every Israeli government has in the past acknowledged that Israelis, too, are responsible for terrorism and incitement. Then too, the parties "shall make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008". This reference to an obviously non-binding but nevertheless significant timetable corresponding to the end of Bush's (and Abbas') term of office was something Olmert had hoped to avoid. Neither of these concessions will endear Olmert to the hardliners in his coalition.

Finally, "[T]he parties also commit to immediately implement their respective obligations under the performance-based road map." This formulation obfuscates a key disagreement between Israelis and Palestinians over the timeline for implementing roadmap phase I demands: Israel wants implementation to be sequential, with compliance by Israel with its obligations conditioned on prior Palestinian compliance; the Palestinians want compliance to be parallel, not sequential. Yesterday's formulation indicates that the two sides still do not agree on this extremely important issue.

The opening statement also tells us that negotiations will begin in earnest on December 12, that Olmert and Abbas will continue to meet every two weeks, and that, as Minister of Defense Ehud Barak had insisted, the United States alone (in the person of General Jim Jones) will monitor compliance with roadmap phase I demands.

Q. So where does the peace process go from here, and what are its chances of success? Where does the roadmap fit in?

A. Essentially, the process will move forward on two fronts: roadmap phase I and roadmap phase III. While the parties carry out their phase I obligations--the Palestinians have to deliver on security and institution-building, Israel on outpost removal, settlement construction freeze, withdrawal to pre-intifada military positions, dismantling roadblocks and reopening PLO institutions like Orient House in Jerusalem--they negotiate phase III final status issues. If and when they complete the drafting of a final status agreement, its implementation will be "put on the shelf" until they have complied with their phase I obligations.

Frankly, their chances of success are very problematic, certainly within a year. Despite the obvious and important friendly relations between Olmert and Abbas, the government of Israel and the PLO remain far apart on key final status issues such as Jerusalem and refugees/right of return. Nor does either party appear to have the capacity to carry out all of its phase I obligations--not to mention their ongoing disagreement regarding sequencing or parallelism.

There was talk in Annapolis of a third track, dealing with multilateral issues and referring to the Arab peace initiative. Here Olmert's concept of the Arabs offering normalization first is a non-starter. The best that can be hoped for--and it is significant--is Arab reciprocation for Israeli-Palestinian progress in the spirit of a statement published last Friday in *Haaretz* and attributed to Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit, to the effect that every step forward by Israel and the Palestinians would be rewarded by an Arab step toward normalization, in the form of high level visits and diplomatic and commercial relations. This is the most forthcoming public Arab formulation of the Arabs' near-term obligations under their peace initiative that I have seen thus far.

Q. How will coalition and other domestic problems affect Olmert's capacity to negotiate?

A. Evidently, if left to his own devices Olmert would be prepared to offer the Palestinians far-reaching concessions that might make a deal possible. But he is burdened with a coalition that he created for political survival, not peacemaking. Shas and Yisrael Beitenu, and around one-third of Kadima's 29 MKs, are certain to object to a host of concessions Olmert envisions. If indeed progress is registered in negotiations in the coming months, Olmert will face the need to restructure his coalition. In the best case, this will mean reliance on Meretz-Yahad and all or most of the 10 MKs from Arab parties. Recent history teaches us that this is a shaky parliamentary formula indeed for sustaining a peace process, and one that could trigger new elections.

Moreover, in the coming month Olmert faces publication of a highly critical final report from the Winograd commission--over which Barak is committed to seek either new elections or a new

prime minister--as well as possible police recommendations to indict him on a number of counts of corruption. All in all, either a government shake-up or new elections are likely in 2008, thereby almost certainly delaying any possible peace process until the next US presidential administration.

