



# COMMENTARY

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## **Virtual Agreement, Virtual Negotiations**

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Getting Israeli and Palestinian leaders to sit down together at Annapolis was an impressive show of support and hope, but negotiations need more than hope to succeed. What Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to in Annapolis was to begin negotiating a virtual agreement that aims to declare an apparent diplomatic victory down the road without resolving the difficult issues that divide the two sides. The rationale is that once an agreement is signed, it will shore up support for embattled leaders, and eventually empower them to implement the deal at some point in the future. The launch of these virtual negotiations does little to resolve the competing visions of every party involved, and those differing visions will likely stall any progress.

The first signal that things were not going as planned at Annapolis was the fallback on the 2003 “road map” document. Both Israelis and Palestinians agreed once again to fulfill their many obligations under the road map. The first phase is particularly complex, with more than two-dozen provisions. For Palestinians, it primarily deals with security reform, an end to violence, and institution building. For Israelis, the first phase calls for the dismantling of settlement outposts erected prior to March 2001, a freeze on all settlement activity, and an eventual withdrawal to their September 2000 military positions. Palestinian and Israeli negotiators have very different concepts of what this all means.

Palestinian negotiators are making the unconvincing case that they have already fulfilled the first phase of the road map, and that negotiations should be started in earnest. They point to a partial reform and consolidation of the Palestinian Authority’s security forces under the control of President Abbas, as well as a broader crackdown against Hamas in the West Bank as proof. They are waiting for Israel to live up to its part of the bargain and freeze settlement activity. Instead, they return home from Annapolis to the announcement of a new construction project in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Homa, which Palestinians call Jebel Abu Ghneim.

Israeli negotiators believe that Palestinians have not even entered the first phase of the road map. As long as Palestinians have not fulfilled their full security requirements and dismantled the terrorist infrastructure, Israelis argue that they are absolved of fulfilling their own requirements. The reality is that rockets continue to rain from Gaza, by some counts more than 2,000 this year. In the West Bank, the Israeli army, and not the police forces of Abbas, is responsible for security. Palestinian leaders are quietly urging their Israeli counterparts to clear out Gaza and strike at Hamas. Neither side sees eye to eye.

To solve the inevitable problem of differing Israeli-Palestinian interpretations, the Annapolis framework calls for the United States to “monitor and judge the fulfillment of” each side’s requirements under the road map. That unenviable task now falls in part to General James Jones, newly appointed special envoy for Middle East security. General Jones is undoubtedly an experienced and capable commander. Yet the many security challenges facing Israelis and Palestinians have primarily political not military answers. The general will likely be as constrained as his many predecessors.

Meanwhile, Europe is eagerly playing along, relieved that negotiations are once again on the agenda. They will have their moment at the upcoming Paris donors' conference. But money is not enough. To be relevant, European governments will have to do more than follow Washington's script and put forward their own ideas. European aid should be directed at improving Palestinian society more broadly, not merely to support the small group around President Abbas.

All eyes have now turned to the Arab role in the process. For the Arab states, Annapolis was a mixed blessing. Yes they all showed up, including Syria, but they are still hedging their bets. There will be increased attention on what they can do to support the process. Often overlooked, however, the first phase of the road map also calls on Arab states to "cut off public and private funding and all forms of support for groups supporting violence and terror." It is not at all clear that the Arab states in attendance at Annapolis interpret this imperative in the same way as the drafters of the road map. Nor is it clear they have faith in the American-led effort.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states lack confidence in the U.S. approach, yet recognize they have no choice but to play along. Their last effort to bridge the gaps between Palestinians through the Mecca Agreement erupted in part because of U.S. opposition. Now, far from fully supporting President Abbas, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are treating Hamas in Gaza like a government and recently facilitated the movement of more than one-thousand pilgrims through the Rafah border crossing. They have their own considerations and are quietly urging Abbas and Hamas to renew their unity government deal.

Arab states know that without such a resumption of cooperation between Abbas and Hamas, progress remains unlikely. Even if Abbas and Olmert did manage to arrive at an agreement, its implementation would still be held hostage to the road map and its numerous provisions. It is difficult to see how negotiations under those circumstances can proceed in good faith. Rather than building hope, the strategy could be a recipe for greater frustration.

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