

The Middle East after Annapolis: déjà vu all over again or a genuine step forward?



David Hannay

The international meeting at Annapolis on 27 November, convened by President Bush, could certainly not be said to have been over-burdened with excessive advance expectations of success. And that was no bad thing. Previous meetings of this sort – the Madrid conference convened by President Bush's father in 1991, the famous handshakes on the White House lawn between Arafat and Rabin in 1993, the Camp David negotiations in 2000 – all were accompanied by tidal waves of hype, and all led to serious disillusionment and, eventually, to increased violence when they failed to deliver the desired results. A more realistic understanding – of the yawning gaps between Israelis and Palestinians that remain to be bridged on all the main substantive issues, of

the weak domestic political situation not only of the two main protagonists but also of the US administration, and of the still rising strength in the region of extremist tendencies opposed to any negotiated solutions – could well provide a sounder basis for the negotiations that lie ahead than the often facile optimism of past efforts. The outcome of Annapolis has not done much to lift this prevailing mood of pessimism, and rightly so. Admittedly, comprehensive negotiations, covering not only the intermediate issues dealt with by the now distinctly shopworn 'roadmap' but also the core final status issues, are now underway. The turn-out at Annapolis was fuller on the Arab side than might at one time have been expected. An American president who had

wasted seven years trying unsuccessfully to marginalise the Arab-Israeli dispute over Palestine has finally recognised that resolving that dispute is central to attempts to stabilise the Middle East, and vowed to devote his last 12 months in office to working towards a negotiated outcome.

These are all plus points. But there are plenty of negatives and question marks too: no progress at all on any of the issues of substance; no hint of a US, or any other, mediating role in the negotiations to come; no recognition of the need to make any peace process inclusive by reaching out to those who so far reject it; and doubts about how effective the provisions for monitoring the interim steps laid down in the roadmap will prove to be. If Annapolis really was the beginning of a new and more hopeful phase in the search for a lasting peace settlement, then it is only so in the sense of the Chinese proverb that 'the longest journey begins with the first step'.

The agreement by the Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate from now onwards in an intensive and sustained fashion, and to cover all issues, both interim and final status ones, is a necessary but by no means sufficient step. All experience shows that two weak governments, saddled with many decades of accumulated unnegotiable objectives, are not likely to shape unassisted the sort of awkward compromises needed if gaps are to be bridged. They will need a mediator or facilitator to help them to move forward, to test the temperature before compromises are floated, to ensure some balance between the different parts of any settlement. And any such mediator or facilitator will need to have the confidence not only of the two parties to the negotiations but also of the United States – at every level of the administration, not just in the State Department.

Such a person could, perhaps most easily, be an American; or the mandate of the existing representative of the Quartet, Tony Blair, could be expanded; or the UN could be asked to put forward names for the approval of the parties. But to try to proceed very far without an agreed intermediary would seem likely to lead to deadlock.

And then there are lessons to be learned from previous failures. The first relates to the US electoral cycle, just getting into full swing and destined to elect a new occupant to the White House in less than a year's time. Without wishing to undermine the Annapolis target of negotiating a settlement within this president's term of office, it must be fairly apparent from the outset that that target may not prove achievable and that, in any case, the extremely sensitive and tricky process of implementing any deal will inevitably fall to the new US administration. So it is critically important to try to ensure that any process is sustainable through and beyond the US presidential election and does not suffer the fate of President Clinton's last-gasp efforts in 2000.

Just as important, a lesson could be learned from Britain's experience in Northern Ireland, and that is not to allow any negotiating process to be derailed by acts of violence perpetrated by those outside the negotiating process. It is an obvious prediction that some of those fanatically opposed to a negotiated solution will do their worst in the months ahead; and the more promising the state of the negotiations the more desperate and the more violent those efforts will become. It is essential, surely, not to allow such terrorist tactics to interrupt the negotiating process as they have so often been allowed to do in the past. I realise how difficult it is to practise such an approach. But the hard fact is that if the terrorists believe they can derail the negotiations there will be more such attacks than if they know from the outset that the negotiating parties will not allow themselves to be manipulated in that way.

No problem is going to be harder to crack than ensuring the inclusiveness of any deal. The present policy of simply ignoring Hamas and behaving as if Gaza did not



US President Bill Clinton with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in 1993
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US President George W. Bush with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in 2007
Photo © Getty Images/Chip Somodevilla

exist will not work in the longer term. But nor can Hamas hope to be welcomed to the negotiating table so long as it allows the territory over which it has effective control to be used for indiscriminate terrorist attacks on civilian targets in Israel, and so long as it rejects outright the peace plans put forward by the Arab nations. That said, it surely makes no sense to cut off all communication with Hamas. Far better to keep talking to them and to try to bring them, or at least the most moderate elements among them, to a realisation of the need to meet these basic conditions.

I have so far ducked answering my own question. Is this a real opportunity or is it more of the same? My answer is that it could be either. The late Abba Eban used to say that the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. In truth his own compatriots have often done the same, as has the international community. The challenge facing all of us is not to do that yet again.

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Recent ups and downs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

