

Palestinians say Annapolis may be postponed — or it will fail

Marian Houk

Two veteran Palestinian representatives who are not currently government ministers have painted a very gloomy picture today of prospects for the Annapolis peace conference.

Nabil Shaath, a former negotiator in the Oslo process from 1994-2000, and former Minister of Cooperation/Foreign Minister in the Palestinian Authority, told a conference in Ramallah on Saturday that in the last two to three days the Israelis have said they will not implement anything as long as there are Qassam rockets flying out of Gaza.

Shaath said that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has told the Palestinians to have no contact with Gazans or Israel will cut ties — yet at the same time Olmert is holding the (now West-Bank based) Palestinian Authority responsible for ensuring that no rockets are shot at Israel.

Shaath said that in his view, “Annapolis is dead — though it goes against my life-long optimism to say so”.

The only hope to salvage the meeting, he suggested, would be for U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice to come back without delay to set things right.

“Yesterday, the Israelis reneged on (1) delivering any implementation of their obligations under the Road Map prior to the Annapolis meeting; (2) on the tripartite committee (reportedly to be composed of Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice) to monitor any problems with implementing the Road Map obligations; and (3) they reneged on the document that they were supposed to be drafting with the Palestinians”.

So, Shaath said, “What’s left?” He told the conference, on Palestinian-European relations, that “the death of Annapolis does not mean the end of the peace process”.

He added later: “I am not pessimistic about reaching a solution, but about Annapolis ... and about the policies of Olmert”.

What the Americans should do, Shaath said, is the following: set the terms of reference and the rules of the game; set deadlines and timetables for actions on the ground; help draft the document; have monitors in place on the ground during the drafting process to see if anything goes wrong; be prepared to provide peacekeepers once a peace deal is agreed; set up an arbitration mechanism; and put together a program of economic follow-up.

The Israeli program, Shaath said, is “totally incompatible with international law on the question of the 1967 borders, on the division of Jerusalem, and on some reasonable solution to the refugee problem”. And there is no need to use excessive force, as he suggested Israel did: “force is passé, force is caduc” Shaath said. “Let’s go to the win-win strategy”.

Earlier, Dr. Charles Kupchan, Europe Director of the Council on Foreign Relations, said that he believed there was a sense of urgency in Washington about the Middle East and Israeli-Palestinian issues. “The U.S. needs a win in this region, and Democrats and Republicans alike see a need for advancement in the peace process”.

He said that “the clock is ticking and time is not on the sides of the Palestinians...I am not a Middle East expert, and I don’t think about the peace process as much as many in this room do, but I’ll be blunt: you (Palestinians) have a very weak hand. Israel has its GDP (gross domestic product), and its Army, and it’s got the land. You (speaking to Palestinians) need to make an offer that the key parties cannot refuse — in particular that the U.S. cannot refuse....I don’t know what offer (that would be) ... but if you’re still talking about the ‘67 borders and the right of return (of Palestinian refugees), you’re not living in the real world”.

Dr. Nasser Al-Qudwa, former Palestinian Ambassador to the UN in New York, and former Palestinian Foreign Minister, said that “the approach now is to go to Annapolis, which will call for ‘serious negotiations’ afterwards, and that means committees and sub-committees will be established, and there will be talk about the Road Map and all that...This will not lead to any results. What is needed is a stop, a total halt and cessation of settlement activity. This is the only possible approach, otherwise, we are just offering a cover for Israeli activities”.

The serving Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad made the opening speech in the conference on Saturday in Ramallah. Fayyad said that “This 40-year occupation must come to an end quickly, leading to self-determination and independent statehood for Palestine. The (Israeli) settlement activities must end — especially if the goal is a two-states solution. It is now time to act”.

He added that “Just as we Palestinians are moving forward on security matters, we also want to see a release of our Prisoners. It cannot convincingly be argued that the continued detention of 12,000 prisoners is needed for the security of Israel”.