



The Middle East Institute

Viewpoints

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Viewpoints are a moderated dialogue between experts expressing opposing or differing opinions on a topic of contemporary relevance

After Annapolis . . .

Many Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians are convinced that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is intractable because neither side has abandoned the goal of defeating the other, and neither really believes in compromise. This is a myth.

The reality is that large majorities of Israelis and Palestinians now believe through bitter experience that their historical struggle over the land they both cherish can only be resolved through negotiations for a two-state partition. Both peoples have come to realize that neither side can prevail through violence. They understand that Zionism and Palestinian nationalism are enduring realities. They know that both peoples are there to stay, and that the choice is not between victory for one and defeat for the other, but whether they will choose mutual compromise or mutual destruction.



Amb. Philip C. Wilcox, Jr. (Ret.)

Indeed, more and more Israelis and Palestinians grasp that both people's fundamental needs for peace, security, dignity, and national self-determination are interdependent. In other words, the Jewish state will ultimately fail if Palestinians are not liberated in a state of their own in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, and that Palestinians will not win real statehood unless Israel is assured that this will bring peace. This conceptual change toward realism by majorities in both societies offers hope for a two-state peace to this century-old conflict. Why then, has this not happened?

The reason, as Ziad Asali and Ori Nir point out in their commentaries, is that hope and trust, vital ingredients for peace and reconciliation, are sorely missing on both sides. Although both peoples have grasped the reality of their situation and want peace, each is convinced that the other side does not. Fear and emotion distort their judgment. Extremist minorities on both sides who oppose compromise spread cynicism and mistrust through incitement and propaganda. These diehard elements also cling to the fantasy that violence works, and chronic mutual violence reinforces fear on both sides that the other wants victory, not peace. Worse yet, chances for human contact between Israelis and Palestinians have been severely curtailed by Israeli-imposed travel restrictions and the separation barrier.

Given this toxic environment, it is not surprising that both Israelis and Palestinians have responded with apathy and skepticism to President Bush's call at the Annapolis Conference for a fresh start toward two-state peacemaking. How can hope and trust be rebuilt in order to transform public opinion, marginalize the extremists, and pave the way to real negotiations and a final status peace agreement?

It is doubtful that Ehud Olmert and Mahmud 'Abbas can do this by themselves in bilateral negotiations, as the Bush Administration advocates. Both men are pragmatists who grasp the need for a genuine two-state compromise. Olmert has even said Israel cannot survive without it. But neither men are strong, charismatic leaders in the mold of DeGaulle,



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Ben Gurion, or even Sharon and Arafat. And both are trapped in dysfunctional political systems in which extremist minorities and proponents of force are disproportionately powerful. For 'Abbas, mobilizing a united pro-peace majority and marginalizing Palestinian extremists will be difficult, if not impossible, as long as Palestinians are politically and geographically divided between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. Likewise, Olmert also faces a divided government. It is unlikely that he, acting alone, can prevail against the settler lobby that is now entrenched in the Israeli system. He also confronts a military and security establishment that exaggerates military force as the key to security and is skeptical of negotiations and compromise. Given these obstacles on both sides, it should have been no surprise that within days after the optimistic proclamations at Annapolis, the grim routine of violence and counter violence, settlement expansion, and mutual recriminations resumed as if nothing had changed.

This tragic dynamic will continue and the promise of the Annapolis peace process will fade without a new approach from Washington. The situation demands on the diplomatic front what Ori Nir calls for, “a more assertive, active American role.” It also calls for, as Ziad Asali urges, a more powerful “American national alliance” here at home of diverse parties who agree on the critical need for negotiating a solution based on “two viable secure states.”

The potential for success of such American leadership is greater than many Americans realize. We too have been demoralized and intimidated by the same kinds of misinformation and propaganda that have crippled Israeli and Palestinian politics. Yet repeated public opinion polls have shown not just American abhorrence of violence and terror by Palestinians, but opposition to Israeli occupation and settlement policies and strong support for more active American diplomacy.

Indeed, there are visible signs of an emerging majority of Americans — Christians, Jews and Muslims — who are alarmed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and want more effective leadership from Washington. More and more Americans understand the toll of fear, suffering, and injustice that this conflict imposes. They also know the price we are paying in terms of our reputation and national security interests.

