



ANNAPOLIS: THREE-RING DIPLOMACY

By Harvey Sicherman

The Middle East Peace Conference convened by the United States on November 27, 2007, met in a spirit of easily restrained enthusiasm. Unlike the last formal relaunch of Arab-Israeli negotiations -- Madrid 1991 -- this was an assembly of the weak. Bush the father came in the wake of victory over Saddam in Kuwait; Bush the son came in the midst of a near defeat in post-Saddam Iraq. Israel's then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir, brought a stable coalition, a reputation for modesty, and a tough immobility occasionally punctuated by pragmatism. In contrast, Ehud Olmert is widely distrusted, lacks a durable party base, and suffers a reputation for dangerous haste (the Lebanon War) and dubious deals. The Palestinians, then as now, were divided. Those attending Madrid, however, had their eyes on Yasser Arafat, an acknowledged master of Palestinian politics. At Annapolis, the eyes were on Hamas. And Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), although Arafat's one-time confidante, is definitely not the master of Palestinian politics.

Weakness was also accompanied by fear. The uninvited -- Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran -- all cast a shadow. Hamas put on demonstrations in Gaza and the West Bank. Lebanon could only send a Minister of Culture. The Syrians sent a deputy Foreign Minister. This posed the larger question as to whether the United States, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and a host of Arab states and major powers could create real movement toward peace, and with it, a defeat for what Bush called "the extremists . . . seeking to impose a dark vision . . . endless terror, endless war, and endless suffering."

THE ROAD TO ANNAPOLIS

Annapolis emerged from a confluence of reverses for the United States and its friends in the Middle East. Israel's summer 2006 military campaign against Hezbollah had not defeated the latter, leaving Lebanon in a perilous political stalemate. By late 2006, Iraq seemed about to go under waves of Sunni and Shia violence. And Abbas had been forced into a unity agreement with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas by the Saudi-sponsored Mecca Agreement (February 2007), a legitimizing act quite contrary to American expectations and despite a U.S., E.U., and Quartet boycott. Then in June 2007, Hamas seized Gaza in a showdown with Abbas' forces.

This event, and Hamas' connection to Syria, where part of its leadership resided, offered another example of how Iranian arms and money, if not its Shiite ideology, was threatening U.S. interests. Jordan's King Abdallah II had warned some years before of a "Shiite Crescent": now it appeared to encompass parts of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Gaza. One U.S. answer was to launch the "surge" in Iraq; another was to forge a larger anti-Iranian diplomatic coalition, still another would be a large-scale arms sale to Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, and Israel. Clearly, the Palestinian issue would have to be tackled not only for its own sake, but also to facilitate a larger movement against Tehran.

On July 16, 2007, Bush announced that an international meeting would be held in the fall with "representatives from nations that support a two-state solution...." The purpose of the meeting, to be chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was to "review the progress that has been made toward building Palestinian institutions." As those institutions, already corrupt and inept, had just collapsed following six years of strife with Israel and a year of internal strife between Abbas and Haniyeh, this was the political equivalent of an invitation to a wake.

Rice, however, had been constructing her own road. After two big blunders -- insisting on the Palestinian elections in 2006 that elected Hamas and expecting that the Saudis would fix the Hamas problem at Mecca -- she had persuaded Abbas and Olmert in late March to meet each other biweekly. They had gotten far enough along to want more international support although not far enough along to agree on anything big. Each was prompted by weakness. Abbas argued that without an expectation of statehood soon he could not outbid Hamas in public support. By appointing the reputable Salam Fayad as Interior Prime Minister, he also indicated his willingness to begin serious government even at the cost of dislodging corrupt Fatah operatives. As for Olmert, mired in low public esteem over the Lebanon War and various legal charges, he had plenty of incentives to negotiate with Abbas in the hopes of also weakening Hamas.

