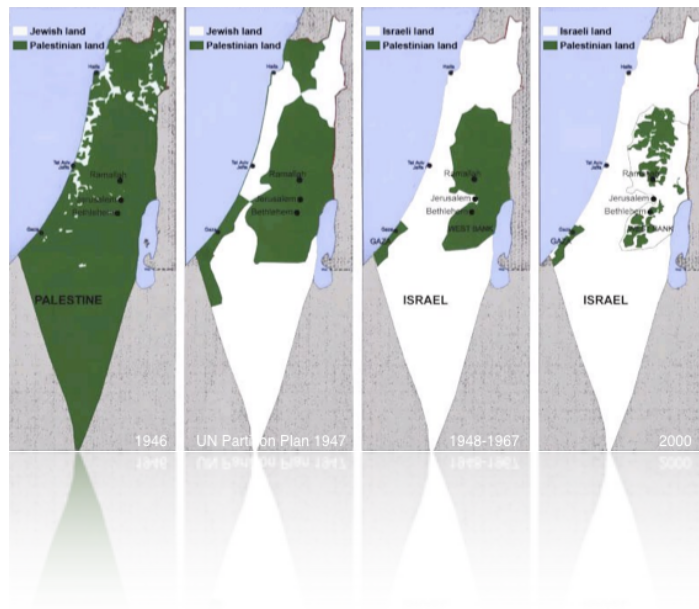


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Annapolis: The Cost of Failure

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[NYRB] Editor's note: In its November 8, 2007 issue, The New York Review published 'Failure Risks Devastating Consequences,' <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20750> a letter to President Bush by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Lee H. Hamilton, Brent Scowcroft, Paul Volcker, and other former Washington officials from both parties, calling for urgent action toward a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement at the Annapolis conference. In response, many readers sent questions to Henry Siegman, the president of the US/Middle East Project, which was a co-sponsor of the letter. In this nybooks.com special feature, Mr. Siegman addresses some of those questions and provides his own analysis of what is at stake at the conference.

One of the first on-line responses to the publication of the letter to President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was a simple, straightforward question: 'What is in it for Israel?' The 'it' referred to guidelines the letter proposed for an agreement that would end Israel's occupation of the territories the IDF overran forty years ago in a conflict—as Israelis were reminded by the celebrated author David Grossman when he addressed a recent commemoration of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination—that is now in its 100th year.

What is in it for Israel should be self-evident, but now that three new Israeli generations have been born having no memory of Israel without settlements, it no longer is; for too many, the occupation—and the spiral of Israeli-Palestinian violence that has come with it—is a given, the natural order of things.

An agreement that leads to the end of an occupation that with the best of intentions humiliates and brutalizes an entire nation should be more than enough of a reason to go for it. The subjugation and permanent dispossession of millions of people is surely not the vocation of Judaism, nor is it an acceptable condition for a Jewish national revival.

The argument against an Israeli agreement with President Mahmoud Abbas and his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is that they are too weak and unpopular to implement an accord that would require them to put an end to the violence of Palestinian rejectionist groups. Indeed, it is pointed out that the fact that most of the violence in the West Bank continues to come from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a faction that belongs to Abbas's Fatah, underlines the limits of Abbas and Fayyad's authority and their capacity to establish the rule of law in the territories.

That Abbas has been unable to control violence is true enough, but it is nevertheless a disingenuous argument. Abbas's weakness is the result of Israeli policies—primarily the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory that continues even as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert speaks about removing settlements—that have convinced most Palestinians that Israel has no intention of returning to the pre-1967 border and allowing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. An Israeli policy that seriously rewarded Abbas for his moderation—such as a significant release of Palestinian prisoners, instead of several hundred out of the over 10,000 prisoners being held by Israel; the removal of physical obstructions and checkpoints that have strangled Palestinian economic and social life; the dismantlement of outposts and a freeze on further construction in the settlements, as required by the Roadmap—

would turn Abbas and Fayyad into strong leaders overnight. But Olmert has until now only offered token 'gestures,' and Palestinians have been given no reason to believe that a change in Israeli policy will occur even when the Palestinians choose leaders committed to nonviolence and moderation.

Checkpoints and roadblocks designed to prevent the movement of people and goods throughout the West Bank—well over 500 such obstacles—have devastated the Palestinian economy and turned Palestinian life, in all of its aspects, into an endless nightmare. In 2005, following Abbas's election as president of the Palestinian Authority and before Israel's dismantlement of its settlements in Gaza, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and James Wolfensohn, the former president of the World Bank who was designated as the envoy of the Quartet (the EU, UN, US, and Russia), worked out a detailed agreement with the Israeli government to remove many of these obstacles. The plan included the creation of a safe passage that would link the populations of the West Bank and Gaza—a connection that is vitally important to the social, cultural, and economic life of these geographically separated entities, to which Israel had already committed itself in the Oslo accords. The whole point of that agreement was to show Palestinians that Abbas's moderation and opposition to violence could obtain results that Israel had denied his predecessor, Yasser Arafat. It proved the opposite. According to Wolfensohn, Israel violated the agreement before the ink of its representatives' signatures had dried.

