

Annapolis: US prepares Palestinian civil war and rallies Arab support against Iran

By [Chris Marsden](#)

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There were times when the Annapolis summit looked like a poor production by an amateur dramatics society—fumbled handshakes, translations not working, President Bush mispronouncing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’s name, and Abbas himself dragging along behind Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert like he had forgotten his stage directions. But these gaffes only underscored the fact that this entire production was mounted only in order to conceal the predatory ambitions of the United States in the Middle East.

Watching the painful performances of Bush, Olmert and Abbas was an audience comprising the representatives of 40 nations, including the European powers and Russia and 16 Arab states, including Syria and Saudi Arabia, which do not recognize Israel.

They assembled, in part, in order to give an official benediction to the Bush administration’s improbable claim that Annapolis will inaugurate a yearlong drive to secure peace between Israel and Palestine and the creation of a Palestinian state. The primary importance of this pretence is that it provides a vital cover for their acquiescence in America’s stepping up of hostilities—both economic and military—against Iran.

The plan unveiled at the US Naval facility in Maryland has been grandiosely described as an end to a seven-year freeze in peace talks, requiring the personal sponsorship and commitment from Bush, and necessitating his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice racking up hundreds of thousands of miles of shuttle diplomacy to the Middle East diplomacy. The aim, so official propaganda would have it, is that Bush will leave a just settlement between Israel and Palestine—rather than the debacle in Iraq—as his legacy when he quits office in January 2009. The real timetable on which both are operating is based on the recognition that Iran must be neutralized if US hegemony over the oil riches of the Middle East is to be secured.

To this end, Bush has tried to cast himself as an honest broker between Israel and Palestine, relying on the readiness of the media and the Arab regimes to forget the fact that Israel is the foremost client state of the US. The Annapolis “declaration”—all 437 words of it—in fact confirms the pattern in which the US continues to place no demands that Israel would find unacceptable, while insisting that the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority crush all resistance to Israel as a precondition for any settlement.

Not even the agreement on a joint declaration of principles was reached until 30 minutes before Bush read it out. How it was finally arrived at paints a vivid picture of the actual

political relations at Annapolis—a bloc between the US and Israel dictating an agenda to their puppet, Abbas.

Haaretz cites Palestinian sources as saying that a stalemate was resolved at Annapolis itself when, “Finally, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice took Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas out of a three-way meeting with US President George Bush and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and pressured him to approve the draft document. Eventually, he did so, enabling Bush to read it to the conference.”

Israeli sources painted an even more damning picture, stating that when the Palestinians had refused to sign, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, “who headed the Israeli team, lost her temper and told [Palestinian negotiator Ahmed] Qureia to ‘take it or get lost.’”

Sections of the Israeli negotiating team told Livni that a declaration “was ‘a waste of time,’ and suggested she forget about it.”

For months no document could be drafted because Israel refused to accept being tied to any position on key Palestinian demands, such as the right of return, an end to Jewish settlement, borders, water supplies and accepting east Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Much has been made of the declaration’s statement that both parties will undertake negotiations for a treaty “resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception.” But none of these issues are named.

Abbas’s own spokesman, Nabil Abu Rudeina, dismissed the statement, explaining, “We failed to conclude a document for the last three, four months. We couldn’t agree on one single point.”

And as the *New York Times* pointed out, “While the two sides said their talks would be aimed at concluding a treaty that deals with all ‘core issues,’ they couldn’t agree on naming them and how they might be addressed.”

What the statement does say is that “implementation of the future peace treaty will be subject to the implementation of the road map, as judged by the United States.”

This passage assigns to Washington the sole right to decide whether the provisions of the road map are being met, ending the pretence that the “Quartet,” which includes the US, the United Nations, Russia and the European Union, are equal partners in seeking peace.

The central demand contained in the road map upon which Abbas will be judged to have been successful is his ensuring the “security of Israel” by dismantling “terrorist organizations.” In effect, Abbas has again been placed on notice that he must crush all resistance to Israel amongst the Palestinians, beginning by taking back control of the Gaza Strip from Hamas.

Abbas is in a weak position from which to take on Hamas, which organised a demonstration of tens of thousands in Gaza denouncing him as a “collaborator” and “traitor” for attending Annapolis. Even in the West Bank stronghold of Fatah, smaller demonstrations took place. Police violently broke up the demonstrations, arresting hundreds and killing a 36-year-old man in Hebron.

