

# An Update on the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

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Over the past generation the Palestinians and Israelis have had so many peace conferences and so little peace, so many attempts and so many failures, so many reruns of the same old movie with the same depressing script. I've been in Jerusalem just over a year now and I already feel the weight of this repetitive story. In covering the Annapolis Conference last month made me wonder and worry how any more failures can they stand before they give up trying for this two-state solution, two states living side-by-side in peace, and condemn their peoples to endless cycles of bloodshed.

After being in Annapolis I can tell you that there is some hope. I realized this when Saeb Erakat, the veteran Palestinian negotiator, came out of the conference telling a joke. A Palestinian and Israeli go to a movie, an American western. The hero is riding his horse real fast and the Israeli, as provocative as ever, looks at the Palestinian and says, "I'll bet you two hundred shekels that guy falls from his horse," and as usual without thinking the Palestinian takes the challenge, "You're on." In the same scene the hero goes down and the Palestinian reaches in his wallet, takes out the 200 shekels and tries to give it to the Israeli. The Israeli's conscience weighs on him, he feels guilty, and he says, "I can't take your money." The Palestinian says, "Why? We had a bet. You won, I pay." The Israeli says, "No, no. I feel guilty. I cheated. I've seen this movie before." The Palestinian looks at him and says, "You know what? I also saw it, but I thought the hero would learn from his mistakes."

The point in telling that joke is that Annapolis was a step forward because it shows that the Palestinians, the Israelis and the Americans have learned from past mistakes—two mistakes in particular: The Camp David talks in 2000 failed in part because the Clinton administration didn't give the Arab countries a stake in the peace settlement. In Annapolis, President Bush brought 16 Arab countries to the table. The Bush initiative of 2005 known as "the Road Map" also failed. It failed because it required the two sides to take some very difficult steps before they would even sit down and start negotiating a final peace deal. The Israelis, for example, were supposed to stop expanding Jewish settlements in Palestinian territory, and the Palestinians were supposed to start reining in the militant groups that attacked and terrorized Israel. They didn't get very far because neither side wanted to take the first step. So, the road to peace was blocked.

At Annapolis, they found a way to break this deadlock. They agreed to take those first steps of the road map in unison, in tandem. Israel also dropped its refusal to start negotiating, at the same time, on the big issues of the conflict—the issues that under the road map were supposed to be put off until the end of the final phase. This was Condoleezza Rice's formula and they agreed to it. She believed that as they talked about the big issues and the shape of a final settlement looked

clearer to both sides, that both sides would find it easier to make progress on these road map issues, quicker progress on settlements and on security. But there was a tradeoff at Annapolis – the Palestinians agreed that no final peace deal, no independent statehood for them would be able to go into effect until they'd met all their road map obligations, and that includes getting a grip on security.

I think you know what the big issues in this conflict are—final borders of a Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem, whether it would be divided as the capital for two different states, the fate of Palestinian refugees who fled their homes in Israel. Palestinian and Israeli leaders have been debating these issues for two decades. What's new this time is that finally we have two leaders who get along well and who trust each other's intentions to make peace. Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas had met 12 times in the 11 months leading up to the Annapolis conference. They met one-on-one, without aides present in the room; they sat around in Olmert's study in Jerusalem. They're both smokers and they filled the room with smoke and chatted for hours on end and pulled out pictures of their grandchildren and showed them to each other and brainstormed basically about how they could create a world in which these children could grow up in peace in these two countries side by side. They developed this warm relationship and a general understanding about the outlines of an agreement on the big issues. We don't know the details because they never announced them publicly but both of them felt that they had enough of an understanding and a consensus, or were close enough to an agreement on these issues, that they could get their negotiating teams together and commit themselves to a process of formal peace talks.

So, this is what Annapolis accomplished—two leaders agreed to form negotiating teams what will sit down together in Jerusalem and try to reach a deal by the end of 2008. They agreed to meet personally, Olmert and Abbas, every two weeks to review the work of these teams. Finally, they agreed that the United States, the Bush administration in its final year, would lead a three-way committee to monitor how they meet these obligations on security, settlements and so on under the road map plan.

So, here we are, for the first time in seven years Israel and the Palestinians are starting serious peace negotiations and that's very good news. But there's also some bad news with this. Some of you are familiar with it because we've reported it over and over in recent months. Both these leaders, Olmert and Abbas, are politically weak. Olmert because right wing members of his coalition oppose many of the concessions that will have to be made and could bring down his government. Abbas is weak because he controls only the West Bank part of his would-be state. Hamas, the militant Islamic group that controls the other part, the Gaza Strip, opposes a peace deal with Israel and is sworn to Israel's destruction. So, it's easy to imagine how Hamas, which was deliberately left out of this negotiating process and doesn't want to be a part of it anyway, with a single suicide bombing could undermine the peace process, if it appeared to be really getting somewhere and promising to succeed. Also, Hamas' rise in political power over the past years has hardened attitudes of the public on both sides. If you look at history you will see that peace in the Middle East is made by strong leaders—people like Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat thirty years ago; people like Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein who made peace between Israel and Jordan in the mid-90s, men who can persuade reluctant followers to go along and not politically hamstring leaders like Olmert and Abbas. So, that's bad news.