A serious partnership between an Israeli and an Arab leader was key, in the American view, to any hopes of success. This had been the missing ingredient since 2000, when Arafat's behavior convinced most Israelis he did not want any deal they could accept. Thus, although Abbas' Palestinian Authority was only a virtual authority, and Olmert's capacity to negotiate was severely hedged, the couple's combined weakness allowed them to gamble rather than face the certainty of the alternative. Apparently, they convinced each other they wanted to deal. They toyed with the idea of a "framework agreement" and then appointed teams headed by Foreign Minister Zippi Livni and veteran negotiator Ahmad Qurei (Abu Ala), but these negotiations soon encountered the dodges that had dogged the late Clinton era talks seven years earlier. There would be no breakthrough.

STOP AT RIYADH

What then was the point of the international meeting? Apparently, the United States, Israel and the Palestinian Authority saw virtue in a simple revival of a motion-making "peace process." But they also wanted a broader endorsement that would demonstrate an international anti-Iranian coalition.

For this to succeed, the United States needed the imprimatur of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were the self-appointed custodians of both the Arab and Muslim consensus. They had pushed Bush hard on the Palestinian issue even before 9/11, and King Abdullah (then Crown Prince) had been instrumental in rallying the Arab League behind the 2002 Peace Plan at the Beirut summit. Although its demands for the 1967 lines and return of the refugees were not what Israel could accept, Abdullah's speech indicated Saudi readiness to support a two-state solution, one of which would be Israel.

The Saudis (like the United States) were deeply disappointed by Israel's performance in the Lebanon War. For Riyadh the IDF offered no solution for Iranian gains in Lebanon. Indeed, the Mecca Agreement was designed to prevent Hamas from becoming the Palestinian Hezbollah by displacing Tehran's financial inducements with Saudi promises. The fall of Gaza, however, exploded that hope.

The American idea of an anti-Iranian coalition would therefore require something that eased the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Riyadh was ready to sponsor a broader endorsement of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations but only on conditions that promised an outcome to Saudi liking. When it became clear that Olmert and Abbas could not create a declaration close to the Arab Peace Plan, the King did what the Israeli and Arab leaders had often done in the past, namely, accept American promises as a substitute. In this case it meant a timetable (end of the Bush term) and a comprehensive negotiation (no issues, such as Jerusalem, deferred). The Saudis also made it known that Bush's personal engagement must be part of the deal. And, indeed, after the requisite rituals of an Arab League consultation in Cairo, the "request" of the Arab consensus, numerous entreaties from Rice and finally a Bush phone call to the King, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal attended -- warning, of course, that he would not deign to shake any Israeli hand lest his presence be misunderstood as more than realpolitik. The handshake would be instead with the Americans, especially as Saudi attendance might ease the passage of the new arms sale (announced in late July) through the pro-Israel U.S. Congress.

ROAD MAPS, HORIZONS, AND SHELVES

That left one very awkward piece of business. On what basis would the parties negotiate? Usually Arab-Israeli joint statements begin by reference to U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 and then name every other stillborn proclamation, as if to say that the new document would now join the list of earlier failures. Although the critics complained that Bush had neglected the conflict, he had in fact already added to the roster of futility something called the "Road Map." Contrived by the United States, E.U., Russia, and the U.N. -- the sometimes less than harmonious Quartet -- back in 2003, it was supposedly the most direct route to the democratic Palestinian state ("its leadership untainted by terror") that Bush had endorsed even earlier in June 2002.

The "Road Map" was a curious document, mixing elements of the Mitchell Plan (2000) and Tenet Plan (June 2001) with the usual collection of clichés. But it did have a pair of innovations. Its phases were linked; if one party failed to perform its part, then the other need not perform its corresponding obligation. The Road Map began phase one by asking each side to surmount huge obstacles: the Palestinians to suppress terrorism, the Israelis to freeze settlements. Then, recognizing that the final status issues might take years, the Map offered a provisional Palestinian state for phase two, even if its final borders were undefined.

Abbas opposed phase two. The temporary might easily become permanent. He wanted stage three at the beginning with no preconditions. Olmert, like Sharon, insisted that Israel would not proceed with compromises when the other side was compromised by terrorist actions; Israel therefore insisted on stage one above all.

