

True Aim of Annapolis, and Why It Failed

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The US-sponsored peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland was neither a success nor failure, if one accepts that its so-called objective was indeed 'peacemaking'.

From a US perspective, the meeting was, at best, a diplomatic manoeuvre on the part of the Bush administration, a last chance for becoming relevant to a region that is quickly escaping its grip. At worst, the conference was a desperate public relations charade aimed at convincing the American public that the administration's plans for democracy and peace in the Middle East are unfolding smoothly. In both scenarios, the conference was a necessary but fleeting distraction from the prevailing criticism that the Iraq war is a 'nightmare' without end.

Bush's words at Annapolis suggested he was playing exactly the part Israel expected of him. His emphasis on the Jewish identity of Israel, itself a crude violation of the principles of secularism, seems more than a mere gesture to appease the concerns of Israel and its backers in the US; it was actually a subtle acceptance of the ethnic cleansing that continues to define Israel's treatment of Palestinians. After all, millions of Palestinians have for decades been expelled from their land for no other reason than not being Jewish, while millions of Jews around the world are welcomed 'back' to Israel - a land that they never lived in or had prior ties to. Could Bush not have known about this when he emphasised the need for a Jewish state? I doubt it.

So what kind of peace process are we talking about? By any reasonable definition, peacemaking usually occurs to bridge the gap and resolve disagreements between antagonists; friends don't need to 'negotiate' through the use of 'initiatives' and 'painful compromises' to find a 'common ground'. While both Israelis and Palestinians are in urgent need for peace to replace the hostility caused by Israel's illegal military occupation, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert could hardly qualify as 'enemies' caught in a state of 'hostilities' from which they require escape. Indeed, both men are individually beleaguered in many ways and engaged in a war of their own - but not against one another. If anything, both Abbas and Olmert are in a state of political symbiosis, a mutual dependency that borders, strangely enough, on solidarity.

Annapolis was the perfect platform for both leaders to alleviate their individual woes. Abbas needed the international validation after his non-constitutional response to the clash with Hamas in Gaza. Being unpopular among Palestinians, the survival of his regime is solely dependent on his ability to sustain the patronage system of his authority in the West Bank. Without international funds, US validation, and Israeli permission, Abbas cannot run his nepotistic empire, itself under Israeli military occupation. Therefore he needs to keep up the balancing act, and cannot be expected to infuriate Israel by pushing for serious demands at

the negotiating table, scheduled to begin December 12.

Olmert, overseeing a shaky coalition, is gripped by two daunting realities: one, he has no mandate to make any 'compromises', painful or otherwise, and two, the fact that a two-state solution is close to becoming obsolete. In a rare frankness, he expressed these fears in an interview with the daily Haaretz right after returning from Annapolis. "The day will come when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights...As soon as that happens, the state of Israel (as an exclusively Jewish state) is finished."

In retrospect, this helps to explain Bush's insistence on the Jewish identity of Israel.

What's ironic is that the same parties that once considered the recognition of the word 'Palestine' as blasphemous and anti-Semitic are now advocating a Palestinian state. David A. Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee told the Los Angeles Times, November 30, that even the two-state solution has to be qualified. "No. no. Two-space-nation-space-states. Not just two states, two nation states. A Jewish state called Israel, and a Palestinian Arab state called Palestine. This is the language that Prime Minister Olmert has been using, that Foreign Minister Livni has been using, that President Bush has embraced, and (was also used by) President Sarkozy (of France)."

Olmert, like many Israeli and Jewish Zionist leaders (as opposed to non-Zionist Jews who refuse to subscribe to this archaic mindset) increasingly realizes that Israel's colonial euphoria is backfiring; the failure to define Israel's borders - left open with the hope of further territorial expansion - is making it impossible for Israel to achieve total dominance of Jews over Arabs, while still calling itself a democracy. There is hardly a doubt that the bad choices made by Israel in the past are now irrevocable, and that indeed the future struggle will be that of equality within one state.

Rather than being a right, or wrong, step toward peace between two conflicting parties, Annapolis has provided a stage for much sweet talk, hyped expectations and soundbytes for leaders with pressing motivations. Reporters may have been told that Annapolis offered "hope...cautious hope, but hope" by Olmert's spokesperson, but neither hope, nor breaking the seven year of 'deadlock' - as prophesized by Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat - are relevant here. The meeting and the year of 'negotiations' expected to follow it are part of Israel's last attempt at 'preserving' its Jewish identity, and creating a South Africa-style Palestinian Bantustans. Palestinians will be granted the freedom to call such disconnected islands whatever they wish, and to hoist their flag within the caged entities, if they must, but nothing more.

Although both Bush and Abbas are willing collaborators in this undemocratic endeavour, Israelis must wake up to the fact that their country is knee-deep in Apartheid, and nothing is significant enough to salvage their racially-selective democracy, except true democracy. It's time for people like Harris to stop talking of 'two-space-nation-space-states' and other such nonsense, but instead to invest sincere efforts in finding a formula that guarantees peace, justice and security for both Palestinians and Israelis, without overlooking the historic responsibility of Israel over the plight and dispossession of the Palestinians.

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