

From Ankara to Annapolis: Turkey and the Middle East Peace Process

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Summary

The two-day summit in Annapolis ended on 29 November, 2007. Israel and the Palestine Authority agreed to start a new peace initiative. The Annapolis Summit has a special significance for Turkey. Israeli President Shimon Peres and President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas came together in Ankara before the Annapolis Summit. This important and progressive initiative represents the changing vision of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey had been keen to get involved in the peace process for a long time. Now, Turkey has a chance to be a new actor in the process, one with fresh and new ideas.

The Middle East Peace Process, which started with the signing of the Oslo Agreements in 1993, has gone through various stages without leading to viable and lasting solution. The Oslo Agreements called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the establishment of a Palestine State within five years. During these direct negotiations, both sides came much closer to accepting each other than ever before. However, most of the agreements were never implemented. After the start of Second *Intifada* in 2000, the Israeli Government increased military pressure on the Palestinians, and the peace process was completely stopped. In 2002, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia offered a peace plan. The plan was approved in Beirut at the Summit of Arab Union, but even this approval could not manage to revive the negotiations. In order to stop the escalating conflict between Israel and Palestine, the U.S., Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations (Middle East Quartet) came together in the same year. The “road map,” the solution offered by the Middle East Quartet, sought to find a final and comprehensive solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict before the end of the 2005. The road map raised hopes among the nations; however, both sides failed to take significant, permanent steps to fulfill their obligations. Subsequently, a new wave of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians derailed the process.

The establishment of an independent Palestinian State will be the main subject of future negotiations. This has been the official US policy since 2002. On June 24, 2002 President Bush announced that a stable, peaceful Palestinian state is necessary to achieve the security that Israel longs for and he challenged Israel to

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take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable, credible Palestinian state.¹ The Annapolis summit, held on November 27, was a part of that policy. After seven years of stalled talks, Israelis and Palestinians came together in Annapolis in response to the U.S. initiative. The invitation of the Bush Administration was accepted by more than forty countries and international organizations, although nobody expected a final solution from the summit. The goal of the Annapolis Conference was declared to be the achievement of progress in the Middle East peace process and the launching of renewed negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The Bush Administration would like to reach the peace goal before December 2008, the end of Bush's presidency. However, this will not be easy. Both sides are represented by weak governments. Ehud Olmert, elected Israeli Prime Minister in March 2006, has never been a popular political figure in Israel. Furthermore, he has lost most of his support since the war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Now, in the last months of his ministry, he is investigated under charges of corruption. Likewise, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and the newly appointed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, do not represent all of the Palestinian people. And although Hamas was not invited to Annapolis, it remains a party too strong to be ignored. Moreover, the Israeli and Palestinian sides both went into the peace negotiations before solving their internal problems. This sobering reality damaged the soul of the summit from the beginning.

Peace in Palestine

The most ironic aspect of the summit was the fact that the Palestinian government went to Annapolis to establish peace with Israel before ending the fight inside its own territory. Palestine had entered a period of chaos after the victory of Hamas in January 2006 elections. Hamas, which received 56% of the total vote, won 74 seats in the parliament and thus came to power. The response of the international community was immediate. The U.S. and the EU did not recognize the new government; they immediately cut contacts and stopped providing assistance to Palestine. Israel put economic pressure on the Palestinians and increased military measures. The mistakes of Hamas as an inexperienced political party and the escalating conflict between al-Fatah and Hamas militants dragged Palestine into crises. The western countries ignored the democratically elected Hamas government, and chose instead to contact Mahmoud Abbas for direct negotiations. This policy created a two-headed administration in Palestine which, in turn, led to internal fighting between two groups as each vied for more power.

