

## Blog Post: The Annapolis Peace Conference

Aljazeera ran a cartoon the other day depicting the proposed international peace conference in Annapolis as a Potemkin facade, festooned with celebratory balloons, rubble in front of it, rubble behind it. Like Hollywood sets, the conference has height and width but no depth at all.

The conference, first proposed by President Bush on July 16, is now scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_. (Fill in the blank.) The fact is that all that is known of the conference at this point is its venue. It may happen towards the end of November, it may be postponed until December, it may dribble into the spring. The United States and Israel will participate, and the Palestine Authority will likely swallow its misgivings and join in, and the EU, Russia and the UN will be there, too. But Saudi Arabia? Egypt? Jordan? Syria? In all likelihood, they themselves do not yet know.

There are a hundred reasons to suppose the conference will fail. As Secretary Rice first envisioned it, the conference was meant to produce a tight framework for a peace agreement, including binding decisions re some of its key elements. The idea was that yet another empty endorsement of a two-state solution would not be sufficient, that before or during the conference, actual if not yet detailed agreements sufficient to ignite genuine momentum would be reached and that an active and intense period of negotiations on remaining issues would follow in very short order.

There has been a flurry of meetings between Israel and the PA since, and the early heady expectations have fallen by the wayside. For a time, it seemed that the detailed agreement would be replaced by a “declaration of principles.” Now even that seems beyond the grasp of the parties; Israel seeks in its place a “declaration of interests.” But such a declaration would not come close to satisfying – the Palestinians nor, one supposes, the international community.

Each of the actors comes to the table with specific constraints. Abbas must have something real to show for the meeting, lest Hamas rises in the West Bank. “Real” means here some immediate Israeli steps to ease the Occupation, perhaps also an agenda for continuing negotiation. Abbas has indicated he would expect, at a minimum, a had timetable issuing in a comprehensive agreement in no more than six months. At the same time, the Bush “emergency” increase in the Defense budget includes \$400 million in aid for the PA; even if approved by Congress, the moneys are hardly likely to be disbursed unless Abbas is seen as “cooperative.” So he is pulled in opposite directions.

As is Olmert, whose only real chance for rehabilitation (after the fiasco of the Lebanon war) is serious progress towards a peace agreement. But his coalition might well not survive were the conference to deliver meaningful Israeli commitments. Both Shas and the Israel Beiteinu (Lieberman) have said they’ll leave the coalition if core issues – borders, Jerusalem, refugees – are so much as discussed at Annapolis. Nor is Ehud Barak enthralled by what he deems an exercise in futility.

Rice? Who knows for sure what prompted a hitherto somnolent administration so suddenly to bestir itself? If the Bush/Rice objective is to show that the U.S. can, after all, play a constructive role in the Middle East, they've chosen an especially resistant virus with which to do battle. Still, the U.S. doesn't have much to lose; it starts from such an enfeebled stature that another failure will hardly register. Mr. Bush is by now familiar with low expectations, and in this instance such expectations are not a reflection of "soft bigotry" but of painful experience.

In light of all that, Saudi participation in the conference is doubtful. That participation would be seen as a victory by Israel, which, absent a clear prior understanding that the product of the conference will be something new and hard, there's no reason for the Saudis to want. Nor, at this late date in the life of the Bush presidency, is there much reason for the Saudis to want to present Mr. Bush with the gift of their participation. Moreover, the Saudis may quite legitimately feel that their very constructive peace proposal should be the basic document that frames the negotiation – yet here is America, elbowing other aside.

And so forth.

So why even bother to take note of a meeting likely to be a waste?

Because, for better or for worse, the meeting is on the schedule. It cancellation would be a major embarrassment to the Bush Administration, a confirmation of the incompetence of the United States in foreign affairs. And more important than that, much more important – after all, many of us feel no need for additional confirmation – the likely failure of the conference will return the parties to something worse than square one. The U.S. would return to its studied hands-off policy, leaving the field of action open to the zealots in the region. That means the ascendance of Hamas in the West Bank, more punitive action by Israel, more investment in acts of terror by Palestinians, and a spreading aura of hopelessness likely to last for years.

So while there are very solid reasons to predict failure, there are compelling reasons to hope for success.

That said, it appears that the only possibility for such success will be, however disguised, via a diktat by the Quartet – the U.S. the EU, Russia and the UN.

In that connection, it is worth noting the letter that appeared in the New York Review of Books in its November 8 edition, a letter addressed to President Bush and Secretary Rice and signed by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lee Hamilton and notable others. The full text of their letter is available on line at [www.nybooks.com/articles/20750](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20750), and is well worth reading quite carefully.

The letter argues, correctly, that the failure of the conference "risks devastating consequences in the region and beyond," hence that "it is critically important that the conference succeed." It defines a successful outcome as one that is "substantive, inclusive, and relevant to the daily

lives of Israelis and Palestinians.” In the view of its authors, that means that either the Israelis and Palestinians come to agreement on the key outstanding issues or that the Quartet present is own outline, based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, the Clinton parameters of 2000, the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, and the 2003 Road Map and calling for two states, based on the lines of June 4, 1967, with minor, reciprocal, and agreed-upon modifications as expressed in a 1:1 land swap; Jerusalem as home to two capitals, with Jewish neighborhoods falling under Israeli sovereignty and Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian sovereignty; special arrangements for the Old City, providing each side control of its respective holy places and unimpeded access by each community to them; a solution to the refugee problem that is consistent with the two-state solution, addresses the Palestinian refugees' deep sense of injustice, as well as provides them with meaningful financial compensation and resettlement assistance; security mechanisms that address Israeli concerns while respecting Palestinian sovereignty. They seek as well a mechanism for ongoing negotiations “under international supervision and with a timetable for their completion, ending in “normal, peaceful relations between Israel and all the Arab states,” as envisioned in the Arab Peace Initiative (the renewed Saudi peace proposal).

There's more to the letter, as you will see when you read it. Perhaps the most important additional element is the authors' insistence that “It is of utmost importance, if the conference is to have any credibility, that it coincide with a freeze in Israeli settlement expansion. It is impossible to conduct a serious discussion on ending the occupation while settlement expansion proceeds apace.”

We've said so often in the past that the outlines of a comprehensive resolution of the ongoing crisis are well-known to all. Here they are stated once again. If the parties themselves are unable to endorse the steps, none of which will come as a surprise, then take your pick: Do you prefer another decade (or more) of death, of waste and recrimination, or do you prefer a resolution that has the blessing of the concerned bystanders? Do you believe Israel will be stronger if another decade passes with nothing changing? Do you believe that if settlement expansion continues it will be easier to persuade settlers to give up their homes in the West Bank? Do you believe that the Palestinians will suddenly see the light and accept whatever crumbs Israel may offer them, eventually? Or do you believe that it is time to end the tragedy, on terms sensible and fair, terms that will be rejected only by those who prefer a one-state solution, be it a Greater Israel from which Palestinians have been exiled or in which they are without political rights or a Greater Palestine, along with the death of the Jewish state and who knows how many of its Jewish residents?

What, in short, are we waiting for?