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The Palestinians / Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad

Avi Issacharoff

Haaretz (Opinion)

November 28, 2007 - 3:15pm

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/928747.html> ^[1]

November 28, 2007

Article Author(s): Avi Issacharoff

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Article Type: Opinion

Date: November 28, 2007

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/928747.html> ^[1]

Minutes after Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert finished their speeches, Palestinian spokesmen rushed to the press room at Annapolis to lower expectations. Being well-versed in peace conferences that end with glorious fanfares but lead nowhere in practice, they warned that it is necessary to see whether the promises made at the conference are implemented on the ground.

Yet even the skeptics among them expressed some satisfaction at the PA's achievements. In the end, the joint Israeli-Palestinian declaration issued at the conference includes both of the PA's main demands: a timetable for beginning and ending the negotiations and an American-led supervisory mechanism to determine whether each side is fulfilling its obligations under the road map peace plan. Moreover, U.S. President George W. Bush unequivocally demanded a settlement freeze and the evacuation of illegal outposts.

True, there was no mention of what the final-status agreement would look like, as the PA had hoped, but overall, the PA's negotiating tactics worked. By fomenting a crisis, they compelled the Americans to pressure Israel, and Israel capitulated. The Saudis also helped by demanding a timetable for negotiations as a condition for attending.

Abbas, who emerged from the conference as the big winner, can now breathe easily: He can return home with real achievements from Annapolis, where the entire Arab world placed itself at his side. Hamas and Islamic Jihad will have trouble describing the conference as a failure when two of the PA's three main goals - the timetable for negotiations and the supervisory mechanism - were achieved.

The PA did less well on its third goal - securing practical Israeli steps such as prisoner releases and roadblock removals - but Israel plans to release over 400 prisoners early next week, allowing Abbas to claim another achievement through negotiations. Moreover, the results of Annapolis will encourage donor states to open their checkbooks for the PA at the Paris conference on December 17.

"Palestine is coming Be confident that the dawn is coming," Abbas told his people in his speech. With a political horizon, released prisoners and money from the donor states, Abbas can show his people that this promise is not empty. Yet he too knows that the skeptics are right. Too many times over the last seven years the fate of both nations has been determined by minor actors: the suicide bomber, a tank commander in the Israel Defense Forces, or even the Israeli minister who seeks headlines by toppling the government. Any of these could delay the talks again and again, return Hamas to center stage and prevent diplomatic progress.

And beyond all those pitfalls lies the problem of the talks themselves - namely, whether either leader is capable of getting his people to accept a historic compromise on the Temple Mount and refugees.

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