The European powers are being subjected to a shakedown by Washington to fund Abbas in

his conflict with Hamas. France will host a donors' conference later next month.

It may be that Israel decides that it will intervene on his behalf by mounting a military incursion into Gaza. This was suggested as a strong possibility in the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*, which noted that even as Annapolis was concluding, "the defense establishment began gearing up for the possibility that Defense Minister Ehud Barak, upon his return from the United States, will order a large-scale military operation into the Gaza Strip."

It cited a defence official stating, "Israel held back from launching such an operation ahead of the summit since it didn't want to be blamed for ruining the summit. Once that the summit is over, there is an opportunity to go into Gaza and strike back at Hamas."

"A large operation in Gaza would require the IDF to call up large numbers of reservists and to mobilize almost two divisions from the Infantry, Armored and Engineering Corps," it concluded.

The *Los Angeles Times* credited Abbas with having tried to "demonstrate to Israel that he's serious about asserting control, starting in the West Bank. He has deployed hundreds of extra police officers to the unruly city of Nablus. He has closed dozens of Hamas charities, fired Hamas preachers, arrested hundreds of Hamas activists, including many gunmen, confiscated weapons and issued a decree aimed at drying up millions of dollars in donations to Hamas from abroad."

But this is not enough for Israel. Abbas is faced with nothing less than a demand that he launch a full-scale civil war, which could precipitate his own downfall as a result of popular opposition. A Hamas official warned, "Abbas would be a fool to return to the Gaza Strip aboard an Israeli tank. Any Palestinian who enters the Gaza Strip with Israel's assistance will be treated as an enemy."

Olmert's own hold on power is precarious. Even the verbal concessions he has made have provoked a furious response from the opposition parties led by Likud, the settlers and his far-right and orthodox coalition partners, which could bring down his government.

Prior to Annapolis, the Knesset approved a bill barring any agreement to divide Jerusalem. Eli Yishai, leader of Shas party, threatened to pull out of the government if "Jerusalem was mentioned at Annapolis." An estimated 25,000 took part in a mass prayer service at the Western Wall protesting Annapolis, before moving on to Olmert's Jerusalem residence and nationalist groups blocked streets in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Following the summit Zevulun Orlev, chairman of the National Union party, declared that "the State of Israel is facing a liquidation sale" and called on Shas chairman Eli Yishai and Yisrael Beitenu head Avigdor Lieberman to resign from the ruling coalition immediately. Yishai defended himself by stating categorically that the division of Jerusalem was not on the table because "the Palestinian leadership has failed to implement the first phase of the Road Map—the dismantling of terror organizations."

The real measure of success for Bush was the participation of the Arab regimes in the Annapolis charade and its endorsement by the European powers and Russia.

When Bush declared in his speech that "a battle is under way for the future of the Middle East and we must not cede victory to the extremists," the assembled delegates were clear that he was not merely targeting Hamas. The most honest appraisal of Annapolis in the US

media was made by Steven Erlanger in the *New York Times*, who wrote, "The Middle East peace conference here on Tuesday was officially about ending the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. But there was an unspoken goal just below the surface: stopping the rising regional influence of Iran and Islamic radicalism."

An adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team, "who spoke on condition of anonymity", told Erlanger, "The Arabs have come here not because they love the Jews or even the Palestinians. They came because they need a strategic alliance with the United States against Iran."

Dan Gillerman, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, added that the Arab regimes were in attendance because of "their fear of Islamic extremism and Iran, which they call the Persian threat. This is what brought them here."

The *Jerusalem Post* was also candid stating that Olmert's meeting with Bush following Annapolis would "try to translate the summit's momentum into a more effective effort to thwart Teheran's nuclear drive." It was pleased that "Along with the Arab states, vital potential partners of the US and Israel in the bid to thwart Iran were notably present at Annapolis, with France, Britain, Germany, Italy, China and Russia all represented at the level of foreign minister."

China and Russia, described as the "two key holdouts against intensified sanctions," have said they would "reassess their positions" following next month's United Nations Security Council discussions centering on "the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its scope and of the degree of Iranian compliance with inspection requirements," the *Post* noted with satisfaction.

Iran was clear that it was the target of the manoeuvres by Washington at Annapolis. Tehran responded by announcing on the same day as the meeting that it had developed a new Ashura missile system, which has a range of 1,200 miles and is capable of hitting Israel and American bases in the Middle East.

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