

Israeli-Palestinian Middle East “Peace Process”: Tragedy and Travesty at Annapolis

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November 27 at Annapolis kicks off the latest Israeli-Palestinian Middle East peace process round that may be an historic first. It's the first time in memory the legitimate government of one side is excluded, and that alone dooms it. Like previous rounds, it's more pretense than peace, and as Jonathan Steele puts it in his November 16 Guardian column: “The Palestinian path to peace does not go via Annapolis....so what do....Palestinians do next....In their decades-long bid for justice, they have tried everything:” armed struggle to compromise, but nothing works and the reason is simple. Their sincerity isn't matched by Israel, the West, other Arab states and the US most of all with all the muscle in its hands to push or constrain Israelis to be serious and fair. That's the problem. How can one side negotiate in good faith without a willing partner.

Nothing new will be introduced this time; the conference is for one day; no peace negotiations will be held; Israeli Prime Minister Olmert calls the summit “a meeting, not a negotiating session;” respected Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk says Olmert “has no more interest in a Palestinian state than....Ariel Sharon;” no advance agreement of intentions or principles has been reached; and it's still not sure who's coming.

Further, Gaza remains under siege, the West Bank is also terrorized, settlements continue being built, Palestinian land keeps being taken, more lives in the Territories are being lost, suffering remains unbearable, and hope for the beleaguered people again will be dashed. Their message on the ground is clear, but no one's listening. They won't accept surrender for peace. They want nothing less than freedom and justice in their own unoccupied land. Israel won't give it to them, so the struggle continues.

But just in case, neoconservative hard-liners are taking no chances on something of substance from Annapolis reports Jim Lobe in his November 22 Electronic Intifada article. Skepticism or not about prospects this time has them united to assure Israel gives nothing away now or ever. Secretary Rice is their target because she's pushing for her kind of no state-two-state solution by January, 2009 when a new administration takes over. It doesn't matter how flawed it is as long as something resembling progress emerges.

But even that's too much for hard-liners like super-hawk Frank Gaffney who calls any type Palestinian state “a dagger pointed at the heart of Israel and a new safe-haven for terror aimed at the United States and other Western nations.” Others like him agree and support continued Middle East war until the entire region is subdued under US-Israeli control. That means no concessions at Annapolis, defeating Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, no pullback from Iraq, and attacking Iran. A very scary scenario as another peace offensive gets underway with its participants pretending it's real.

Looking Back at Past Peace Process Futility

Until the late 1980s, the US and Israel were content to ignore regional and other calls for peaceful diplomacy, but that began to change with the outbreak of the first intifada mass uprising in 1987 when oppressed Palestinians fought back and caught the media's attention. The region exploded again when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August, 1990, and the Gulf war followed in 1991. When it ended, the US and Soviet Union jointly sponsored the watershed Madrid peace conference at which Israel negotiated face-to-face with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians for the first time. They continued after its conclusion on two parallel tracks to resolve past conflicts and sign bilateral peace treaties along with multilateral negotiations on issues affecting the whole region.

Madrid promised hope and was the catalyst for the Oslo Accords and their Declaration of Principles that were signed on the White House lawn in September, 1993. They began secretly with a post-Gulf war weakened PLO and delivered betrayal. They established a vaguely-defined negotiating process, specified no outcome, and let Israel delay, refuse to make concessions, and continue colonizing the Occupied Territories. In return, Palestinians got nothing for renouncing armed struggle, recognizing Israel's right to exist, and leaving major unresolved issues for indefinite later final status talks. They included an independent Palestinian state, the right of return, the future of Israeli settlements, borders, water rights, and status of Jerusalem as sovereign Palestinian territory and future home of its capital.

Israel got more as well – the right to establish a new Palestinian Authority (PA) to police a restive indigenous population. Yasser Arafat and other PLO leaders were in exile in Tunis following the 1982 Lebanon war. They got to come home, take control of their people, and be rewarded for being Israel's enforcer.

Oslo I led to Oslo II that was signed in Taba, Egypt in September, 1995, countersigned in Washington four days later, and made things even worse with its complex document. It called for further Israeli troop redeployments beyond Gaza and major West Bank population centers and later from all rural areas except for Israeli settlements and designated military zones. The process divided the West Bank into three parts with each having distinctive borders, administration and security control rules – Areas A, B and C plus a fourth area for Greater Jerusalem. A complicated system was devised as follows:

- Area A under Palestinian control for internal security, public order and civil affairs;
- Area B under Palestinian civil control for 450 West Bank towns and villages with Israel having overriding authority to safeguard its settlers' security; and
- Area C with its water resources under Israeli control and its settlements on the West Bank's most valuable land with them all connected by special by-pass roads for Jews only.

Israel has total control of the Territories and occupies most of the West Bank with its expanding settlements, by-pass roads, separation wall, military areas and no-go zones overall that are off limits to Palestinians in their own land.

The Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum came next and was signed by Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on September 4, 1999. Its purpose was to implement Oslo II and all other agreements since Oslo I in 1993 that included the following:

- a 1994 Protocol on Economic Relations;
- a Cairo Agreement on Gaza and the Jericho Area the same year;
- the 1994 Washington Declaration and Agreement on Preparatory Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities between the two parties; and
- the 1995 Protocol on Further Transfer of Powers and Responsibilities. Both sides agreed to resume “permanent status” talks and discuss other elements of a peace plan relating to Israeli troops redeployments, land transfers, safe passage openings between Gaza and the West Bank, a Gaza seaport, prisoner releases and other issues related to security, normal civilian life activities, international donor community aid, and a timetable for final status talks on the toughest issues.

“Permanent status” talks followed in July, 2000 at Camp David where Bill Clinton hosted Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak. Betrayal was again planned and delivered, but the major media called Barak’s offer “generous” and “unprecedented” with Arafat spurning peace for conflict. Barak insisted Arafat sign a “final agreement,” declare an “end of conflict,” and give up any legal basis for additional land in the Territories. There was no Israeli offer in writing, and no documents or maps were presented.

All Barak offered was from a May, 2000 West Bank map dividing the area into four isolated cantons under Palestinian administration surrounded by expanding Israeli settlements and other Israeli-controlled land. They had no direct links to each other or to Jordan. The cantons consisted of: Jericho, the southern canton to Abu Dis, a northern one including Nablus, Jenin and Tulkarm, and a central one including Ramallah. Gaza was left in limbo as a fifth canton that was resolved when Israel disengaged from the Territory in August and September, 2005 but kept total control over it and right to reenter any time. The Barak deal was so duplicitous that if Arafat accepted it any hope for real peace would be dashed. He didn’t and was unfairly blamed.

The Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP) analyzed the deal as follows:

- Israel only proposed relinquishing control of from 77.5 – 81% of the West Bank excluding East Jerusalem and likely intended to keep the Jordan Valley;
- Israel claimed sovereignty over all West Jerusalem, one-third of occupied East Jerusalem, and as later developments proved wants all Greater Jerusalem exclusively for Jews;
- Israel wanted control of the Temple Mount that Palestinians call al-Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary and is the site of the sacred Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque.

Barak’s Camp David deal was all take and no give with no chance for reconciliation or resolution of the conflict’s most intractable issues. It was all pretense by design, but when Ariel Sharon took over in February, 2001 he ended all further peace negotiations.

It stood that way until George Bush unveiled the Quartet’s fake “road map” for peace in a June 24, 2002 speech. In it, he called for an independent Palestinian state along side Israel in peace by 2005 with good faith efforts on both sides to achieve it. The process was to be in three phases, but its prospects were doomed from the start. After the plan’s launch, the region was beset by violence, Israel increased its land seizures and targeted assassinations, Palestinians responded in kind, and the humanitarian situation in the Territories became so

dire it was impossible convincing either side that the road map was credible. It wasn't, and it failed like all previous efforts before it.

That's where things stood until Condoleezza Rice restarted the current Annapolis round to salvage a warmaking administration, reinvent it as a peacemaker, and manage to manipulate a fake outcome to prove it. The scheme is this, and George Bush spelled it out on November 21 when he spoke to Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian leaders to lay the groundwork for Annapolis:

- forty-nine countries were invited;
- who's coming isn't sure, but Iran wasn't invited;
- Saudi Arabia accepted with reservations; and
- Syria was a maybe but AP reported November 25 it will now send its deputy foreign minister unlike other attendees sending foreign ministers; Syria will come because the occupied Golan is on the agenda, even though, like the Saudis, it has no formal relations with Israel.

Others listed are members of the Quartet, G-8, Arab League, permanent members of the Security Council along with Israel and the Palestinian Abbas quisling government with its legitimate one excluded that renders the process a sham.

Rice is pathetic saying "very clear signs" are evident, and "everybody's goal is the creation of a Palestinian state" with both sides on board for it. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert is just as bad claiming "Annapolis will be the jumping-off point for continued serious and in-depth negotiations (that won't) avoid any issue or ignore any division (in) our relations with the Palestinian people for many years." Nearly sixty to be exact and over 40 under occupation with no serious effort ever for resolution.

Snags still remain in the window dressing surrounding the conference with both sides so far unable to reach an acceptable joint statement to be presented in Maryland. If they're still apart when it starts, the conference will end with Rice's statement and not a joint Israeli-PA one. Either way matters little as once again fanciful language will substitute for substantive results. With Gaza under siege, Hamas uninvited, and an illegitimate government in its place, peace and any progress toward resolution can't happen. That's how it's always been and won't change until Israel begins negotiating in good faith. But that won't happen until the world community accepts nothing less because world public opinion and people of conscience demand it.

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