But what about the widespread belief that a powerful “Israel lobby,” whose mission is to support Israeli policy, right or wrong, ultimately controls our foreign policy? This is another myth. History proves that when American leaders like Eisenhower, Carter, Kissinger on behalf of Nixon, and George H.W. Bush asserted American leadership at critical moments in the Arab-Israeli conflict, they prevailed. Moreover, there are emerging and dynamic Jewish groups in the United States, as well as Christian and Arab-American groups, who know that Israel's security and a real Palestinian state are two sides of the same coin, and who strenuously oppose both Palestinian terrorism and Israeli occupation and settlements.

If George W. Bush takes advantage of his Annapolis initiative and intervenes more actively to help Ehud Olmert and Mahmud 'Abbas resolve final status issues they are unlikely to resolve by themselves, he would offer them a desperately needed lifeline that they would certainly grasp. In doing so, he could summon support from and help empower a large American pro-peace majority. Herein lies a bright opportunity for President Bush to help overcome America's travails in the Middle East, leave a powerful legacy, and help rescue our Israeli and Palestinian friends from a bleak future.

Amb. Philip C. Wilcox, Jr. (Ret.) is the President of the Foundation for Middle East Peace and an MEI Adjunct Scholar.



Ziad Asali American Task Force on Palestine

Even the most skeptical of us would have to concede that things are better now than they were a few months ago, as they hasten to add that we have been here before and that this too shall pass.

Yes, things are better: Palestinian and Israeli officials are talking, and not about the weather. Final status issues are being discussed, though they are not being resolved.



Palestinian security forces are being trained by General Keith Dayton. These forces have already been deployed in Nablus and Tulkarem and have secured a peaceful Christmas in Bethlehem. Enough law and order in these cities have returned to give their people a sense of hope and a taste of what might be if the present trend continues.

Pledges of \$7.4 billion dollars have been made in Paris to rebuild Palestinian institutions and the economy with the stated goal of establishing a Palestinian state.

Nevertheless, astonishingly, settlement expansion continues, checkpoints have not been removed, Qassam rockets are still being fired, Israeli incursions and assassinations go on, and Gazans sink deeper into isolation and suffer economic and social degradation under siege. Public and private racist discourse still rages — everywhere. It is still considered politically risky to ascribe anything but bad motives and nefarious designs to the “enemy,” be he an Arab or a Jew.

How do we keep the momentum for peace going beyond expressing wishes and hopes?

There are governmental policies and steps that need to be implemented and there is a wider sphere of private, institutional, and individual endeavors that have to be undertaken to put this aging monster of a conflict to its final rest:

1. Help build the underpinnings of a Palestinian state on the ground.

Ori Nir Americans for Peace Now

Last month, I spent seven days in an Israeli living room, sitting “shiva” with my family to mourn the loss of a relative. Hundreds of people came to visit. Hundreds of conversations unfolded on almost any topic imaginable. One of the purposes of the shiva is to distract mourners from their loss through engagement with the living in conversations on the mundane.



Although it was shortly after the Annapolis peace conference and although one of the days of the shiva, December 12, was when bilateral final-status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority officially started, the Israeli-Palestinian issue was not discussed by any of those who came to comfort us. Only once did it come up on the margins of a conversation with a friend who works in the southern town of Sderot and talked about ducking Qassam rockets. But that was it. On the 12th, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Israel, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, mentioned the formal opening of final-status negotiations in a short story on page 6. The next day, there was no story at all.

Apathy hardly seems to be a strong enough word to describe the way Israelis regard the Annapolis process. Israelis have been steadily turning off, tuning out, and dropping away from politics in recent years. Corrupt politicians, inept leaders, and ongoing violence have bred contempt for the political process. Their cynicism is most evident when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. While most Israelis support a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians, most also believe that such a solution is not feasible in the foreseeable future, nor a matter of urgency, and therefore peace efforts are an exercise in futility.

That skepticism — some would say political nihilism — is mirrored on the Palestinian side. There too, most believe that while a two-state solution is desirable, it is not yet viable — at least not in the foreseeable future.