The escalating conflict between Hamas and al-Fatah increased overall tension in the region, and neighboring countries worried about the internal war. The Saudi Arabian initiative brought the two sides together in Mecca. On February 8, 2007 al-Fatah and Hamas made a compromise on an accord for the formation of the new Palestinian national unity government. In the new government, Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas, remained prime minister and Hamas controlled nine ministries. Six ministries were given to al-Fatah and the

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020624-3.html>

remainders were shared between independents and smaller parties. On March 17, 2007, the Palestinian Legislative Council held a vote of confidence for the new national unity government and approved its establishment. Although the new government of Palestine was welcomed by most European countries, they still refused to have contacts with its Hamas members. The majority of Hamas party figures in the government caused a disappointment in the Bush administration. It announced that the U.S. will have contact only with non-Hamas members of the government, and promised to redirect some assistance to Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Other western countries also used al-Fatah members of the cabinet to by-pass Hamas. As a result, both sides began to carry out different policies and to clash with each other. The U.S. financial assistance to the National Security Forces, which were under the direct command of Abbas, caused another crisis between al-Fatah and Hamas.²

On June 13, 2007, Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip. President Abbas declared a state of emergency in the Gaza Strip and dissolved the national unity government. Abbas dismissed Prime Minister Haniyeh and appointed an interim government led by the former finance minister Salam Fayyad on June 14. The U.S. and the EU countries pledged their full support to the new non-Hamas government. Following the establishment of the Fayyad Government, both the U.S. and the EU lifted the financial and diplomatic embargo on the Palestinian Authority. Despite their support and financial aid, the West Bank-based government remained weak. Fayyad refused to negotiate with Hamas members unless they recognized his government's authority and leave Gaza's control to them. On the other hand, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh declared the Fayyad government to be illegal and said that any decision of this government would be valid only in the West Bank which Hamas does not control.

Israel also recognized the new government and announced that they are ready for cooperation. The aim of Israel is not only to strengthen the Fayyad government in order to isolate Hamas but also persuade the Palestinians to resume peace negotiations under Fayyad. The Fayyad government needs the support of Israel and the West to strengthen its position in administration. The lifting of embargos provides an important opportunity to increase public support. However, such support is not enough to establish security in Palestine. Although Hamas lost its majority in the parliament due to the arrest of forty of its members, it has still strong support among the people. Hamas is a powerful actor in Palestine political life that cannot be ignored. The Fayyad government cannot implement any decision, particularly on the Gaza issue, without the acceptance of Hamas.

The policies of the Western countries, which serve to deepen the gap between Hamas and al-Fatah instead of establishing compromise, is the main problem undermining the most recent peace initiatives. The rift between the two parties is longstanding and may prove difficult to repair. In February 2005, the newly elected president Mahmoud Abbas had come together with Ariel Sharon in Sharm el-Sheikh to negotiate a cease-fire agreement. At the end of that meeting, the sides announced to cease all violence against each other. Hamas issued a

² "Congress okays \$59m in U.S. funds for Abbas' security forces", Haaretz, 12 April, 2007

statement and said that the cease-fire is not their position, this is the decision of Palestine Authority and they will not respect it. Abbas deployed security forces within the Palestinian territories to prevent attacks, and Israeli officials approved the release of some Palestinian prisoners in response. In spite of these confidence-building steps, the agreement was never fully implemented because of Hamas' opposition. Today, Hamas continues to oppose the decisions of the Fayyad government. The deposed Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh stated that they reject all outcomes of Annapolis and do not recognize any commitments for Arabs and Palestinians.³

Palestine remains both geographically and politically divided between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It will not be possible to establish peace between Israel and Palestine unless peace is established first among the Palestinians.

The New Actor in the Peace Process: Turkey

The Annapolis Summit has a special significance for Turkey. Israeli President Shimon Peres and President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas came together in Ankara before the Annapolis Summit. This important and progressive initiative represents the changing vision of Turkish foreign policy. As a result of the success in the Ankara meeting, Turkish government was invited to the Annapolis summit. Turkey had been keen to get involved in the peace process for a long time. Now, she has a chance to be a new actor in the process, one with fresh and new ideas.

Turkey's involvement represents more than just a case of seeking peaceful relations within the neighborhood. By implementing a multi-dimensional policy, Turkey wants to have a louder voice in the region. As it adopts a pro-active foreign policy, Turkey seeks to have more influential position on the regional map. Although this new approach is causing some problems with the U.S., the Turkish government is seeking to implement its own alternative policies, especially in regards to the Middle East.

