

A PALESTINIAN VIEW **Beyond Annapolis**

by Rafiq Hussein

It takes a lot of courage to agree to write about what may happen beyond Annapolis when the outcome of Annapolis itself--even though we are now a few hours before the conference--is yet unclear.

Nevertheless, let's dream together for a minute and suppose that Annapolis will achieve the impossible, where the wise leaders of Israel--emulating King Solomon the Wise--say:

- * We accept that the Palestinians can have a state of their own and live with dignity and peace in 22 percent of historic Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) in return for the right of Israel to exist in the rest of historic Palestine in peace and security.
- * We accept the Arab initiative and are ready to return the Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms to Syria and Lebanon in return for the normalization of relations with them and 50 other Arab and Islamic states.
- * We are ready to work on a just and agreed-upon solution for the Palestinian refugees.

Should this happen, then the entire world would have changed beyond Annapolis--not only the Middle East! And we will all shout "Hallelujah, yet another miracle in the Holy Land!!"

But alas! We all must be rudely awakened from our deep sleep where we--like Martin Luther King--had a dream, into the reality that Annapolis will not produce results that come close to resembling this dream.

The most probable scenario therefore is that--not having learned from King Solomon the Wise--the leaders of Israel will say:

- * We cannot accept that the Palestinians have a state in 22 percent of historic Palestine; we can only offer them parts of the West Bank (for now, without specifics).
- * We don't accept the Arab initiative in its totality but we want to normalize with the Arab and Islamic states, nevertheless.
- * We are not ready to return the whole of the Golan Heights to Syria and Shebaa Farms to Lebanon--but want a full peace agreement with both countries.
- * We are not ready to discuss the refugee problem and will not accept any of the refugees back into Israel.

The gap between the dream and the reality is therefore immense.

As Palestinians, our expectations have dramatically changed since US President George W. Bush called for the Annapolis meeting five months back, from dreaming about a document defining parameters and guiding principles for the six final status issues (borders, refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, water, and security) to acquiescing to a statement of intent about creating conditions for peace and working on the first phase of the roadmap adopted by the Quartet (but without using the words "immediate and parallel" in reference to each side's obligations).

At the start, the US administration wanted to define the "end game" and "to build the building, then put in the furniture" but it, too, had to moderate its expectations.

So how then do we move forward beyond the "realistic" scenario of the Annapolis document? And how can we--the Palestinian moderates--convince the Palestinian voters to support peace and give them the perception that things will improve politically, economically and socially?

Here it is important to realize that the Palestinian voter, while free, is not independent. He/she is affected to a very large extent by what Israel does around him/her and will vote accordingly. That is to say if, before a Palestinian election, Israel removes checkpoints, releases prisoners, halts incursions, freezes building of settlements and the wall, then the majority of Palestinian voters will support moderate candidates. If, on the other hand, Israel does the complete opposite (which it did in the period before January 2006 and the parliamentary elections that brought Hamas a majority of seats) then the Palestinian voter will support the extremists and radicals.

Given all the deficiencies of Annapolis, and taking into consideration what the Israeli position will most likely be at that conference, and since we do not occupy Israel but the opposite is true, there are three tracks that we (Palestinians, Israelis and the international community) need to move along so that the Palestinian people's perceptions are strengthened in the direction of peace and coexistence.

The first is, of course, advancing the political track that is obviously not moving very far or very fast for reasons that only Israel understands and enforces. Yet a well-drafted document and an immediate serious-looking negotiations process would help give some of the Palestinians some hope (in contrast to a dream document and a process that would give all Palestinians all hope possible, or a lousy one that gives no Palestinian any hope).

The second track involves creating access, movement and other confidence-building measures, where most checkpoints are removed (they are useless, anyway). Movement of goods and people should be made easier, thousands of prisoners (from a total of more than 11,000) are released, settlement and wall construction is frozen, East Jerusalem institutions are re-opened and life in Palestinian areas becomes as near-to-normal as possible.

The third track involves economic revival in the West Bank and Gaza. This means that many job-generating development projects are initiated and that at the end of each calendar month, all government employees receive a full salary without delay and the private sector is promptly paid for the services it renders to the public sector and its beneficiaries.

The Palestinians--for their part--also need to continue to work with full speed and intent on their obligations under the first phase of the roadmap, especially with regard to security, which is Israel's main pretext for building the wall and denying us access and movement. The moderate leadership will also have to convince the majority of the population in Gaza that there is a way forward through peace and coexistence, so that they (the people) force the extremists to rescind their coup d'etat and accept the legitimacy of and new elections for both the presidency and the Legislative Council.

This way, we hope that the moderates--armed with progress on the above three tracks--regain their control of PA institutions in a democratic and non-violent manner.

If we are successful, even to varying degrees, on the three tracks, we will see a positive, supportive and more patient Palestinian public with the peace process beyond Annapolis. On the other hand, if we are not successful on a combination of these three tracks, then we can kiss moderation and the peace process goodbye and both of us--Israelis and Palestinians--

will be rolling down a steep hill toward further disaster.- *Published 26/11/2007 © bitterlemons.org*

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