



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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*Americans for Peace Now, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, Arab American Institute, American Task Force on Palestine, Israeli Policy Forum, and Churches for Middle East Peace*

## **Digesting Annapolis: What Happened, What It Means, and What Happens Next?**

Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building, Nov. 29, 12:00 – 2:00pm

A wide range of organizations sponsored a briefing on Capitol Hill today analyzing the proceedings at Tuesday's Annapolis meeting. Former Ambassador **Phil Wilcox** of the Foundation for Middle East Peace moderated a panel featuring former Israeli negotiator Daniel Levy, AAFP's **Ghaith al-Omari**, **Scott Lasensky** of USIP, APN's **Ori Nir**, and **Greg Khalil** of the Palestinian Authority's Negotiations Support Unit.

**Ghaith al-Omari** began by highlighting the new elements brought to the current peace process. Annapolis has begun a peace process after seven years of silence, he described, one that involves the Arab countries for the first time since Madrid in 1991. In addition, the parties have now reached "an understanding that discussing the big political issues - refugees, Jerusalem, territory - has to go hand in hand with actions on the ground."

Since it was announced several months ago, "the purpose of the meeting seemed to bounce all around, like a pinball machine," **Scott Lasensky** argued. "People are drawing lessons from the past," he continued, but unfortunately they have not meaningfully addressed the significance of the "asymmetries of power" involved, including a strong U.S. alliance with one of the parties. Positive developments of Annapolis include a U.S. President and Secretary of State invested in the process, and **an alignment of regional players supporting an Arab-Israeli peace process.**

**Greg Khalil** argued that despite negative developments on the ground in the past seven years, "overall Annapolis should be viewed as a positive moment." He cited an increase of 100,000 Israeli settlers in the territories and increasing restrictions on Palestinian movement and trade – along with subsequent mass poverty as reported by the World Bank - as some of the issues requiring resolution. Over the next few months, he stated, **significant international aid will create an opportunity to create meaningful political and economic gains** through a "convergent process" of negotiations and an improving situation on the ground. However, he argued, if Palestinians are barred from work and trade, potential spoilers will be able to speak against the peace process and discount the aid as ineffective.

**Daniel Levy** began by stating that, although an American-backed renewal of the peace process is positive, "the skepticism in Israel and the Arab world is very well earned by the [Bush] administration," after seven years of neglect. Regarding Secretary Rice's performance during the Israel-Lebanon war of 2006, he argued that there are important lessons she needs to bring to

the current peace process, including the need to **“treat local divisions in fragile Arab political entities with great caution - don’t try to exacerbate those divisions as a recipe for stability.”** Continuing escalation in Gaza could create an “impossible situation” for President **Mahmoud Abbas**, he continued, “doing the day to day work on roadmap implementation requires [American] commitment that we haven’t yet seen.” He drew attention to **Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s statement this week that if “the two-state solution collapses... the State of Israel is finished.”** The Arab states are saying that we have “gotten to yes” on terms less favorable to us than 60 years ago, Levy argued, now Israel needs to say yes to 78% of mandatory Palestine, and not hold out in the hopes of getting two percent more.

**Ori Nir** described the dismantlement of illegal Israeli outposts and the cessation of all new construction, including in existing settlements as the true elements of the “settlement freeze” in roadmap phase one, going beyond Olmert’s declaration that there will be “no new settlements.”

Khalil noted the attendance of Malaysia and Indonesia, and the importance of the Muslim countries’ endorsement of an Arab-Israeli peace initiative. While there will not be a dramatic development like the Gaza disengagement, he claimed, what is needed is a “calm reasonable approach” to addressing the settlements, including the economic situation providing incentives for Israeli settlement.

Al-Omari argued that the economy in Gaza cannot be allowed to collapse beyond recovery under an Israeli embargo. If Abbas believes that Hamas can constructively engage in the process, he claimed, the US and Israel should not block their inclusion. Furthermore, he stated, as immediate progress on the Syrian-Israeli track is not evident at the moment, peace with the Palestinians cannot be “held hostage” to a stalled process with Syria. In addition, **we don’t need an honest broker for a peace process “we need an effective broker,”** al-Omari stated; the U.S. is the only country with the trust and leverage over Israel.

Levy argued that **the peace process cannot move forward “on the basis of a divided Palestinian polity.”** “You do not punish a civilian population of 1.4 million people”, he asserted, this can only be self-defeating for Israel. Arab states need to be able to tentatively address the divisions among Palestinians, he stated, and there needs to be a ceasefire between Gaza and Israel.

Nir argued that while peace with Palestinians or with Syria can reframe Israel’s standoff with Iran, the reverse does not hold - developments with Iran should not affect the peace process. Levy agreed, stating that Annapolis **should not be framed “as the anti-Iranian summit” as this will only encourage Iran to act as a spoiler.** The “single most destabilizing thing” for the peace process and the region “would be a preemptive military strike on Iran,” he argued. Lesensky claimed that Iranian influence in the region is exaggerated, and cautioned against giving Iran more credit than it is due.