

Beyond Annapolis: The Security Aspects

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Q1: What are the post-Annapolis military implications for Israel and Palestine?

A1: The fact that Israeli-Syrian negotiations have now become a possibility may reduce tensions between the two countries and the prospects for war. This is particularly likely if Russia presses for a peace settlement and limits any destabilizing arms exports to Syria.

Much still depends, however, on developments in Lebanon. Israel is deeply concerned about the steady rearmament of Hezbollah by Syria and Iran, while Syria sees a “friendly” (and Syrian-influenced) Lebanon as a vital security interest. There were few prospects for any other kind of Arab-Israeli conflict or clash before the Annapolis meeting, but the resumption of active negotiations may have marginally reduced the already low probability of such a clash. The key wild card, and one not affected by Annapolis, is Iran and the Iranian nuclear issue. The fact that Iran was not present, immediately denounced the conference as a failure, and continues to arm Hezbollah is a serious issue.

Q2: Hamas military commanders have shown a willingness to act independently of political leadership. Will political leaders be able to rein in Hamas hard-liners?

A2: Hamas has a clear incentive to sabotage the follow-up peace negotiations and exploit any delays, failures, or expansion of settlements and Israeli security measures in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel also remains highly vulnerable to Hamas action because virtually any major act of terrorism or violence—particularly coming from the West Bank—might force a weak Israeli government to overreact and delay or limit the peace process.

Hamas’s political leaders are likely to exploit this situation rather than have their military leaders act independently. They are also likely to use their security forces to put continued pressure on Fatah elements in Gaza and try to attack or destabilize elements of the Abbas government in the West Bank. They may, however, seek to put the blame for any internal Palestinian violence on Fatah and Abbas and claim that acts of violence are rogue or perpetrated by other opponents of Israel to ease any resulting tensions with Arab states, hostile reaction from the West, and the level of Israeli reprisals.

Q3: How important is the appointment of General James Jones (USMC, ret.) and the U.S. follow-up in economic and security aid?

A3: The United States needs to do more than press ahead with the peace negotiations. It is the only power that can provide the Abbas government with serious aid in strengthening Palestinian security forces, giving them the ability to provide internal security, and persuading Israel that it can steadily expand the real-world level of sovereignty the Palestinians can exercise in a state, whether initially a West Bank state or one that combines the West Bank, Gaza, and some part of East Jerusalem.

U.S.-led efforts in increasing security aid and economic aid will also be critical to winning Palestinian support for what are certain to be hard compromises if a peace settlement proves possible—and to either help the Abbas government win back control of Gaza or persuade Hamas that it must compromise in ways that lead it to accept a peace.

Q4: How important are the Syrian and Lebanese issues?

A4: Although domestic U.S. politics tend to focus on dialogue with Iran, the prospects for improving relations with Syria may be substantially better and provide more real and immediate security benefits. U.S. efforts to persuade Syria to secure the Iraqi border have had some success, and Syria’s longer-term interests do not coincide with those of Iran. If Syria’s

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presence at the summit leads to serious negotiations, this can aid both the search for a comprehensive peace and help provide broader regional stability.

Much does depend, however, on a serious Syrian interest in peace with Israel and Syrian willingness to accept a compromise president and government in Lebanon. Continuing arms transfers to a now rearmed Hezbollah, further nuclear adventures, and any new Syrian tolerance of Iraqi insurgent activity could make progress impossible.

Q5: What impact will the summit have on broader U.S.–Middle East relations?

A5: Ironically, the United States has come under attack both inside and outside the Middle East for renewing its active role in the peace process on grounds ranging from charges it is merely making cosmetic efforts to rebuild its position in the Middle East to charges that any new effort is premature because it cannot succeed and the resulting failure will make things worse. The fact is, however, that Secretary Rice has clearly committed her prestige and that of President Bush to a serious and continuing effort at a time when the lack of a major U.S. role in pushing the peace process forward was a key factor in shaping Arab and Islamic anger and hostility to the United States.

This points out the reality that Palestinians, Arabs, and others outside the United States and Israel must see a real, continuing, and high-profile U.S. effort for the summit to have any positive impact on the broader nature of U.S. relations with other Middle Eastern states. They must see from U.S. actions that it is objective and balanced in seeking progress and compromises from both Israel and the Palestinians and sincere in seeking to help the Palestinians build a real state.

At the same time, virtually all of the Arab states at the summit realize that 2008 may prove to be an artificial deadline. Few, if any, really expect or demand rapid success as long as the United States makes a consistent effort and any delays and problems do not lead to a situation where the next U.S. administration does not sustain the new level of activity that Secretary Rice and President Bush have begun.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace effort, and any new Israeli-Syrian negotiations, will also interact with how the United States deals with Iraq, Iran, the war on terrorism, and key friendly Arab states. Rebuilding and strengthening the U.S. security position in the broader Middle East has four elements, not one. In practice, the United States must make consistent progress in several, both during the last months of the Bush administration and in the transition to the next presidency, and may well be judged by its performance in dealing with the weakest link.

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