

**“Slouching Towards Annapolis”
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Strategists, diplomats and would-be peacemakers in the Palestinian-Israeli arena have always sought to involve neighboring Arab states in the process, sometimes in order to provide political backing to a Palestinian side in need of Arab reinforcement, sometimes to sweeten the deal for Israel, and sometimes even to bypass obstacles created by the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock. Next month's expected conference in Annapolis, Maryland constitutes the Bush Administration's most serious effort to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process since it assumed power in 2001, on the heels of President Clinton's failed efforts and the outbreak of sustained Palestinian-Israeli violence. According to the American scenario, not only Egypt and Jordan, which have diplomatic relations with Israel, must be present to lend their symbolic weight to the effort, but also additional Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, as well as parties from outside the region, should attend as well. A new proposal by senior foreign policy figures from outside the Administration that Annapolis inaugurate a sustained initiative to resolve the conflict also refers to the roles of Arab states, whether in preventing arms smuggling, including Syria and Hamas in the dialogue, or giving credence to the principles contained in the Arab summit's peace initiative (*New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2007). But what do the Arab states think about the roles being assigned to them?

Uniformly, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, America's three main Arab allies, have adopted a low public profile as they wait to see the nature of the Annapolis gathering. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been less than enthusiastic about lending a hand to the effort, given its skepticism that the meeting will begin alleviating the plight of the Palestinians in the territories. With their public opinions being extremely hostile to the US, a premature embrace of an American-sponsored process could prove to be more than embarrassing. For Riyadh, a return to the Madrid formula of steps towards normalization with Israel requires Israeli reciprocity. Thus, the Saudis, Egyptians and Jordanians have all sought guarantees from the Americans that Annapolis would be more than just a photo op. Not only must it produce immediate and tangible Israeli concessions, such as the freezing of settlement building, the dismantling of illegal outposts, the release of prisoners and the removal of checkpoints, it also must demonstrate intent to achieve a final and comprehensive settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict within a reasonable and agreed upon time

frame, and include clear dates for the commencement of negotiations and a coherent follow-up mechanism with a visible role for the UN.

At the outset, the US had no interest in involving Syria in the Annapolis gathering, given the fact that Bashar al-Asad's regime had placed itself opposed to the US on nearly every important regional issue - Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian-Israeli arena. However, Washington ultimately accepted the entreaties of its Arab allies, issuing an invitation, albeit a distinctly lukewarm one, to Damascus, in its capacity as a member of the Arab Peace Initiative Committee, while making it clear that the focus of Annapolis would be the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. In a further sop to Arab sensibilities, it appears likely that whatever declaration comes out of the Annapolis meeting will include references to the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese negotiation tracks. For Cairo, Amman and Riyadh, this should be sufficient, providing cover against possible charges from Syria that they were abandoning it in the face of American and Israeli diktats. In actuality, Bashar Asad is viewed extremely critically in all three capitals, thanks to his deepening alliance with Iran, his support for the Lebanese Hizballah, which contributed to the destruction in Lebanon during the summer 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, likely Syrian complicity in the murder of Lebanon's prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and Syria's continued violent meddling in Lebanese politics. Saudi-Syrian relations, in particular, are currently at an unprecedented low. In other words, in strategic terms, Syria continues to stand apart from, and even opposite to the deeply held concerns among Sunni Arab states regarding ascending Shiite power, backed by Iran, in the region. Their complete silence in the wake of Israel's apparent destruction of a secret Syrian military facility last month speaks volumes regarding the depth of the fissure between them and Damascus.

Nonetheless, neither Syria nor the Saudi-Egyptian-Amman triumvirate seek to entirely burn the bridges to one another, even if they differ over attendance at the Annapolis conference. Syria will not agree to the token standing being offered at Annapolis, and will attend only if its interests are to be squarely addressed. Will it seek to actually sabotage the meeting? Signaling that it can do so, Damascus has begun preparing to host a counter-gathering, with Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other anti-Fatah Palestinian groups. PA President Mahmud Abbas, who is working hard to bolster his shaky position vis-a-vis Hamas via backing from Arab states, has already beseeched Damascus not to seek to undermine the Annapolis conference, and participating Arab governments can be expected to do the same. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are also trying to avoid antagonizing Syria as they seek to resolve Lebanon's political deadlock by finding a compromise candidate, apparently commander of the army Gen. Michael Suleiman, for the post of president. Failure to peacefully resolve the Lebanese impasse would mark one more blow to the already largely hollow notion

of collective Arab action. Conversely, Egypt, long the self-styled leader of the Arab world, would be delighted to achieve a diplomatic success there.

US standing in the region, both among governments and societies, has suffered considerable damage in recent years, as a result of the Iraq war and its support for Israel. Traditionally pro-American Arab regimes are therefore understandably reluctant to get behind the initiative of an American administration which has made resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict a lower priority than other more pressing matters. Moreover, they too have myriad important issues on their regional and domestic agendas. But neither do they desire to appear before American public opinion or the US Congress as placing undue obstacles in the way of Annapolis. Hence, while not being optimistic, they appear to have little choice but to play a supporting role. Their best hope remains for a conference that loosens the Palestinian-Israeli logjam. If this does come to pass, their presence will restore at least a bit of luster to the tattered image of the Arab collective as being impotent and helpless - not a bad thing, domestically or regionally.