

Annapolis: US hopes talks will forge Arab unity against Iran

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US hopes peace talks will forge Arab unity against Iran

Ben Lynfield in Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian leaders will meet today in Annapolis, Maryland in the most serious effort yet by the US president, George Bush, to relaunch negotiations on resolving the core issues of their conflict – with Iran as a ghost in the room.

The one-day conference comes seven years after peace efforts led by the then US president Bill Clinton broke down. The meeting will be attended by at least a dozen Arab states, many of which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, including Syria.

Mr Bush and many of the participants will be hoping to use the gathering to forge co-operation against Iran and its suspected efforts to attain nuclear weapons capability, according to Israeli analysts.

“Iran is the strategic subtext of this meeting,” said Yossi Alpher, a former director of the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University. “The US has finally got interested in dealing seriously with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of its dilemmas in the Gulf and its need to ensure backing for its policies in Iraq and Iran.”

Yasser Abed Rabbo, a Palestinian negotiator said the two sides were close yesterday to agreeing on a joint document of principles to guide peace talks that could be announced.

Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, said negotiations with the Palestinians would have a better chance of a positive outcome than in the past because “we have a lot of participation”, an apparent reference to the Arab League’s decision to attend. “We and the Palestinians will sit together in Jerusalem and work out something that will be very good.”

Mr Abbas faced criticism from hardliners back home, with the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement that controls the Gaza Strip convening its own conference in Gaza City along with Islamic Jihad “to safeguard Palestinian rights.”

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader, said the peace conference was “doomed to failure” and was intended to “give assistance to the Zionists”.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, chided Saudi Arabia for its participation in the

meeting.

Galia Golan, an international affairs specialist at the Interdisciplinary Centre in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, said: "It turns out that Bush has another agenda for the conference and that is Iran. The conference will go a long way to isolate Iran, which is what many Arab states, Israel and the US would like to see, but where things go from there is unclear."

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