'In the months that followed, every aspect of the agreement was abrogated,' Wolfensohn, an observant Jew and a lifelong friend and generous philanthropic supporter of Israel, recently told the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz. Indeed, instead of removing checkpoints, more were added. Reading the Ha'aretz interview, it is difficult to avoid the impression that this firsthand experience with Israel's dealings with the Palestinians profoundly disillusioned Wolfensohn, who came to see the equities of the conflict in a new light.

Syria and Hamas

The signers of the letter to President Bush stressed that a successful outcome of the Annapolis conference would require Syria's participation in the conference, as well as efforts to start a dialogue with Hamas. Washington overcame its initial reluctance to include Syria. However, Syria has said it will not attend if the subject of a Syria-Israel peace agreement will not appear on the Annapolis agenda. Syria's nonattendance would result in the downgrading of Arab attendance at the meeting to the ambassadorial rather than ministerial level, which in turn would defeat the American objective of using the Annapolis gathering to create a coalition of moderate

Arab countries that, together with Israel, would be prepared to counter the growing threat of Iranian hegemony in the region.

Syria's absence will also prevent a serious exploration of the Arab League's 2002 peace initiative, whose promise of full normalization of relations with the state of Israel is contingent on an Israeli-Syrian agreement. It would also impede efforts at a resolution of the festering crisis in Lebanon.

Israel and Washington have made clear their determination to deny Hamas the fruits of its 2006 victory in the most honest and democratic election—perhaps the only one—in the Arab Middle East and to return to power a Fatah leadership that lost those elections. This has surely given Hamas's leadership an incentive to undermine any agreement reached by Abbas in Annapolis, or in the negotiations that are supposed to follow the conference. But if Abbas emerges from Annapolis with parameters for an agreement with Israel that will be seen as fair by the Palestinian public—even if such parameters were not explicated in a joint statement of principles by Olmert and Abbas but by Bush in his address to the meeting—Hamas would damage its standing with the Palestinian public if it were to seek to wreck such an accomplishment. Palestinians have suffered too much for too long to tolerate that kind of recklessness.

Israel and the US have disqualified Hamas as a peace partner not only because it has refused to recognize Israel but also because it refuses to be bound by previous agreements between the PLO and Israel's government. A recent Op-Ed in Israel's Yedioth Ahronot newspaper by Zalman Shoval, a former Israeli ambassador to Washington and a longtime senior adviser to Likud prime ministers, illustrates the manipulative character of Israel's diplomacy. Shoval asks in his Op-Ed piece, 'How could the government that would replace Olmert's cabinet be able to free itself from the pledges and commitments to be made in Annapolis,' given the 'basic principle of international law that every government inherits the rights and obligations of its predecessors...?'

What is remarkable is not only the shamelessness of a Likud leader, himself a prominent Israeli lawyer, urging publicly that Israel find ways to violate commitments it is about to make to the Palestinians in a meeting to which the president of the United States is a party, but of the answer Shoval proposes: This principle of international law applies only to states, and 'after all, it is difficult to define the Palestinian Authority as a state.' Apparently not so difficult as to prevent Israel from starving the civilian population of Gaza by pretending that Hamas is to be defined as a state.

Be that as it may, Abbas will have to negotiate with Hamas the reestablishment of a unity government even in the highly unlikely event Annapolis is a success. He cannot risk the permanent separation of Gaza from the West Bank, nor will the Palestinian public allow him to take that risk. An even greater risk is that without a unity government, Hamas—which has significant political support in the West Bank—will replace Fatah in the West Bank as well. Hamas will exist at least as long as Fatah, and Palestinian governance will have to reflect that reality.

Palestinian Compromises

Is Abbas prepared to agree to compromises that Palestinians must make if there is to be an agreement with Israel? The answer is yes, if the demands for compromise do not go beyond those envisioned in President Clinton's proposals and in the Taba discussions that followed the failed Camp David summit in 2000. The parameters of an agreement reflecting those compromises are outlined in the letter from Scowcroft, Brzezinski, Hamilton, et al. to President Bush and Secretary Rice.

It is not true, as Israelis often claim, that Palestinians refuse to compromise. (Former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu famously complained that 'Palestinians take and take while Israel gives and gives.')