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A. A security system that imposes law and order and puts an end to lawlessness in the territory must be implemented and controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA). The definition of security has to go much further beyond personal safety. It has to include just and enforceable laws, an independent judiciary, a functioning court system, and law enforcement agencies, as well as the development and activation of professional disciplined forces that are able to ensure safety and implement the law. Creation and deployment of such forces under occupation has to be a cooperative, coordinated effort with the Israeli security system. Without a political road leading to a viable state this effort will inevitably lead to accusations of collaboration, betrayal and a worse outcome than the miserable *status quo*.

Security has to extend to Gaza as well as the West Bank; the most promising policy proposed to end the deadlock is to turn over the crossings in Gaza to the control of the PA, thereby lifting the siege and boycott. The Quartet adopted this position at the Paris conference, and Israel and Hamas have to provide explanations should they oppose it. The will of the people in Gaza will have to be expressed in free and fair elections to end the Palestinian political impasse.

B. An economic system that balances the immediate needs for jobs and the rebuilding of infrastructure with a sound development plan to build institutions and policies leading to economic viability and independence that will put an end to hand-outs and subsidy. The PA has put together such a plan for reform and development that was submitted to the Paris Conference. Pledges that exceeded expectations affirmed the credibility of the Palestinian leadership that submitted the plan.

The private sector, i.e. global institutions, enterprises, and citizens have yet to assert their own role and defend their values as well as their interest in peace and in resolving this conflict. Much can and should be done to invest in development initially as a peace dividend and ultimately as a capitalist investment with an eye towards returns. The returns on investment in a peaceful Middle East can and should be substantive. Citizens of every country in the Middle East should benefit from these returns. The power of the private sector, its reach and its talent, must come into play. The private sector can be the best expression of global social responsibility if it helps buttress the economic underpinnings of a peaceful Palestine. The newly founded US-Palestinian Public Private

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This deep-seated pessimism has become a serious challenge facing the peace process. It severely challenges the ability of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to take the immediate steps that the Roadmap for peace prescribes toward resuming the peace process.

In a way, this public opinion challenge joins the “traditional” intractable problems of Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and West Bank settlements that the peace process aims to resolve. The Annapolis approach suggests tackling these issues head-on, setting the end of 2008 as a self-imposed “soft” deadline for achieving a final settlement.

This new approach, however, makes a distinction between achieving a peace accord and implementing it. An agreement between the two sides, according to the statement of understanding achieved in Annapolis, would only be implemented when the requirements of the first phase of the internationally sponsored Roadmap are met.

The self-imposed deadline and the linkage between the Roadmap and the implementation of a future agreement could serve as an incentive for robust and sincere mutual Israeli-Palestinian engagement toward an agreement. Unfortunately, these new elements are not enough to get this kind of engagement going. Neither is another new element introduced by the Annapolis process: the supportive role that the Arab world is playing in the drive toward peace.

These new elements are necessary, but not sufficient, because there is so little trust in the Annapolis process. Amazingly, despite the overall positive atmosphere surrounding November's Annapolis summit, and despite the presence of so many Arab states, polls showed that more Israelis considered the conference a failure than those who said it was a success. On November 28, the day after the summit, *Yedioth Ahronoth* ran a banner main headline celebrating a “New Beginning.” The next day, *Yedioth's* front page featured a snap-poll showing that 50% of Israelis considered Annapolis a failure while only 18% considered it a success. There were similar polling numbers on the Palestinian side.

Under such circumstances, it would be unrealistic to expect either the Israeli or the Palestinian leadership to respond to popular pressure. The feeble popular pressure that may exist is not likely to create the critical mass needed for decisive



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Partnership chaired by Walter Isaacson is the mechanism created by Secretary Rice to steer this effort. A Palestinian private sector conference hosting business leaders and global private investors will be held for this purpose in Bethlehem this spring.

