Commentary

Mission Unaccomplished: Can Annapolis Jumpstart the Middle East Peace Process?

BY ASHRAF SWEILAM

There was a time when phrases such as “the struggle in the Middle East” or “the Middle East conflict” referred primarily to the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, or to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular. This is no longer the case. From the current American debacle in Iraq to the rising tensions with Iran and the fragile situation in Lebanon, the Middle East is currently undergoing what constitutes by any account the most violent and turbulent period in its modern history. And while “missions unaccomplished” abound, none lies as much at the heart of the region’s continuing instability and vulnerability than the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the failure of its parties and the international community thus far to bring it to an end.

Some skeptics claim that the conflict is simply irresolvable. Thirty years ago, however, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat shattered that conviction — or so we thought. In a historic visit to Jerusalem on November 20, 1977, Sadat offered the region, and the world, its best shot at peace. His bold and courageous initiative, which ultimately cost him his life, culminated not only in Israel’s first peace treaty with its largest and most powerful Arab neighbor, but also provided the blueprint for Israel’s subsequent peace treaty with Jordan. Moreover, and even though a final settlement remained elusive, Sadat’s initiative set the stage for the numerous accords reached during the 1990s between Israelis and Palestinians.

For six decades, the main obstacle hindering advancement towards a final settlement to the longest lasting conflict in the Middle East was finding a
way to address a variety of difficult, complicated, sensitive, and sometimes emotionally charged questions, including land, final borders, Jerusalem, settlements and refugees. Throughout the 1990s, under the auspices of the Clinton administration, Israelis and Palestinians tried, albeit failing, to reach an agreement. The finger-pointing that followed the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit, the eruption of the second Palestinian Intifada, the collapse of the Israeli peace camp, and America’s disengagement under the helm of President George W. Bush shelved the process for seven long years, during which much changed. Rather than talking to each other, Israelis and Palestinians went back to killing each other. The 2003 Roadmap for Peace, a performance-based approach that conditioned final status negotiations on meeting certain conditions by both sides, proved to be a map to nowhere. Israeli attempts at unilateral disengagement based on the assumption that a new reality can be imposed on the Palestinians, rather than negotiated with them, proved to be wishful thinking at best. Finally, and most importantly, the Israeli and the Palestinian camps became sharply divided.

In this rather discouraging environment, the Bush administration finally decided to engage in a serious manner. Active American diplomacy, spearheaded by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, brought the parties to Annapolis, Maryland, on November 26, 2007, where they agreed to “immediately launch good-faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving all outstanding issues.” The Joint Understanding went on to declare the parties’ intention to “engage in vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations”, and to “make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008.” — by no means an insignificant development taking into consideration the deadlock of the last seven years.

Much of the analysis since Annapolis has focused on what was included or omitted in the meeting’s Joint Understanding. On the one hand, the critics on both sides of the conflict, either due to their own political reasons or out of despair, dismissed Annapolis as falling short of achieving the legitimate (read “maximalist”) aspirations of their people. On the other hand, the skeptics pointed out the parties’ failure to outline a specific “political horizon” for settling the conflict as was hoped earlier. Finally, there were those who dismissed the 2008 target for reaching an agreement as simply unrealistic. Those criticisms, while expected given the misgivings of some of the participants in Annapolis regarding the intentions of the U.S administration, as well as the doubts about what the meeting would realistically achieve, are misguided.

What was achieved at Annapolis cannot be readily dismissed for a number of
reasons. First, the parties did agree to launch negotiations in view of reaching a final, not an interim, agreement. Second, the parties also agreed not to hold those negotiations hostage to the completion of the first phase of the Roadmap, which by no means constitutes an insignificant achievement. In the post-Annapolis period, negotiations are to take place as the implementation of the Roadmap obligations by both sides gets underway.

This is not to suggest that no challenges lie ahead. As a matter of fact, Annapolis’ success should not be judged in light of its conclusions in terms of the Joint Understanding, rather it should be assessed based on what might, or more accurately, what should, follow it. A necessary — though insufficient — condition for the success of the process that Annapolis launched is for the Palestinians and the Israelis to reach an agreement. While by no means an easy task, there is room for optimism. In terms of substance, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the rest of its Arab neighbors as outlined in the groundbreaking Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, is within reach. Despite its failure to deliver a final settlement ending the conflict, the Madrid/Oslo process had one undeniable success: it significantly narrowed the gaps between the two sides. As far as the general outline is concerned, there is very little disagreement on what the final settlement should look like, namely:

1) Two states living side-by-side in peace and security according to the June 4, 1967 borders, with some necessary modifications based on the concept of equitable land swap.
2) Jerusalem as a shared capital and an open city to all religions.
3) A just and practical solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees.
4) Enforceable security arrangements that address Israeli concerns, without violating Palestinian sovereignty.

