

# Downplaying Annapolis

by Gideon Lichfield

*The Annapolis middle east summit will not live up to its original, over-ambitious goals. But might there be signs of progress nonetheless?*

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The Israelis and Palestinians have at last found something to agree on: the Annapolis summit taking place on 27th November will be a failure. The pro-Palestinian lobby thinks the meeting could have pinned down some commitments on the shape of a Palestinian state, but Israeli obfuscation leached out all the goodness until it became a bland, mushy photo-op. The pro-Israel crowd thinks it is a pointless diplomatic exercise, carried out mainly for the sake of George W Bush and Condoleezza Rice's political legacies.

Up to a point, they're both right. Annapolis will fall far short of its original goals; and its original goals were probably too ambitious.

Annapolis represents the culmination of a turnaround in American policy towards the middle east. Two years ago it was the US, still trying to spread democracy in the region, that leaned on Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, to stop delaying legislative elections for the Palestinian authority (PA). It was stunned when Hamas--which rejects permanent peace with Israel, though it has offered a long-term "hudna," or truce--won the poll in January 2006.

The world imposed an aid boycott on the Hamas-controlled PA, and Fatah kept control of the PA security forces to prevent Hamas from governing effectively. When Hamas's own "executive force" routed the PA forces in Gaza in June, Abbas (who is from Fatah, and is elected separately) dismissed the Hamas-led government and appointed an emergency one to run the West Bank. The new plan was to starve Gaza and support the West Bank, in the hope that Palestinians would reject Hamas--a return, for the US, to regime change of the most heavy-handed kind.

The key was to make Abbas look capable of getting a peace deal with Israel. Rice--who led the push for Annapolis despite

scepticism from the vice-president, Dick Cheney, and others--hoped that a "political horizon," meaning a dim outline of the shape of a future Palestinian state, would give Abbas that boost. She also hoped that it would strengthen Arab support for an American policy to isolate Iran, which solidly backs Hamas.

But Israel's Ehud Olmert, politically weak after botching the war against Hizbullah in Lebanon last year and heading a fragile coalition heavy with right-wing parties, wanted to stick to Israel's stand over the past few years: that the PA must show itself capable of fighting Palestinian militant groups before Israel makes any big concessions. Up to now, this approach has made for a vicious circle. The PA never takes enough action against militants to allow Israel to ease its occupation, while Israel never eases the occupation enough to generate broad Palestinian support for a PA crackdown on the militants.

So on its own terms, Annapolis is clearly a failure. The day before the summit, negotiators were still arguing over whether there would be a joint statement. Abbas does not look more credible to his people; in fact, having said he would rather stay at home if the summit proved devoid of content, he looks like a chump for going.

The focus has instead shifted to what happens after Annapolis, but even there the good news is sparse. Israeli and Palestinian officials are trying to revive the long-defunct "road map," whereby Israel starts curbing its West Bank settlements at the same time as the PA moves against militants. But they have still not agreed on an impartial and effective way to monitor each side's progress, which will be vital to stop the plan getting bogged down again. Tony Blair, in his reincarnation as a peace envoy, has got stuck into the plumbing of the conflict, unblocking some Palestinian development projects that had been held up by Israeli security concerns; but these will be mere bandages on a Palestinian economy shattered by the movement restrictions and land confiscations that Israel has imposed. And foreign donors are beginning to get sick of pouring a billion dollars or more a year into the territories. Finally, nobody is willing to deal with the elephant in the room: Hamas. It is losing popularity in Gaza, but still controls the strip, and a lot of Palestinians still see it as the only alternative to a corrupt, ossified Fatah leadership.

Blow away the fog of exaggerated expectations, though, and there is some progress. Olmert's promise to start talks on a permanent peace deal immediately after Annapolis, and try to conclude them within a year, marks a significant, though little-remarked, shift in Israeli policy. In the road map, negotiations were meant to begin only after a certain amount of progress on settlements and security. Also, the Arab League is sending a delegation of foreign ministers to the summit, among them Saudi Arabia's, though officially he will not meet his Israeli counterpart. Syria's deputy foreign minister will come too. These are all baby steps, but big leaps in middle east diplomacy are rare.

The question is really about momentum: will Annapolis start a peace snowball effect? It's hard to say: peace talks may start, but Israeli rightist parties have already started throwing up obstacles to them, such as a bill that would make it much harder for Israel to concede even the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem to the PA. And if the talks get really serious, they will run into issues that nobody has even dared talk about yet, like who will pay for resettling and compensating millions of Palestinian refugees. The Aix Group, an Israeli-Palestinian-French research team, recently estimated the cost at between \$55bn and \$85bn. That in turn will increase pressure to come up with a similar-sized compensation package for Jews who fled Arab countries for Israel in the state's early years. All this makes Olmert's one-year deadline for completing the peace talks start to look rather ambitious.

On top of that, Olmert himself could be ousted by political rivals or a string of corruption scandals. And given his record as a political hustler, it's natural to suspect his motives. Does he really aim to strike the peace deal to end all peace deals, or is his promise little more than an expedient way to keep the heat off for another 12 months?

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