2. Defeat defeatism. Cynics on all sides may or may not be wise, but they are hurtful. The worst of them are beneficiaries of a *status quo* that leaves them privileged and free to utter words with no obligations or sacrifices. The best have allowed past experiences of failure to foreclose all possibilities of change for a different future. Their attitude in sum serves to extend the dehumanizing and terrible *status quo* which is leading the Palestinian and Israeli people to catastrophe. We need to clearly, publicly, and loudly support the stated international goal of the two-state solution. Indeed an American national alliance with just this goal in mind should be mobilized to include strange bedfellows who agree on achieving a two-state solution no matter their motivation and their agenda. It will be a national alliance for two viable secure states negotiated between the parties, sanctioned and guaranteed by the existing instruments of the international community.

3. Speak up for the silent majority — the less strident, cowed majority that is defensive about being labeled as naïve and unrealistic or even traitorous. This majority refuses to believe that most human beings on “the other side” are evil but remains unwilling or incapable of checking and confronting its own extremists. A violent young zealot full of sound and fury against the “Muslims,” “Israelis,” “Jews,” “Arabs” or “Palestinians” needs no more to be “understood and defended” if he is on our side of the aisle than any racist criminal anywhere in the world. More, much more, public discourse and courage to go against the parameters of political correctness is needed. The media needs to uphold its own share of social responsibility to highlight the incredible efforts of so many decent people who toil for peace, at least as much as it covers the violent, fuming, or cold-blooded racists and their verbal and physical violence. There is a story of decency and courage — one that deserves to be told.

4. Abandon, ridicule, and shun all moves that undermine the emergence of a viable state. This is the first time that we have a budding partnership between Palestinian and Israeli leadership. To undercut this partnership by actions on the ground is to undermine the Palestinian leadership of

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government action.

These circumstances call out for an assertive, active American role.

For the Annapolis process to yield results, the Bush Administration, during the last year of the President’s term, must act upon its assertion that the creation of a Palestinian state is not only in the interest of Palestinians and Israelis but a key national security interest of the United States. President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have been making this point in recent weeks, but their rhetoric must be bolstered by their policy.

The administration should focus on two chief goals. One is to facilitate the fulfillment of both sides’ Roadmap obligations. The Bush Administration should go beyond demanding the fulfillment of Palestinian law enforcement and an Israeli freeze on settlement construction. It should provide incentives, guarantees, expertise, and support in an effort to immediately reduce friction on the ground.

While trying to reduce this friction, the administration should focus on another goal: to insure that the rough routine of Israeli-Palestinian relations — violence, settlement activity, terrorism, and collective punishment — does not impede the negotiations aimed at resolving the “core” issues of the conflict: refugees, Jerusalem, borders, settlements, and water.

In the past, bilateral negotiations often were held hostage to violent militants whose aim was to torpedo the peace process. This dynamic must not repeat itself, if the Annapolis process is to succeed.

This process is in dire need of credibility. The publics on both sides will consider it credible only if they see Israeli and Palestinian leaders acting with determination. Israelis and Palestinians need to see results. Washington must help create momentum by persistently rewarding positive performance with positive reinforcement.

As the process gains momentum, it hopefully will generate the trust and hope on both sides of the Green Line that are essential for its long-term sustainability. But such a momentum cannot be taken for granted. It has a chance of evolving only if this administration — and most probably the one that



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Mahmud 'Abbas and Salam Fayyad and boost their known political opposition. The recent three-day Israeli military campaign in Nablus has undermined the Palestinian leaders, demoralized their security services, and vindicated Hamas and their rejectionists. Settlements must freeze, not just to leave room for a Palestinian state, but to retain the political viability of the present Palestinian leadership. Israel has a clear cut choice of dealing with a leadership that is committed to negotiate a two state solution or having to contend with one that refuses to recognize Israel. Decisions made by Israel to support or withhold support from those who are trying to build a new Palestine will have existential consequences for both peoples.

The two peoples can gradually, and by choice, become normal citizens of normal nations, or they can descend further into their tribal, feudal conflict over grazing grounds and continue to fight over metaphysical symbols and their baggage of glory and suffering. Now is the time to help sustain the momentum toward peace.

Ziad Asali, MD is the President and Founder of American Task Force on Palestine.

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will follow — act as a superpower should act when pursuing a national security goal.

Ori Nir is Spokesman for Americans for Peace Now.