Rice and her team finessed these differences by getting Israel to agree on final status talks, giving Abu Mazen the "political horizon" -- statehood soon -- he needed. Simultaneously, the United States got the Palestinian Authority to agree that the final status "treaty" would stay "on the shelf" unless the Road Map's first phase was fulfilled, thereby assuring Israel that terrorism had to be eliminated (or at least minimized) before the deal took effect. The United States would assume responsibility for judging the parties' performance on the Road Map.

Hamas' seizure of Gaza and continued rocket fire on Israeli border towns oddly enough made it easier for the Palestinian Authority to begin the first phase. Abbas suppressed some Hamas cells in the West Bank and his security people began to

work again with the Israelis to disrupt others. Thus, the Palestinians could argue that they had made a good faith effort on the terrorism issue even if what had actually been done was quite modest. It was the Israeli army, rather than the Palestinian Authority's security forces that held attacks down on the West Bank. Thus was the Road Map revived.

All of these elements were assembled at Annapolis. After the customary last minute heroics, the parties agreed on a statement that President Bush read at 11 a.m. on November 27, 2007, thereby setting a constructive tone for the meeting. Among other matters, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders committed themselves to the two-state solution; "good faith bilateral negotiations" to conclude a peace treaty that resolved "all outstanding issues, including all core issues, without exception as specified in previous agreements," and to reach agreement "before the end of 2008." They had a structure for the negotiations: a steering committee to "develop a joint work plan," beginning December 12, 2007. Biweekly Abbas-Olmert meetings would continue. Then came the critical mechanism:

The parties also commit to immediately implement their respective obligations under the performance-based road map to a permanent two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict issued by the Quartet on 30 April 2003.... The United States will monitor and judge the fulfillment of the commitment of both sides of the road map. Unless otherwise agreed by the parties, implementation of the future peace treaty will be subject to the implementation of the road map, as judged by the United States.

Horizon and shelf now in place, the Road Map was open for travel.

THE THREE RINGS

Post-Annapolis, all parties -- the United States and the other participants -- committed to three rings of diplomacy. The first encompassed final status negotiations. These were least likely to succeed anytime soon. Abbas and Olmert may be more confident of each other than Arafat and Sharon (not a high barrier) but their ability to agree and then deliver are very much open to doubt. The obstacles to final status are very high and the political popularity of these leaders very low.

Annapolis added a second ring intended to reduce the ultimate risks of final status concessions through a pair of committees. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair is to prepare the Palestinians for statehood. His key interlocutors are the PA's Prime Minister Fayad, an honest international civil servant, and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, the latter a man not likely to gamble on Palestinian promises. Even more important is the role of American General Jim Jones, formerly Supreme Commander of NATO, for he is to become the "judge" of whether the sides are fulfilling phase one of the Road Map. Finally, the third ring collects the other Annapolis attendees, especially the Arab governments, to assist the Palestinians with money and political cover.

The second ring, nannied by Blair and Jones, is the most critical. Success there facilitates success everywhere. Failure there dooms the rest.

There will be early tests. At December's pledging session in Paris will the Saudis pay for a Palestinian Authority limited to the West Bank, thereby deciding against Hamas? Presuming that happens all attention will then shift to Jones' committee because economic and institutional construction depend on security. The Palestinian Authority will claim they have done their part to satisfy the Road Map on terrorism in the West Bank and they can do little about Gaza. The Israelis will argue that their removal of settlements from Gaza plus two on the West Bank, done in 2006, plus an illegal outpost or two, are enough to satisfy the Road Map until the rocket fire ceases from Gaza. The United States, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority will have to decide whether these partials are enough to proceed onto the other elements, mainly Blair's plans. Otherwise the entire process will be paralyzed.

These imponderables notwithstanding, Annapolis went far enough to arouse threats from Hamas and Iran. We can therefore expect determined efforts on their part to break the rings, and in Iran's case, to make sure that neither Syria (nor Lebanon) join them too actively. A well-calibrated American and Israeli response to these challenges (especially on the Gaza-Israel border) will be necessary to give the Annapolis process a chance. Thus far, the United States has channeled weakness and fear into promising motions and a full employment act for diplomats. But there is not much time to convert motion into movement.

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