

Annapolis, as seen from Gaza

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While politicians press their suits, the siege on Gaza continues: A relative of Fatah activist Ahid al-Biyari cries during his funeral in the town of Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza Strip, 15 November 2007. Al-Biyari and two other activists from the Fatah movement were killed and three other Palestinians were wounded after an Israeli air strike on Beit Hanoun, medical sources said. (Wissam Nassar/[MaanImages](#))

Even in the worst of times, there's one thing we're never short of in our troubled part of the world: another conference, meeting, declaration, summit, agreement. Something to save the day, to "steer" us back to whatever predetermined path it is we are or were meant to be on. And to help us navigate that path.

Never mind the arguable shortcomings of this path, or the discontent it may have generated, for we all know what happens to people who question that; the important thing is to move forward, full steam ahead.

Enter Annapolis. I've been there a couple of times. Beautiful port city, great crabs, quaint antique shops. And of course, the US Navy.

So what exactly is different this time around? Well, if you believe some of the newspaper headlines, lots. Like the fact that Ehud Olmert has promised not to build new settlements or expropriate land.

And yet, as recently as September, Israel expropriated 1,100 dunams (272 acres) of Palestinian land in the West Bank to facilitate the development of E-1, a five-square-mile area in the West Bank, east of Jerusalem where Israel plans to build 3,500 houses, a hotel and an industrial park, completing the encirclement of Jerusalem with Jewish colonies, and cutting it off from the rest of the West Bank.

The conference simply generates new and ever-more superfluous and intricate promises which Israeli leaders can commit to and yet somehow evade. An exercise in legal obfuscation at its best: we won't build new settlements, we'll just expropriate more land and expand to account for their "natural growth," until they resemble towns, not colonies, and have them legitimized by a US administration looking for some way to save face. And then we'll promise to raze outposts.

Each step in the evolution of Israel's occupation — together with the efforts to sustain it and the language to describe it — has become ever more sophisticated, strategic and

euphemistic.

Israel has also promised the release of 450 Palestinian prisoners (who have, by Israel's own admission, nearly completed their sentences) on Sunday ahead of the conference, while dozens of others are detained and thousands of others remain in custody without charges or trial — making theirs the highest rate of incarceration in the world.

Still, Annapolis is being hailed as the most serious attempt in eight years at getting “back on track.” According to the US State Department's spokesperson, the conference “will signal broad international support for the Israeli and Palestinian leaders' courageous efforts, and will be a launching point for negotiations leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state and the realization of Israeli-Palestinian peace.”

Support, I gather, that will also entail arms and money to help Abbas rid Gaza of Hamas once and for all.

So then what are people's expectations in Gaza from all of this?

In short, not much. But then, if history has taught them anything, it's that they never have much of a say in anything that involves their destiny, be it Madrid or Oslo or the Road Map. And the moment they do attempt to take control, the repercussions are to “teach” them never to attempt to do so again.

To quote Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish, “The siege will last in order to convince us we must choose an enslavement that does no harm, in fullest liberty!”

The stage has been set, the roles are the same, but the actors have been switched. That is the feeling of many in Gaza.

“The Annapolis meeting will not bring anything new for the Palestinians; it is a repetition of many other conferences which sought to reinforce the principle of making concession on the Palestinian national rights,” says Yousef Diab, a 35-year-old government employee.

For Fares Akram, a young Gaza-based journalist, the conference will result in little more than token concessions aimed at further isolating Hamas-run Gaza, and bolstering support for Abbas: “The Israeli government is weak in this time. President Abbas may get some support in the conference but the support will be for his struggle against Hamas. Gaza will remain forgotten and the improvements that may come out from the meeting will only apply to the West Bank while nothing will be done here in Gaza.”

Fida Qishta, a videographer and community activist in Gaza's troubled town of Rafah, can't even be bothered with thinking of things as abstract and distant and — ultimately — irrelevant as Annapolis when life in Gaza as she sees it has all but come to a standstill.

“I wish you were here to see how life is, it is really like a body that died. I still can't imagine we are living through this and I try not to think about it a lot.”

Aliya Moor, a mother of eight, adds: “We're already dead, the only thing we need is to be buried, to be pushed into the grave and buried. It's already been dug up for us.”

We are prisoners, others have told me, constantly waiting and helplessly hoping for decisions to be made that determine whether they live or die — both figuratively and

literally.

Except prisoners are guaranteed certain things, like food and water and access to medical care. Gazans are guaranteed none of these things. Instead, they are setting the bar as the first occupied people in history to be embargoed and declared hostile.

“People just want out,” explained another friend. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Fatah or Hamas anymore. It just doesn’t matter.”

We have become a people, to quote Darwish, constantly preparing for dawn, in the darkness of cellars lit by our enemies.

This piece was originally published in the Guardian’s Comment is Free, where Laila is a frequent contributor. Laila El-Haddad is a Palestinian freelance journalist, photographer, and blogger who divides her time between Gaza and the United States. She most recently co-directed the short film [Tunnel Trade](#), which aired on CBC and Aljazeera International. Her blog, [Raising Yousuf](#), is named after her 3 year old son.

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