

## Key Topics, Major Players For Annapolis Conference

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### Statement by the President

I am pleased to welcome Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas, and representatives of more than forty countries to the United States for the November 27 Annapolis Conference. The broad attendance at this conference by regional states and other key international participants demonstrates the international resolve to seize this important opportunity to advance freedom and peace in the Middle East.

This conference will signal international support for the Israelis' and Palestinians' intention to commence negotiations on the establishment of a Palestinian state and the realization of peace between these two peoples.

It will also provide an opportunity for the Israelis, the Palestinians, and their neighbors to recommit to implementing the Roadmap, with the U.S. monitoring their progress by the parties' agreement. Finally, the conference will review Palestinian plans to build the institutions of a democratic state and their preparations for next month's donors' conference in Paris.

I remain personally committed to implementing my vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

The Israelis and Palestinians have waited a long time for this vision to be realized, and I call upon all those gathering in Annapolis this week to redouble their efforts to turn dreams of peace into reality. I look forward to my discussions with Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas this week, as well as to addressing the conference along with them on Tuesday.

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Syria Will Attend Annapolis Summit  
Olmert, Abbas  
Will Meet Bush  
At White House  
Associated Press  
November 25, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Arab holdout Syria agreed Sunday to attend a Mideast peace conference called by U.S. President George W. Bush to restart talks to resolve the six-decade conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, yet expectations for the summit remained low. The two sides came to Washington without agreeing on basic terms for their negotiations.

Mr. Bush invited the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to separate meetings at the White House on Monday to prepare for the centerpiece of his Mideast gathering -- an all-day session Tuesday in Annapolis, Maryland. It is to be the only time that Mr. Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas meet together, and their three-way handshake is expected to be the conference's symbolic high point. Mr. Bush closes the U.S. effort with a second set of separate Israeli and Palestinian meetings at the White House on Wednesday.

"The broad attendance at this conference by regional states and other key international participants demonstrates the international resolve to seize this important opportunity to advance freedom and peace in the Middle East," Mr. Bush said in a statement Sunday.

Palestinian negotiators Ahmed Qureia and Saeb Erekat met with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Tzipi Livni, Israel's lead negotiator, for unscheduled talks Sunday evening. Asked if they were optimistic about the prospect for reaching a consensus on a joint declaration, Mr. Qureia replied, "You don't meet if you're not optimistic."

The negotiators were still trying to write a framework for talks that the U.S. hosts had hoped would be complete by now. Ms. Rice's spokesman said earlier the last-minute work is not surprising.

"We're confident there will be a document and we'll get to Annapolis in good shape on that," but bargaining may well continue behind the scenes during the session Tuesday, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in an

interview.

The Bush administration, which has largely taken a hands-off approach to the nitty-gritty of Mideast peacemaking until now, says the goal is to set up an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. Israeli and Palestinian leaders have said they want to do that by the time Mr. Bush leaves office in January 2009. While there are widespread doubts in the administration about that time line, Ms. Rice has said she is game to try.

"This is not a negotiation session, it is to launch negotiations," said Mr. Bush's national security adviser, Stephen Hadley.

A succession of U.S. presidents has aimed to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and late in his tenure, Mr. Bush has made that long-coveted diplomatic victory his own goal, too.

"I remain personally committed to implementing my vision of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," Mr. Bush said in his statement Sunday.

Mr. Hadley said that during his address to the conference Tuesday, Mr. Bush will make clear that the Mideast peace process has his support, and that it is a top priority for the rest of his time in office. But he is not expected to use his speech to advance any of his own ideas on how to achieve that by wading into the issues that have kept the parties bitterly divided.

The conference is meant to draw Arab and other outside backing for what will be difficult negotiations. The idea is also to let Arab states have their say alongside Mr. Bush, making it more difficult for them to complain that Washington is not doing enough or is not listening to good advice from those closest to the conflict.

Syria, which borders Israel and has no diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, gave Washington a partial victory Sunday by agreeing to send a lower-level envoy, Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad, to the session. Syria wants to raise the question of the Golan Heights, strategic territory Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 war. The U.S. hosts and Israel have agreed, at least tacitly, to listen.

Other major Arab states whose participation was considered essential had decided on Friday to send their top diplomats.

As 16 Arab nations and the Arab League prepared to sit down with Israel for the first time in more than a decade, Israel's ambassador to Washington said what Arab leaders say and do after the conference can change the bitter atmosphere in the Middle East.

"Annapolis is about two things," Ambassador Sallai Meridor said in an interview. Foremost is furthering direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians "and the other thing it is important for is creating international and Arab support for this process," Mr. Meridor said. "We hope the Arabs will come and come with a spirit of peace."

Israel's Foreign Minister Livni suggested that a lack of Arab backing contributed to the failure of the last round of talks. That effort collapsed in bloodshed in the waning days of the Clinton administration in early 2001. The Arab world, Ms. Livni told reporters en route to Washington, "should stop sitting on the fence."

"There isn't a single Palestinian who can reach an agreement without Arab support," she said. "That's one of the lessons we learned seven years ago." But, Ms. Livni added, "it is not the role of the Arab world to define the terms of the negotiations or take part in them."