One of the first visible results of such policy was seen after the Hamas victory in the Palestinian public elections. On 16 February 2006, Khalid Meshal, the political chief of Hamas in exile, came to visit Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül and his officials. Reactions came quickly, not only from Israel and the U.S., but also from oppositional circles within Turkey. A very realistic approach to Turkish foreign policy came from EU Envoy Javier Solana, who stated that any government holding negotiations with Hamas should encourage them to follow the road map.⁴ Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan asserted that everyone has to accept the outcome of free and fairly held Palestinian elections, and should consider converting these results into a chance for peace.⁵

At a time when almost all countries shut their doors to Hamas, Turkey was one which left dialogue channels open. Although the Meshal visit caused a short-term crisis in Israeli-

³ "Angry Gazans reject Mid-East talks", BBC News, 27.11.2007

⁴ "Ziyaret dünyada yankı uyandırdı", Radikal, 18.02.2006

⁵ "Erdoğan'dan ABD ve İsrail'e Hamas Uyarısı: Bunun adı demokrasi!", Radikal, 22.02.2006

Turkish relations, Turkey ultimately managed to maintain its good long-term relationship with Israel. The many ongoing mutual agreements between Israel and Turkey are evidence of these good terms. Additionally, Turkey is a necessary partner for Israel's regional policies.

Turkey is the only country that maintains good relations with all of the three main actors in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By hosting both Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Head of State Mahmoud Abbas in Ankara on 17 November 2007, Turkey made an influential show before the Annapolis conference. The seventh Ankara Forum meeting was held with the participation of the three presidents at the presidential palace in Ankara. Presidents Gul, Peres and Abbas signed a joint declaration stating that they support the Turkish private sector activities in the Palestinian Territories and the new Tarqumia industrial estate project in the West Bank. The Ankara Forum was established as a trilateral cooperation initiative by TOBB, the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges, and their Israeli and Palestinian counterparts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The Forum is currently working on mutual projects related to the establishment of industrial estates in the Palestinian Territories. A similar business-centered initiative will attempt to implement this model to improve relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Istanbul Forum, which was founded last month and will hold its second meeting in Islamabad in January 2008. Such business investments projects contribute considerably to Turkey's efforts to have a role in the region as an arbitrator.

In the Middle East, where varied political interests are present, a sustainable peace is not possible with the exclusion of even one single actor. Turkey's diplomatic attacks before Annapolis were not limited with Peres and Abbas meeting in Ankara. Turkey, which sees Syria, Lebanon, and Iran as the indispensable partners of the Middle East peace, contacted all actors to create a negotiation space between them. A few days before the Annapolis summit, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan spoke to Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad on the phone to overcome the deadlock over the delayed presidential elections in Lebanon. Erdoğan expressed his concerns over the situation in Lebanon and requested Iranian support. Turkey believed that the political instability in Lebanon which also strengthened the Hizbullah might damage the peace talks in Annapolis. Due to that, Turkish Government chose to pursue a kind of preventive diplomacy and tried to establish more secure environment for the peace talks.

Turkey's multifaceted relations within the region increase her chances to become a significant arbitrator in the Middle East conflict. It is a fact that Turkey does not have the economic and political power of the U.S. and cannot use the same kind of pressure to convince the sides. However, the repeated occlusions of the Middle East peace process are a natural result of the problematic methods used at talks and proposals, as well as the manners of the main arbitrator, the U.S. Turkey can bring a new soul to the process by offering a different voice. The Ankara meeting of Peres and Abbas, and the developments during the invitation process to the Annapolis summit, has created opportunities for a more active role for Turkey in the Middle East peace talks.

After Annapolis

The two-day summit in Annapolis ended on 29 November, 2007. Israel and the Palestine Authority agreed to launch peace negotiations.⁶ The first session of the steering committees will be held on 12 December 2007. The target date to conclude a peace agreement was announced as December 2008. While the Bush Administration is eager to solve the Middle East question before the end of Bush's presidency, many unresolved issues remain to be discussed, including the status of Jerusalem, the borders of a Palestinian state, the future of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the fate of the Palestinian refugees.

The Annapolis summit does not change the basic structure of the road map of April 2003. The road map had offered a three-phase plan. In the first phase, Palestinians undertake an unconditional cessation of violence; promise to end terrorism; pledge comprehensive political reform in preparation for statehood, including drafting a Palestinian constitution; and realize free, fair and open elections. In turn, Israel withdraws from Palestinian areas occupied from September 28, 2000 and freezes all settlement activity. The second phase involves the creation of an independent Palestinian State. This phase was to start after the Palestinian elections and end with the possible creation of an independent Palestinian state with provisional borders in 2003. An International Conference was slated to be part of this process. The goal of the third phase was a permanent status agreement to be achieved before the end of 2005. The hard issues, such as the status of Jerusalem, the fate of refugees were to be negotiated in the Second International Conference of the plan.

