

# Avoiding the Mistakes of Camp David

by Rami G. Khouri Released: 8 Oct 2007

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BEIRUT -- Momentum seems to be picking up for the November meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, between the United States, Israel, and representatives of roughly half the Palestinians, to achieve a framework agreement for comprehensive peace negotiations, leading to permanent peace. In many ways we are back to 2000, when Israelis and Palestinians hurriedly huddled with Americans at Camp David to try and solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that is at the heart of wider Arab-Israeli tensions.

That attempt did not succeed, due to deficiencies on the part of all three principal parties. We should avoid a similar rush-job scenario -- driven again by the slightly hysterical urgency of a disheveled American presidency nearing the end of its term.

I have some comments for the Palestinians, who are hobbled by three major constraints going into the meeting: President Mahmoud Abbas is dangerously close to being seen by many in the Arab world as a hapless American-Israeli puppet; his political party Fateh has been largely discredited as a corrupt, bloated and inefficient burden on society and no longer represents majority Palestinian thinking; and, the absence of Hamas from the Annapolis meeting makes the Palestinian delegation's credentials rather thin.

There is one way that Abbas can overcome these constraints, which recalls a major weakness that contributed to the collapse of the Camp David talks in 2000: He should consult widely, deeply and sincerely with ordinary and politically-active Palestinians throughout the world, in order to be able to attend the Annapolis talks as a credible representative of the Palestinian people, not a finger puppet hand-picked by Condoleezza Rice and still playing by Dennis Ross' old skewed and failed rules.

The hardest issue to resolve in this conflict comprises the status and rights of Palestinian refugees, of whom there are now some 4.5 million living outside Palestine (they were 750,000 when they first became refugees in 1948). All other contentious matters -- land, sovereignty, recognition, settlements, water, security, Jerusalem -- now appear solvable, given the years of negotiations that have taken place by the concerned parties. The Palestinian refugees issue, however, remains both intractable, and existential for both sides.

There is no excuse for Abbas to repeat Arafat's mistake. Abbas would be immeasurably strengthened, and would negate his image as Condi's Karzai-in-a-kefiyyeh, if he were to launch a blitz campaign of open meetings with Palestinian refugee communities around the world, to identify the main points that define refugee attitudes towards a comprehensive peace with Israel -- what the Palestinians want, what they would give, and what they would be willing to compromise on. Abbas fools nobody by going to an American-Israeli-structured peace conference without the essential compensatory credibility card of speaking in the name of the proven majority of Palestinians everywhere. Fortunately, he can start this process by reading a fine volume that is easily available to him and to all Palestinian leaders.

In 2005-06, the Palestinian scholar Karma Nabulsi, at Oxford University, directed a remarkable participatory project that consulted Palestinians in every part of the world, to hear their views on the issues that concerned them. The Report of the Civitas Project, as it was called, was published last year by Nuffield College at Oxford. It offers powerful insights into a national community of Palestinians scattered all over the world, but also united by many shared sentiments and needs, and, more importantly, by common perceptions of their rights as human beings.

Nabulsi herself points out that despite the very different circumstances of Palestinians around the world, "one can immediately note certain key commonalities in our current Palestinian discourse: the desire for direct elections to the Palestine National Council (PNC), for the reactivation and democratic reform of the PLO institutions, for the implementation of the Right of Return."

How these and other desires can be fulfilled will only be known if these positions are channeled into the negotiating process by fortifying and defining the Palestinian negotiators in the first place. Tough issues like the "right of return" and a democratic PLO will be negotiated and agreed upon through a consensual process, not by one side imposing American-Israeli rules or by another side ignoring the sentiments of its own people.

Fulfilling the legitimate rights of Israelis and Palestinians is the key to achieving peace. Israelis and Americans will be well represented and prepared at Annapolis, Palestinians less so. Now is the time to redress this perilous imbalance, and avoid the mistakes that were made in 2000. The Palestinian leadership must generate the vital legitimacy, credibility and sensible negotiating position that it requires to succeed in such a process. It can get these essential assets from only one source in the world: its own people. Condi Rice and Dennis Ross get you invited to long weekends in wooded Maryland estates; credibly

representing your own people, by consulting them widely, lets you be taken seriously on such outings.

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