Whatever joint agreement the Israelis and Palestinians present at Annapolis will be a starting point and is likely to sketch only vague bargaining terms. The big questions that have doomed previous peace efforts, such as the borders of a Palestinian state, the status of disputed Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinians and their descendants to return to homes in what is now Israel, would come later.

Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo said Palestinians hoped to work out a joint document, but that an agreement was not essential because of assurances received in the U.S. invitation to the conference.

That invitation, he said, "includes all the terms of reference for the future negotiation" and "confirms that both sides are committed" to putting in place the peace process. "This is enough to launch negotiations after the conference."

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----- A U.S.-hosted Middle East peace conference next week could launch the first round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in seven years. The White House has invited representatives of some 50 governments and organizations for talks. After a Washington dinner Monday night, the meeting moves to Annapolis, Md. \* \* \*What's at Stake, and Where

• The Palestinian Territories, including West Bank and Gaza: The Islamist group Hamas won Palestinian elections

last year and violently overran the Gaza Strip last summer. The group's gains worry Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose Western-leaning Fatah party controls politics in the West Bank.

• Israel: Prime Minister Ehud Olmert suffers low approval ratings and a shaky coalition. Still, the rise of Hamas and Iran may embolden him to make concessions his predecessors haven't been able to make.

• Golan Heights: Israel captured this strip of land during the 1967 Six Day War. If Syria accepts an invitation to attend the Annapolis conference, U.S. officials have signaled they may encourage talks between the two over the issue.

• Lebanon: Hezbollah, backed by Iran, is part of an opposition bloc that has boycotted the Lebanese Parliament and is locked in stalemate with the Western-leaning government. Syrian troops withdrew in 2005 after popular protests, and some worry that Syria may ask for more influence in Beirut in exchange for peace overtures to Israel.

• Iraq: Iraqi officials have cited cooperation with Tehran in a drop in insurgent attacks, and a top U.S. general credited Syria as being helpful, too. The Bush administration could win more support to stabilize Iraq if it shows progress in its Israeli-Palestinian talks.

• Iran: Near-\$100 oil and a messy Iraqi invasion and occupation have given Iran's regional influence a big boost. The U.S., along with many of its Sunni Arab allies, want to check that rise.

Who's Coming to Dinner? Among the attendees:

• George W. Bush

Currently: In Washington

Comments: Mr. Bush is hosting a pre-conference dinner in Washington Monday night. With just over a year left in his presidency, this could be his last chance to kick-start Mideast talks.

• Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice

Currently: In Washington

Comments: The secretary of state is committed to making progress on Israeli and Palestinian peace before the end of her boss's term. "The parties have said they are going to make efforts to conclude it in this president's term, and it's no secret that means about a year," Ms. Rice said Thursday. "That's what we'll try and do. Nobody can guarantee that, all you can do is make your best effort."

• Mahmoud Abbas

Currently: In Washington

Comments: With the violent overthrow of the Gaza Strip this summer, Mr. Abbas's government is being bolstered financially and diplomatically by Western powers and Sunni Arab allies. "I told the Arab foreign ministers they had a historical opportunity that we need to seize to voice our [cause] before the international community," he told reporters in Cairo Friday.

• Ehud Olmert

Currently: In Washington

Comments: Mr. Olmert faces dismal approval ratings at home and a coalition government that could pull the plug on his government if it compromises too much. Still, the rise of Hamas, backed by Iran, may embolden him to make unpopular concessions. "I have concluded that we cannot maintain the status quo between us and the Palestinians," Mr. Olmert said Thursday. "We have spent too much time dealing with the status quo but it will lead to results that are much worse than those of a failed conference. It will result in Hamas taking over Judea and Samaria, to a weakening or even the disappearance of the moderate Palestinians. Unless a political horizon can be found, the results will be deadly." Boarding a special flight to Washington Sunday, Mr. Olmert told journalists he hoped the meeting would "allow the launch of serious negotiations on all the core issues, that will lead to a solution of two states for two peoples."

• Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal

Currently: In Cairo for Arab League meeting

Comments: The kingdom, one of Washington's staunchest allies in the Persian Gulf, said Friday it would attend the Annapolis talks, but Saudi Arabia is insisting upon serious negotiations. On Friday, he told reporters, "We are not prepared to take part in a theatrical show, in handshakes and meeting that don't express political positions. We are going with seriousness and we work on the same seriousness and credibility."

• Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad

Comments: On Sunday, Syria's state-run news agency announced that Damascus would send its deputy foreign

minister, Faysal Mekdad, to the gathering because the Golan was added to the conference agenda. But Syria's decision not to send Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem appeared to indicate that Damascus was not entirely confident the conference would address its concerns over the territory.

Mahmoud Ahamadinejad• Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Currently: Not invited to the talks and highly critical of them

Comments: "This meeting will result only in losses for the Palestinians," he has told Syria's Mr. al-Moallem. "The organizers of this conference aim to connect all the Arab countries to the Zionist regime."

• United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

Amr Moussa• Portuguese Foreign Minister Luis Amado, representing the European Union

• Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

• Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, special representative to the Palestinians, representing the Quartet (U.N., E.U., Russia and the U.S.)

• Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa

• Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Ghei