Moreover, and as a byproduct of several rounds of previous negotiations and informal discussions, the contours of an agreement have been detailed (in the Clinton Parameters, the Taba negotiations, and the Geneva accords) that the parties need not start from scratch. Palestinians and Israelis entered the Annapolis process not only with as close to a general outline of an agreement as it gets, but also with twice the amount of time they had before the 2000 Camp David Summit. Indeed, the fourteen-month period until the end of the Bush presidency is a reasonable timeframe to reach a deal, assuming that political will exists on both sides.

Furthermore, despite their political difficulties at home and the suffering and bloodshed that characterized the last few years, Israeli and Palestinian leaders have entered this process with the support – though admittedly shaken
of the majority of Israelis and Palestinians alike, who still believe that the achievement of peace is possible. According to an October poll commissioned by the Geneva Initiative, 65.2% of Palestinians and 65% of Israelis support a political settlement for the conflict based on a two-state solution.

Empowerment – and, if possible, enlargement – of those majorities is a key factor. Aside from the obvious precondition of reaching a deal that meets basic realistic and legitimate aspirations and expectations of both sides, much work still needs to be done. First and foremost is the pressing need for positive and meaningful change of the realities on the ground. The process that Annapolis has launched should go a long way in delivering outcomes relevant to the daily lives of both Palestinians and Israelis, including a permanent cease-fire between the two sides, the release of prisoners, the removal of unjustified checkpoints, allowing for a freer movement of Palestinians and better living conditions, and a complete halt on settlement activity. Economic support from the international community is also crucial. Efforts in this regard are already underway, spearheaded by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Last, but not least, the Palestinian and the Israeli leaderships should exert every effort possible to prepare their respective constituencies for the difficult compromises that both sides will have to make in order for a final settlement to be reached.

In order for the Annapolis process to succeed, there is also a need to be extremely mindful of implementation issues, by far the utmost challenge to the entire process. The greatest uncertainty in this regard lies in the complicated political reality in both Israel and the Palestinian territories. Both leaders lack the charisma of the iconic figures they have replaced, and as a result they have very little room for error.

For Olmert, the 2006 war in Lebanon was simply a disaster. It ended with the opposite outcome of what he had hoped for, leaving him vulnerable to attacks from various political figures on the Israeli scene, each with his or her own political ambitions. For Mahmoud Abbas, the situation is even more complicated. Hamas’ electoral victory in January 2006, the collapse of the Mecca power-sharing arrangement, and Hamas’ violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007 have left Abbas and Fatah extremely vulnerable. As a result, Olmert and Abbas are, ironically, each other’s best friends. A final and comprehensive deal, and nothing short of that, around which an overwhelming majority of the Israelis and the Palestinians would rally, is the only outcome that can provide both leaders with the political assets they need in order to overcome their complicated realities.
I am not holding my breath. The lead-up to Annapolis and the process that it aims to launch is far from perfect. But nothing yet in this conflict has been perfect. This much remains true: the Annapolis process is the greatest hope we have had in the last seven years. Indeed, looking back a decade from now, it might very well be remembered as the best chance we had ever had.

-Maryam Shahabi served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

1  As recently as November 25th, 2007, in an interview with CNN, Former Arkansas Governor and Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee declared: “This conflict isn’t new. It has been going on since all the way to the time of Abraham. And it’s not going to be resolved any time in the immediate future.” Huckabee added, “The best we can hope for is that there will be some level of loosening of the hostilities. But that everybody is going to just get along merrily is probably not something that’s likely to take place any time, at least, in the immediate future.”

2  Including eight visits to the Middle East in 2007.

3  Three days before Annapolis, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal was quoted as saying, “I’m not hiding any secret about the Saudi position. We were reluctant until today. And if not for the Arab consensus we felt today, we would not have decided to go. But the kingdom would never stand against an Arab consensus, as long as the Arab position has agreed on attending, the kingdom will walk along with its brothers in one line.”

4  Some commentators argue that the weakness of both Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas renders futile any movement now. In reality, exactly the opposite argument can be made. The perceived weaknesses of the two leaders mean that there are dividends for both in moving, at least in terms of solidifying their positions within their respective polities.