There's also some bad news because of four things that did not happen in Annapolis. Yes, the United States government is going to monitor how they comply with the road map, but there was no agreement at Annapolis spelling out exactly what the United States is going to do, what kind

of powers it has to monitor and report on violations. There's a problem with this because each of the two sides, the Israelis and the Palestinians, has a minimalist interpretation of its own obligation and a maximum interpretation of the other side's obligation. This is not news—it's been going on for years. So, will the United States set a precise performance standard for each of these obligations for each side. How, for example, would it define a settlement freeze? Does that mean no construction, no new construction of Jewish housing even if it was authorized before Annapolis? These are all tricky questions. Will the United States issue public reports on either side's failure to meet those standards. So far the Bush administration has been reluctant to do that.

Secondly, the Annapolis agreement failed to spell out exactly what's suppose to happen when these two teams sit down together to negotiate on the big issues. How often do they get to meet? Where will they start? There have been some reports in the Israeli press this past week that they're going to divide into 14 working groups, each negotiating a separate issues, refugees, borders, Jerusalem, etc. But no decisions have been made about that and this is a problem. I worry, having seen them in the runup to Annapolis that the two parties could waste weeks just haggling over how they're going to proceed.

The third failure at Annapolis, and this is a subjective view, but Bush stopped short of full engagement in this process. He promised at Annapolis that he would support their quest for peace, that he would always be a phone call away, but he shied away from spelling out his own proposals on what would be a reasonable peace or setting himself up as a broker between these two sides. Many diplomats who have been involved in past negotiations from all three sides believe that the Israelis and the Palestinians really do need a broker because they're going to have to make some painful concessions, painful compromises and it's much easier to go to the domestic critics and say, "Look, this is not exactly the deal I want, but the president of the United States is asking me to accept it."

Finally, we heard Olmert speak about the hard concessions that Israel must be prepared to make, but I didn't hear anything like that from his Palestinian counterpart. Abbas has done very little to prepare his people for what may be coming and I think this is a problem.

So, here we are. We have a year to watch these negotiations play out and hope for the best. In our reporting at the *L.A. Times* we have been skeptical that Olmert and Abbas and Bush can succeed, but I think we have to take them at their word that they're sincere about peace, give them a chance, and hold them to their commitment. So, as you follow their progress, or lack of progress, during the coming year I'd like to give you a short list of signs to watch for, signs that we'll be watching for, that will help determine how things go. Watch how the negotiating teams get organized. If they start by tackling each issue separately then these talks will drag on for a long time without much result. A more serious effort, I think, would with tradeoffs to break the deadlock over the really problematic issues. For example, Israel in such a tradeoff might give up parts of Jerusalem that are already Palestinian populated and in return the Palestinians would give up the right of refugees to return to Israel. The sooner they get to these tradeoffs the better because once they have that tradeoff down they can work their way down to the particulars on all these other issues.

On the Israeli side you should watch what defiant settlers do in the West Bank to expand their communities, watch how forcefully Olmert moves to stop them. Watch whether Israel's far right reacts with the kind of murderous rhetoric that preceded Rabin's assassination 12 years ago. Watch whether Olmert goes to the Knesset and asks them to enact a referendum law. This is a

little detail people don't talk much about, but if he and Abbas ever reach a peace deal, Olmert probably won't be able to get it through his cabinet or the Knesset. His best bet would be to go to the people and get approval from the voters for a peace deal but he can't do that because there can't be a referendum unless he gets the enabling legislation passed, and he would have to do that now well before any peace deal is reached.

On the Palestinian side you should watch for how aggressively Abbas moves against the militants on the West Bank, not just against Hamas but members of his own Fatah movement who are still armed. He's been making progress, Abbas says, about disarming some of these militias, but we also need to watch whether the Israeli army pulls back and lets Abbas get the job done or if it undermines his authority by continuing his own raids in cities in the West Bank where the Palestinians are really making a real effort. Watch what Hamas does to try to subvert this whole process but also watch whether Olmert and Abbas can show enough courage to continue the peace talks and not break them off and give up in the event of any attack by the Israeli army or Hamas that causes heavy civilian casualties.

And watch how Abbas deals with Hamas' leadership. No peace accord can work unless Hamas allows it to, and this is the real problem in this whole process. For Hamas to allow the peace process to work, I think Abbas is going to have to bring Hamas back into some kind of an alliance with his government. But by doing that he would risk allowing Hamas to try to dictate the terms of the negotiations, and he can't do that because that would prompt Israel and even the Bush administration to walk away from the peace effort. That would be a big risk so Abbas has a very hard balancing act between getting Hamas involved and not letting them dictate the terms of what he is negotiating.

Finally, I think we need to watch two more things. We need to watch the Arabs and we need to watch President Bush. We need to watch where the Saudis and other Arab states use their diplomacy and their considerable influence to get Hamas to go along with the peace agreement. If the Arabs who came to Annapolis really support the peace effort then they'll pledge billions of dollars in oil revenue to help Abbas revive the economy in the West Bank and give the Palestinians living there a better life and a bigger stake in the peace talks—a bigger stake in trying to get a deal with Israel.

Finally, watch whether President Bush stays involved. His plans to visit Israel next month is a good sign of his intention to follow up. He might not be willing to engage deeply enough to bring about peace in the little time he has left but at least he could work to keep the negotiations from getting derailed so that they might be able to continue under his successor.

We'll be watching all this in our reporting for the *Times* so stay tuned on what we write and I believe in the coming months you'll be able to tell whether we're watching a movie with a new more hopeful script or just another rerun of that western where the hero falls off his horse.

Thank you.

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