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## The Middle East Waits for Obama

By [Pierre Atlas](#)

With much of the world's attention focused on the economic crisis and now the terrorist attacks in India, a noteworthy anniversary has passed. On November 27, 2007, President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice convened an international peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland. The ultimate goal, Bush declared, was to achieve, by the end of 2008, an agreement that would create a Palestinian state "living side by side with Israel in peace and security." One year later, it does not look like this ambitious timeline will be met.

The Annapolis process was seriously flawed from its inception. The Bush administration agreed to assist the Israelis and Palestinians in their bilateral negotiations, but declared it would not play the role of active broker, even if the talks bogged down. Negotiated settlements need third party mediation--especially, as in this case, when there is an absence of trust among the parties in conflict. And the United States has always been the only country with the clout and credibility to broker a deal between the Israelis and Palestinians.

There were additional problems with Annapolis as well. The final status issues were deliberately left off the table, but, as I wrote for RealClearPolitics in October 2007, they needed to be front and center if the summit was to succeed.

Finally, the Annapolis process may have been doomed from the start due to weak and ineffective leadership. Significant achievements in Middle East peace have always been accompanied by a synchronicity of strong leadership--when leaders on all sides, simultaneously, have both the political will and the capacity to reach an accord. This was true from the Kissinger-brokered disengagement agreements in the mid-1970s through the Oslo accords of the mid-1990s. On the other hand, whenever key leaders lacked political will or the capacity to make and enforce decisions, the peace process has faltered. This was one of the reasons Camp David II failed in 2000.

When they arrived at Annapolis last November, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and President Bush all had limited credibility and influence with their own constituencies. President Bush was at his nadir of political weakness at home and abroad. The Democrats had retaken Congress, the US was bogged down in Iraq due in large part to Bush's ineffectual leadership as commander-in-chief, and for the previous five years the president had shown little interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Annapolis was dismissed by many at the time as a face-saving photo-op rather than a serious attempt at peace. Today all three leaders are even weaker, and at least two of them, Bush and Olmert, are on their way out the door.

On November 9, 2008, five days after the US elections, Rice and other members of the Middle East Quartet met with Abbas and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni for a follow-up summit in Sharm Al-Sheikh, Egypt. It appeared that some small-scale achievements had been made through the Annapolis process, and

perhaps a portfolio of ideas and modalities might be ready to pass on to the next US president after January 20. Everyone seemed to agree, however, that a peace agreement will not be reached by the end of this year. The parties are in a holding pattern until Obama takes office.

In the next few months there will be some important developments in both Israel and Palestine that will impact on the prospects for peace, and their outcomes are uncertain:

- Mahmoud Abbas' term as Palestinian Authority President expires on January 8, 2009. Will the PA hold new presidential elections in January? If not, Hamas might name its own president. This would only increase tensions between Hamas and Fatah and Gaza and the West Bank could move even further toward dual Palestinian "sovereignties." Such moves would make Israeli-Palestinian negotiations all the more problematic.
- Israeli elections are scheduled for February 10, 2009. How will Israeli voters respond to developments on the Palestinian side, including any renewed conflict between Hamas and Fatah? As always, the potential for terrorist attacks by Palestinian extremist groups will increase as the Knesset elections near. According to a recent study by political scientists Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor, terrorist attacks during previous election campaigns had the effect of increasing Israeli support for rightist parties--especially the closer the attacks were to Election Day. Although elections are more than two months away, last week's terrorist attack on the Chabad House in Mumbai might also spur increased support for the right, especially Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud.
- President-Elect Obama's Middle East policy will no doubt be influenced by the results of the Israeli elections. But the Obama presidency could also influence the outcome of those elections. Livni will likely argue that she and her Kadima party are best suited to take advantage of the opportunities for peace that will be created by Obama's ascendancy, since they will be most in sync with the new administration on the peace process. Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, on the other hand, will likely argue that Israel will need a more hawkish government in place, in order to stand up to any "unreasonable" demands on territory or security that President Obama might make.

The horrific attacks in Mumbai, and especially the terrorists' deliberate targeting of Jews, might make the Annapolis peace negotiations seem less relevant. But resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is more critical than ever, for Israel and the US as well as for the Arab and broader Muslim worlds.

All signs indicate that the incoming Obama administration--including Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State and General Jim Jones (currently the special envoy for security in the Annapolis process) as National Security Adviser--will be up to the task of brokering a peace deal between Israel and its neighbors, perhaps through a comprehensive, regional approach.

After a year of limited progress with Annapolis, the Middle East is waiting for Obama.

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