Both Israel and Palestine have committed themselves to implementing their obligations as outlined by the road map until they reach a peace treaty. The United States will monitor and judge the fulfillment of these commitments. The Israeli government is acting as if it is ready to fulfill all obligations of the road map. According to the statements of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Israel agrees to take necessary steps for the establishment of a Palestine State if the Palestine Authority will manage to end terror and violence against Israel. Israel needs a Palestinian State due to demographic facts. Most of Palestinians also reject one-state solution. Olmert warned his people that the expansion of the settlements is making Israel look increasingly like an apartheid regime and the world could impose a "South African solution" on Israel if two states are not created.⁷

However, Israel's version of the road map has led to 14 reservations and several resultant directives. These reservations undermine the structure of the plan. In light of these reservations, the Palestinians may establish their own state, but it will be not viable. Israel will retain settlement blocks; continue to control the borders and the movement of people, internal and international trade, and almost all natural resources. Any artificial state established under such conditions would surely be dependent on Israel. According to Israel's specifications, the Palestinians will dismantle the existing security organizations and implement security reforms during the course of which new organizations will be formed

⁶ "Joint Understanding Read by President Bush at Annapolis Conference", 27.11.2007, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/95696.htm>

⁷ "Olmert warns of 'end of Israel'", BBC News, 29.11.2007

and act to combat terror, violence and incitement. The Monitoring mechanism will be under American management. The provisional state will have provisional borders and certain aspects of sovereignty, be fully demilitarized with no military forces, but only with police and internal security forces of limited scope and armaments, be without the authority to undertake defense alliances or military cooperation, and Israeli control over the entry and exit of all persons and cargo, as well as of its air space and electromagnetic spectrum. There will be no involvement with issues pertaining to the final settlement. Settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza are among the issues not to be discussed:⁸

The ignored Hamas party is another factor to be taken into account when considering the future of peace negotiations. Hamas has announced that it will not be bound by anything decided in Annapolis. Hamas rejects negotiations with Israel and continues to engage in militant activities. Abbas has not established full control over the Palestinian Authority's territories. It is not easy to establish a stable peace under these conditions.

Recommendations

- Turkey has pursued a successful active policy in the last term of the peace process. The Ankara meeting demonstrates the will and the capability of Turkey to facilitate the peace process. Turkey should develop relations with all actors in the region in order to become a reliable partner and mediator in the region.
- Israel and Palestine are not the sole actors of the peace process. Syria, Lebanon, and Iran should be part of future negotiations. The Middle East conflicts can not reach a sustainable peace without these countries. Turkey has played an important role by convincing all sides of the vitality of Syria's participation. Turkey should continue its policy of regional engagement.
- The U.S. and the EU should abandon their policy that deepens the gap between Hamas and al-Fatah. They should try to establish compromise between them. The Mecca Agreement hosted by the King of Saudi Arabia should be revitalized and the help of other Arab countries should be sought to bring Hamas and al-Fatah together.
- Israeli reservations about the road map weaken the foundation of the plan. Israel should be persuaded to lift these reservations and fulfill its obligations.
- The road map, offered by the Middle East Quartet in 2003, is still the basic document for future negotiations. However, neither side took significant steps to fulfill their obligations. The deficient parts of the plan and the mistakes in the implementation should be revised.

⁸"Israel's road map reservations", Unofficial text, Haaretz, 27.05.2003

- According to the Annapolis statement, the United States will monitor and judge the fulfillment of the commitments. But the U.S. is no longer seen as an honest broker. The dominance of the U.S should be balanced through parallel peace meetings and reports. Alternative monitoring can strengthen the process.
- Confidence building between the sides is more important than the implementations of details. "Confidence-building measures" of the agreements should mean more than words. To achieve this goal, Israel should abandon its skepticism regarding Palestinian policies and take steps for the establishment of a viable Palestinian State.