That is an indecent charge, not only because so far Israel has given Palestinians nothing, but because Palestinians made the most far-reaching compromise of all when, in 1988, Arafat formally accepted the legitimacy of Israel within the 1949 armistice line (i.e., the pre-1967 border). With that concession, Palestinians gave up their claim to more than half the territory that the United Nations 1947 Partition Resolution had assigned to Palestine's Arab inhabitants. Palestinians have never received credit for this wrenching and historic concession, made well before Israel formally recognized that Palestinians have a right to sovereignty in any part of Palestine. The notion that Palestinians can now be compelled to accept 'border adjustments' at the expense of the 22 per cent of the territory that is left them is deeply offensive to Palestinians, and understandably so.

Also forgotten is that at the Camp David summit Palestinians agreed to border adjustments to the pre-1967 borders that would allow large numbers of West Bank settlers—about 70 percent—to remain within the Jewish state, in an equal exchange of territory on both sides of the border. Barak rejected the principle of one-to-one land swaps.

In the past, the Palestinian demand that Israel accept the Palestinian refugees' 'right of return' to their homes was a serious obstacle to a peace agreement. But the Arab League's peace initiative of 2002 leaves no doubt that what Arab countries are demanding is Israel's acceptance of that

right in principle, while agreeing that the number of refugees allowed to return would be subject to Israel's agreement.

If Annapolis fails, it will be because of Israel's rejection of the single most central condition for success: full disclosure of its definition of viable Palestinian statehood. Olmert has already reneged on his earlier endorsement of Rice's insistence that the meeting must produce a joint statement outlining a permanent status agreement to avoid becoming a meaningless photo op, and it remains unlikely that any meaningful joint declaration can be reached.

According to Aluf Benn, Ha'aretz's diplomatic correspondent, Olmert is adept at marching 'in the no-man's land between talk and action.' For Olmert, Benn says, engaging in high-level talks and granting gestures to the Palestinians creates 'the most convenient diplomatic situation,' because such gestures are 'in themselves sufficient to remove international pressure on Israel to withdraw from the territories and to end the occupation.' At the same time, 'as long as it's all talk and there are no agreements,' internal pressures not to cede the territories are neutralized. Olmert seems to have succeeded in turning Annapolis into that kind of no-man's land.

The Cost of Failure

The importance of reaching such an agreement now rather than in the future should be self-evident. For if Annapolis fails, the likelihood that Israel will again have a moderate Palestinian interlocutor is close to zero. Not only the prospect of a moderate Palestinian leadership but also the commitment of all Arab countries to normalizing relations with Israel following a peace agreement will be casualties. Hamas's insistence that moderation, as understood by Israel, is a synonym for Palestinian capitulation will become widely accepted, and not only in the Arab world.

The disillusionment that would follow a failed effort in Annapolis would therefore leave Israel with the most dismal of prospects for renewing a peace process with the Palestinians and with Arab countries. It certainly could not happen in circumstances as favorable as they are today, for the growing skepticism in US policy circles about Israel's real intentions in the territories, as suggested by the letter to Bush and Rice by this country's most eminent elder statesmen and stateswomen, is bound to change what has been the reflexive US support that Israel has been able to count on until now, particularly during the past two administrations.

More important, should Annapolis fail, prospects for resuming a viable peace process at some future date will be made increasingly unlikely by the changing demographic balance in Palestine. A clear Arab majority in historic Palestine, a situation that is imminent, will persuade

Palestinians and their leaders that the quest for a two-state solution is a fool's pursuit. They may conclude that rather than settling for even less than 22 percent of Palestine—i.e., less than half the territory that the international community confirmed in the 1947 Partition Resolution of the UN is the legitimate patrimony of Palestine's Arab population—it would be better to renounce separate Palestinian statehood and instead demand equal rights in a state of Israel that includes all of Palestine. Why settle for crumbs now if as a result of their decisive majority they will soon become the dominant political and cultural force in all of Palestine?

If the international community has been largely indifferent to—or impotent to do anything about—what some have tried to portray as a quarrel between Israel and Palestinians over where to draw the border between the two, it is far less likely to remain indifferent to an Israel intent on permanently denying its majority Arab population the rights and privileges it accords to its minority of Jewish citizens. It would be an apartheid regime that, one hopes, a majority of Israelis would themselves not abide.

Annapolis may well be a historic watershed—the last opportunity to salvage not only a two-state solution but a Jewish state that remains a democracy.

—November 21, 2007

Henry Siegman, the director of the US/ Middle East Project, served as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations from 1994 to 2006, and was head of the American Jewish Congress from 1978 to 1994.

