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Summit Surpasses Low Expectations

The Los Angeles Times (Editorial)

November 30, 2007 - 3:52pm

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-ed-annapolis28nov28,0,2818244.story?coll=...> [1]

November 28, 2007

Media Outlet: The Los Angeles Times

Article Type: Editorial

Date: November 30, 2007

Source Link(s): <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-ed-annapolis28nov28,0,2818244.story?coll=...> [1]

It started out like an office party that no one wanted to attend. Everyone felt obliged to put in an appearance in Annapolis, even though the first Middle East confab in six years wasn't billed as a peace conference, a forum for negotiation or, really, much more than a photo-op. Yet once the leaders were all there, with the TV cameras pouring an intoxicating adrenaline cocktail, the pressure to be seen to do something about the seminal conflict of our time couldn't be ignored.

Defying rock-bottom expectations, Israelis, Palestinians and President Bush rose to the occasion Tuesday. The "joint understanding" signed at the last moment by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is no more than an agreement to kick off negotiations. But the leaders did set out a pragmatic framework for resolving the "final status" issues that have long been seen as virtually insurmountable obstacles to the creation of a Palestinian state, including borders, Jerusalem and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. They did agree on a timetable for negotiating the establishment of a Palestinian state by the end of 2008. And they did commit to meet biweekly to keep the negotiations moving.

There were other signs of progress, however modest and rhetorical. Under pressure from the Bush administration, Olmert for the first time welcomed the Arab peace initiative begun in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, an essential concession to Israel's neighbors. Abbas declared that the Palestinian state must have as its capital "East Jerusalem," not "Holy Jerusalem," a linguistic signal that he is prepared to bargain over the boundaries of that most contested piece of real estate. And Bush inched closer to the articulation of what most Western and Middle Eastern leaders understood well before 9/11: that there can be no meaningful reconciliation between Islamists and the West, no end to terror, without a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Abbas and Olmert pledged "to bring an end to bloodshed, suffering and decades of conflict between our peoples; to usher in a new era of peace, based on freedom, security, justice, dignity, respect and mutual recognition; to propagate a culture of peace and nonviolence; to confront terrorism and incitement, whether committed by Palestinians or Israelis." That noble goal, no matter how difficult to realize, stands in contrast to the nihilistic rejection of peace by Jewish and Palestinian extremists back home. The repugnant spectacle of Jews praying at the Western Wall for the failure of the peace process and of Hamas supporters condemning Abbas to death as a "traitor" should be a clarion call to moderates in the Middle East and around the world. Where there is even the faintest hope, we must protect and nourish the fragile embryo of peace.

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