



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

December 27, 2007

## **Annapolis: Precedents and Transactions, But No Transformations**

**Kenneth W. Stein**

Last month's Annapolis Middle East Conference was the third major conference during the last quarter-century devoted to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, after the ones in Geneva (December 1973) and Madrid (October 1991). Like then, the US Secretary of State oversaw the diplomatic choreography. Unlike the previous two, Moscow was not a co-sponsor. As with its predecessors, no real negotiations took place

Like the others, Annapolis was part of a process that included substantial pre-negotiations. The two previous gatherings led to signed agreements and additional diplomacy. The Geneva Conference prepared the way to three Arab-Israeli military disengagement agreements. They in turn set the stage for Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's negotiations and peace treaty signing with Israel. The Madrid Conference led to bilateral talks, multi-lateral negotiations, and secret Israeli-PLO diplomacy, whose outcome was the Israeli-PLO Oslo Accords, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty and a series of multilateral conferences on economic and other issues. The immediate followup to the Annapolis conference included, the establishment of a Steering Committee to oversee talks on final status issues, and a donors conference in Paris,

where \$7.5 billion was pledged to aid the Palestinian people, through the Palestinian Authority.

The Annapolis conference confirmed the distance that the Palestinian national movement had traveled since Geneva and Madrid: from no representation at Geneva, to being limited, junior partners within the Jordanian delegation at Madrid, to full-fledged self-representation, by the Palestinian Authority. The problem, of course, was that Palestinian unity had been fractured. Hamas, having seized exclusive control over the Gaza region, was opposed to Annapolis, thus calling the very legitimacy of the PA's participation into question.

### **Terms of Reference**

Since the June 1967 war, more than two dozen mediators have engaged in Arab-Israeli diplomacy seeking to clarify one underlying question: under what conditions and over what period of time would Israel relinquish land attained in the June 1967 War, and what kind of understanding or agreement from an Arab partner would Israel receive in return? Both the Geneva and Madrid Conferences were underpinned by UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which enshrined the principle of exchanging land for peace, through a process of direct negotiations. Annapolis, by contrast, moved Arab and Israeli leaders from the general to the specific: for the first time, they agreed on the establishment of "two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security." However, while agreeing on the common political horizon – a two-state solution – Israelis and Palestinians profoundly disagreed on the proposed nature and definition of the two states.

### **Transactions, not Transformations**

Annapolis and its aftermath continued a core feature of Arab-Israeli diplomacy: the desire to conclude contractual transactions. This process began after the 1973 war, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signaled that he wanted to leave the Soviet Union's embrace and cultivate American friendship, technology, and foreign assistance. The resulting negotiations, carried on mainly through Sadat's anointed 'envoys' to Israel - US Secretary of State Kissinger and then President Jimmy Carter - were heavy on the search for contractual transactions. Sadat needed to show specific results to Egyptian and Arab public opinion, while Israel wanted tangible

proof that Sadat could be trusted. Hence, the Egyptian-Israeli peace process was long on tangible specifics. These included armistice arrangements, an exchange of prisoners of war, disengagement of military forces, determining the precise number of men and equipment in a limited force zone, deciding on the terms of commercial shipping to Israel through a reopened Suez Canal , the dismantling of Israeli settlements in the Sinai, and circumscribing the conditions under which Egypt could come to the military assistance of other Arab states.

Similarly, when negotiations in the late 1980s haltingly shifted to the Israeli-Palestinian theater, many measurable transactional elements were on the negotiating table: the size of territorial withdrawals, the curbing of violence, water rights, sharing Jerusalem, Palestinian elections, establishing a corridor between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the fate of Israeli settlements, etc. Hence, whether implemented or not, observable transactions have dominated the course of Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

### **The core issue remains: recognizing Israel as a Jewish state**

For years it was widely held that Sadat's November 1977 visit to Jerusalem broke the psychological barrier between the Arab and Israeli peoples. Having the leader of the most populous Arab state stand before the Israeli parliament in front of a picture of Theodore Herzl and proclaim that "the October War will be the last war" was indeed unprecedented. But neither Sadat, nor American diplomats and Arab leaders undertook to alter basic Arab attitudes toward Israel. In the peace treaties which Israel signed with both Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), there is no mention of recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. At Annapolis, by contrast, US President George W. Bush publicly emphasized that the "US would maintain its commitment to the security of Israel as a Jewish state,...[and] to Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people." Similarly Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that the negotiations should conclude with " two states for two peoples, a peace-seeking Palestinian state, a viable, strong, democratic and terror-free state for the Palestinian people; and the state of Israel, Jewish and democratic, living in security and free from the threat of terrorism, the national home of the Jewish people. " By contrast, at both Annapolis and the subsequent donor's conference, Chairman of the PLO and President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmud Abbas shied away from making a similar statement.

Instead, he focused on the Palestinian core demands, achieving “ freedom, independence, getting rid of the occupation, establishing the state of independent Palestine within the 1967 borders and guaranteeing the rights of our people's refugees in accordance with resolution 194.” To be sure, he categorized Annapolis as “ a turning point in a very dangerous and old conflict.” However, saying that Annapolis was a turning point and making it so are light years apart.

On November 29, 2007, exactly sixty years after the UN voted to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, the Saudi Arabian paper *al-Watan* noted that the “Jewishness of the state of Israel will in fact provide the fuel for an eternal conflict between the Arabs and Moslems on the one hand, and the state of Israel on the other.” For many in the Arab and Moslem world and elsewhere, when Israel is recognized as a Jewish state, then Palestinians will no longer sustain the dream of living in portions of what was Israel prior to the 1967 June war. Recognizing Israel as a Jewish state would mean surrendering a core element in Palestinian national identity; it would mean essentially ending the Arab-Israeli conflict without a complete victory by the Arab side. It would mark an underlying and fundamental transformation, one that has obviously not yet occurred. Hamas refuses unequivocally to abandon that core element. Similarly, Abbas endorses the core. Unlike Hamas but like Sadat, at least thus far, Abbas believes that he can recognize Israel's legitimacy without accepting its Jewish essence.

Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches Middle Eastern history and Political Science at Emory University. He is the author of *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Sadat, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (Routledge, 1999)

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation**