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## Arab Neighbors May Hold Key

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As the Annapolis peace parley rapidly approaches, some of the Arab and Muslim players expected to play a key role in creating conditions for a favorable outcome are proving to be more of an obstacle than an asset.

Egypt, Syria and Turkey have been complicating efforts to hold what

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the United States envisions to be a tipping point in the long-dormant peace process.

On Tuesday, one of those nations seemed to reverse course: Egypt threw its support behind the peace conference after Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit met with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Syria, however, has proven more of a problem. If Annapolis is supposed to trigger a process of reconciliation between Israel and the entire Arab world, it is imperative that Syria attend. But Syrian leader Bashar Assad says he has no intention of coming to Maryland unless a much clearer offer of a deal with Israel is put on the table.

Complicating matters further are strains between Israel and Turkey, which reportedly is trying to mediate between Jerusalem and Damascus.

The difficulties on the Palestinian track could be helped by a Syrian presence in Annapolis. Although Assad says he has yet to receive a serious offer, he went to Turkey on Tuesday for regional talks that were to include discussion of Israel. Assad told the Tunisian daily al-Shuruq

that the Turks have been mediating between Israel and Syria for the past six months.

Just two weeks ago, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan came to Jerusalem after visiting Damascus. Before that the Turks initiated a failed back channel involving former Israeli Foreign Ministry Director General Alon Liel and Syrian-American Abe Suleiman.

Ironically, some Israelis believe the chances of accommodation with Syria are greater in the wake of the reported Israeli airstrike last month against an alleged Syrian nuclear facility. Top Israel Defense Forces generals believe there now is a real chance for a dialogue with Syria and Israel should explore it.

In farewell interviews, the outgoing deputy chief of staff, Maj.-Gen Moshe Kaplinsky, argued that detaching Syria from the Iranian-led "axis of evil" was a vital Israeli and American interest.

"There is much to be gained from removing Syria from the axis of evil," Kaplinsky said, "and if the conditions are ripe, it can be done."

At one point, the Turkish mediation effort seemed hampered by strains in ties between Israel and Turkey. The Turks were angered by Israeli planes overflying their airspace during the reported operation against the Syrian nuclear facility.

They were angered as well by what they saw as Israeli influence on U.S. Jewish groups lobbying for congressional legislation to recognize the Armenian genocide.

Although the visit to Israel this week of the Turkish chief of staff, Gen. Yasar Buyukanit, seems to indicate business as usual, there are major concerns in Israel about Turkey's geopolitical alignment. The fact that Ankara is now ruled by an Islamist government and president and seems to be gearing up for military action against the Kurds in northern Iraq raises questions about its position within the moderate pro-Western camp.

Just as the Western camp would like to pluck Syria from the axis of evil, Iran is making renewed efforts to draw Turkey away from its Western orientation.

As important, Israel and the United States had hoped that Egypt, the key moderate Sunni nation in the region, would encourage the Palestinians and other regional protagonists to make peace with Israel the way it did in 1979.

Instead, Israeli officials have been complaining that Egypt has been playing a negative role, turning a blind eye to the unimpeded smuggling of weapons across the Egyptian border to Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. The Israelis said this was creating a major military threat that could scuttle the November gathering even before it began.

For months, tons of explosives and weapons have been flooding across the porous Egyptian border with Gaza, Israeli officials say. Dozens of Palestinian militiamen also have been slipping back into Gaza through Egypt after training in Iran, Syria or Lebanon.

Before the Hamas takeover in Gaza in June, there was a semblance of border control. Now, Israel says, the Egypt-Gaza border has become a "smugglers' highway." So great is the increase in smuggling that Israel says it constitutes a "strategic threat" both militarily and politically.

In mid-October, Israeli officials fired off an urgent message to Washington.

"The smuggling of weapons and terrorist experts," they said, poses "a real threat to the holding of the Annapolis conference."

The nightmare scenario is this: The smuggling encourages Hamas to launch a multiple rocket attack on Israeli urban centers, drawing Israel into a large-scale military operation in Gaza and pushing Annapolis off the agenda.

This week, however, the Egyptians announced they had uncovered new tunnels to Gaza. Three Palestinians found inside one of them were arrested, and bombs, bullets and drugs found inside another were confiscated.

Israel foresees two major military problems if the smuggling remains unchecked: The introduction of longer-range rockets and the industrial wherewithal for Hamas to produce its own missiles on a grand scale. This would give the militants in Gaza the capacity to threaten Israeli population centers in the southern and central regions of the country in very much the same way as the Lebanese-based Hezbollah does in the North.

Israeli officials also are concerned by Egyptian attempts behind the scenes to effect a reconciliation between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' moderate Fatah movement and the radical Hamas.

"Egypt is working against everything we are all trying to achieve," senior Israeli officials complained recently to the Americans. "We are organizing a summit, trying to strengthen Abbas, and they are strengthening Hamas."

The Egyptians see things differently. They claim Israel is to blame for the difficulties in the run-up to Annapolis.

"There are people in Israel who are trying to prevent prior agreement on the core issues, without which the conference will fail," the Egyptian Foreign Minister Gheit charged.

Gheit softened his tone somewhat after meeting Tuesday with Rice, who had come to the region to get the Annapolis agenda back on track.

"Rice has helped us to understand the American objective. She shed a great deal of light on the current American efforts," Gheit told reporters. "We feel encouraged regarding what we heard from Secretary Rice and promised her that we would help."

Rice has three main goals: To bring Israelis and Palestinians closer to agreement on a statement of principles, to impress Israeli government hard-liners of the need to go forward, and to get Israel and Egypt back on the same page.

One thing is clear: In the run-up to Annapolis, the geopolitical stakes are rising.

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