

The Road from Annapolis

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As expected, the November 26-27 international peace meeting at Annapolis ended with some modest achievements. As Israel and the Palestinians failed before Annapolis to agree on a joint statement of principles on the permanent status agreement, and actually failed to conclude any joint statement at all, it was decided to be less ambitious and turn the meeting into a launching pad for a negotiations process that will hopefully do what the parties were not able to do thus far, namely, deal with the core issues of the permanent status agreement. Significant also was the broad Arab and international (including Muslim) participation. It manifested the almost wall to wall support for progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the two-state solution. Prime Minister Olmert reciprocated in his statement by mentioning the Arab peace initiative very positively.

At the meeting itself and after much US pressure, the two parties accepted a Joint Understanding that includes the following elements:

- Agreement to launch immediate negotiations on a peace agreement that will implement the two-state solution.
- The negotiations will deal with all the core issues.
- The parties will make an effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008.
- A steering committee will meet continually to oversee the negotiations and address all issues.
- The two leaders will have bi-weekly meetings for follow-up on the negotiations.
- Renewed commitment to implement the roadmap under US monitoring.
- Implementation of the future peace agreement will be subject to implementation of the roadmap.

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In his concluding statement President Bush also included two additional themes. First, he said that "while the borders of a Palestinian state are important, the nature of a Palestinian state is just as important." Second, he responded to a central Israeli demand by emphasizing that the purpose of the negotiations is to end the occupation and "establish Palestine as a Palestinian homeland, just as Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people," reiterating later that the US is committed to the security of Israel as a Jewish state and homeland for the Jewish people.

The Joint Understanding is a compromise between contradictory positions. The Palestinians wanted immediate permanent status negotiations according to a fixed timetable that would be followed by implementation of the concluded agreement. The Israeli contingent that doubts the Palestinian leadership is capable of concluding such an agreement

and implementing it prefers a more gradual process in which Palestinian capabilities and institutions will be built and tested, as only then conclusion and implementation of a permanent status agreement will be possible.

On the one hand the two parties agreed on immediate negotiations on the permanent status agreement. On the other hand, they re-committed to the full implementation of the obligations of the roadmap, which is a gradual process, as a prerequisite for a permanent status agreement. That means that the agreement that the two parties will hopefully conclude will be shelved until these commitments are fulfilled. As such, while it can be argued that the agreement to start negotiations on the permanent status negotiations according to a determined timetable is an achievement for President Abbas, many Palestinians in his own camp think this achievement is completely neutralized by its link with the roadmap. The fact that President Bush decided to take sides and adopt the Israeli position on the issue that prevented agreement on even a watered down joint statement before Annapolis, namely, the Israeli demand to define Israel as a Jewish state, only aggravated the negative perception of the results of the meeting among the Palestinian side and its failure to strengthen Mr. Abbas' position. On the Israeli side there is concern because of the determination of a timetable for the negotiations, that if not kept may cause important parties to put the blame on Israel.

Most of all, the day after Annapolis, nothing has really changed in the problematic domestic political situation of both negotiating

parties, which already inhibited implementation of the roadmap and prevented the two parties from dealing seriously with the core issues of the permanent status agreement. The Palestinian Authority is still divided between two separate political entities: Gaza ruled firmly by Hamas, which does not want a peace agreement with Israel, and the West Bank, which is under Israeli security control and only virtual rule of the Palestinian president and the Fayyad government. Actually there is much validity to Mr. Fayyad's recent assertion that what is happening in Nablus (his government's effort to assume control of the city) is much more important than what happens at Annapolis, because real progress will be possible only when the Palestinian government will demonstrate that it can establish genuine security control in the West Bank.

On the other side Mr. Olmert's political situation is still weak. He does not enjoy the support of the people and the stability of his government is based on avoidance of controversial issues. He will have to decide whether to make a bold move and exploit the Annapolis understanding to try to achieve a breakthrough with the odds of success quite unclear. Such a move would risk his coalition government and might lead to early elections in the short term, yet might also strengthen his political status in the long term. Alternatively, he might choose to keep his present coalition intact by dragging his feet. The conditionality embedded in the Annapolis understanding indeed provides ample opportunities for procrastination.