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## Annapolis: The End Of The Beginning

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That was the easy bit. Now for the hard work.

All the old unresolved issues have to be tackled - the borders of Israel and the new state of Palestine, Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, Palestinian refugees.

A pessimist, a realist maybe, can look at the target date for an agreement - December 2008, the end of the Bush presidency - and say that the agenda is too large and the room for manoeuvre too little for success to be likely, let alone assured.

The concept is to create a critical mass of opinion that will enable the centre ground to be held.

For this to happen, great compromises will have to be made by each side, leaving them open to being outflanked by critics within their own camps.

Already Hamas in Gaza is saying that it will not respect any agreement.

In Israel, the Likud opposition has denounced the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for agreeing to discuss core issues without insisting, as a spokesman put it, "on the Palestinians first of all breaking up the terrorist infrastructure".

Someone looking for hope could point to a new element in this process - the involvement of the United States.

This will be seen in a mechanism under which the US will be the judge of whether both sides are living up to the commitments they made sometime ago in the so-called road map. This foresaw an incremental approach under which security and confidence would be established before the final issues were tackled.

The statement at Annapolis said that, unless otherwise agreed, "the implementation of the peace treaty will be subject to the implementation of the road map, as judged by the United States."

The role of the US as "judge" means that neither Israel nor the Palestinian Authority will be able to declare unilaterally that the obligations have not been met.

The attitude of the Bush administration for the last seven years is giving way in its final year to a much more hands-on approach.

The speeches from Mr Olmert and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas gave plus and minus signs about the prospects for an agreement.

Mr Olmert, who spoke first, referred to the suffering of the Palestinian people : "We are not indifferent to this suffering. We are not oblivious to the tragedies that you have experienced."

And he acknowledged that Israel could not hold onto all the land it won in the war of 1967: "I am convinced that the reality that emerged in our region in 1967 will change significantly."

On the other hand, he was careful to insert a prime Israeli negotiating feature - an acknowledgement in a letter from President Bush to the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2004 that the big Israeli settlements are unlikely to be dismantled.

President Abbas was clear in a commitment to ending violence: "I wish to emphasise that we shall pursue our obligations under the road map, in order to combat chaos, violence, terrorism, and to ensure security, order and the rule of law."

But he too was also clear about Palestinian aims.

He called for "a reciprocal strategic willingness that would basically lead to ending the occupation of all Palestinian occupied territories in 1967, including East Jerusalem, as well as the Syrian Golan and what remains of occupied from Lebanese territories, and to resolve all other issues relating to the conflict, especially the Palestinian refugees question..."

So Annapolis does not change the basic configuration. The issues remain. The intention is there. The delivery has to follow.

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