Q. Will Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas labor under similar constraints?

A. Worse. For Abbas to succeed and build upon the warm demonstration of pan-Arab support he received in Annapolis, he must find a way to consolidate his control over dissident elements in the West Bank and restore Fateh rule in Gaza. The latter task means either re-negotiating a unity government with Hamas--but one that the US and Israel can live with--or indirectly endorsing a massive Israeli military operation that eliminates Hamas rule in Gaza. Either enterprise is extremely problematic. Then too, Hamas and other "refusalist" elements are now likely to mount violent operations against Israel and/or the Abbas camp in order to sabotage the process. Yesterday's West Bank demonstrations against Annapolis, some of them violent, may be only the beginning.

Q. Why was the large Arab presence at Annapolis significant?

A. It reflects the Arab states' grudging understanding that, despite disappointments, they need American leadership in the Middle East--regarding a peace process but also concerning Iraq and Iran, where US policy needs constituted an important strategic subtext for the entire Annapolis enterprise. It is also a vote of confidence for an Olmert-Abbas peace process despite the glaring lack of progress in pre-Annapolis negotiations. At the same time, the relatively cold shoulder given Olmert by the Saudis and others at Annapolis bespeaks a clear rejection of his concept of instant normalization with Israel or hands-on Arab participation in an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Q. The invitation to Syria, and the conditions Damascus tried to place on its participation, reflect the efforts of some Israelis, Americans and Arabs to exploit Annapolis in order to generate an Israel-Syria peace process. Where does this initiative now stand?

A. An Israeli-Syrian track was not formally launched at Annapolis, as some had hoped. Bush's refusal to welcome discussion of the Golan helped ensure that Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem would stay home and send his deputy instead. Here it is important to note that Bush was not the only statesman at Annapolis with reservations concerning Damascus: the Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians and emirates are torn between the obligation to include Syria that is dictated by both the spirit of Arab solidarity and the letter of the Arab peace initiative, and their condemnation of the Bashar Assad regime for its murderous behavior in Lebanon, its alliance with Iran, support for terrorist groups and condoning of jihadi violence in Iraq.

In this regard, the crisis in Lebanon provided an interesting subtext to the last-minute negotiations over Syria's participation. Syria's agreement to pressure Hezbollah and its other Lebanese supporters to cooperate in electing a new president was seen as a possible quid pro quo for putting the Golan on the agenda. In the end, the Syrians pressured Hezbollah to avoid escalating the crisis to violence, but not to solve it, and Muallem stayed home.

Q. What decisions now confront the American organizers of Annapolis regarding tactics for handling the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that are about to unfold?

A. Having brought off a successful, albeit limited display of American leadership, Bush and Rice now confront the question of the extent of American participation in the anticipated Israeli-Palestinian process. They yielded to Olmert's demand that negotiations be held in Israel/Palestine and be strictly bilateral. And they are appointing an American military monitor of phase I compliance as Olmert and Barak requested. They made a few concessions to the Palestinians in the opening statement, though Bush's difficulty pronouncing Abbas' name will be seen by Palestinians as symbolic of Washington's pro-Israel tilt. Now Bush and Rice have to decide how much more involved the US can or should be?

Can Bush, for example, in an election year, put pressure on Olmert regarding outpost removal? How much pressure? Should Bush and Rice appoint a special envoy, a "Dennis Ross", to babysit a peace process? Will Rice herself take on that task? Should they rely on the Quartet for follow-up, e.g., in the form of a second conference in Moscow? How much pressure dare the administration apply to the Arab League to deliver on normalization gestures if and when Israel claims progress? How does Washington address a possible Abbas-Hamas political compromise designed to maintain Abbas' leadership?

Considering the president's standoffishness regarding the Israeli-Palestinian question throughout the past seven years, it is questionable how far Rice can drag him into active involvement.

Q. The bottom line?

A. At the end of the day, the Annapolis extravaganza launched a very modest and problematic process--but nevertheless, a peace process. As for its chances of success, Henry Kissinger once famously said that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy. This is equally true for the Palestinians. It is at the domestic level on both sides that the fate of the Annapolis process will be determined.