

# Can Annapolis restore America's battered credibility in the region?

## SYRIAN ATTENDANCE OPENS UP TANTALIZING OPPORTUNITY

Alastair Lyon  
Reviews

BEIRUT: By hosting an Israeli-Palestinian peace conference, US President George W. Bush seems finally to have heeded arguments that only by tackling the Middle East's core conflict can he begin to restore American credibility in the region. That credibility has plummeted largely as a consequence of the Bush administration's efforts to remake the Middle East after the September 11 attacks by invading, isolating, threatening or imposing sanctions on its foes and those of its ally. In the process, conflicts involving Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and the Palestinians have become dizzyingly intertwined in a region polarized between the United States and its main opponents - Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas.

The conference starting in Annapolis, Maryland, on Tuesday may go some way toward mitigating the dismay this has created among many Arab and European governments who fear that Bush's "war on terror" has only spawned more Al-Qaeda-type militancy.

From Morocco to Afghanistan, the had gays are winning," said EU Middle East envoy Marc Otte. "If we want to start reversing the trend, we've got to start somewhere, and that somewhere is a two-state solution in Israel-Palestine."

While expectations are low for any major progress at the Annapolis talks, some Arabs see a shift in US attitudes. "Whether out of desperation or realism, the Americans are becoming more pragmatic. They are beginning to engage with Syria and Iran and trying to solve political problems through political means, not through threats, invasions, sanctions and regime change," said Beirut-based commentator Rami Khouri.



Iranian policemen prevent members of the Basij militia from approaching the Jordanian Embassy in Tehran on Monday during an angry protest against the conference in Annapolis.

Others see the latest US stab at Middle East peacemaking as part of a strategy to form a broad coalition to counter Iranian influence that has risen since the 2003 Iraq invasion. "There is a convergence of interests of Israel, the Arabs, the United States and the EU," Otte said in Berlin last week. "Call it a cynical bargain," he added. "The Arabs will help the United States on Iraq and Iran if the West helps toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, because that is what is inflating Arab opinion."

Excluded from Annapolis, Iran and its Palestinian Islamist ally, Hamas, have derided any expected a solution to emerge. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said on Monday that the talks were "doomed to failure." Hamas has voiced shock that Arab states had decided to take part.

The chances that Bush, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert can resolve a 60-year-old conflict that has defied so many others seem slim, but Syria's attendance opens up a tantalizing side-opportunity.

President Bashar al-Assad's decision to send his deputy foreign minister marks a cautious willingness to explore whether Bush is prepared to work with a country he has previously deemed an "evil-doer" for its policies on Iraq, Lebanon and Israel. Damascus, which has repeatedly offered to resume talks with Israel on the return of the occupied Golan Heights, demanded the issue be discussed at Annapolis as its condition for going.

No one expects Syria to reconsider its alliance with Iran or its ties to Hizballah and Hamas overnight, but if fruitful negotiations began, regional re-

alignments could follow. In Lebanon, anti-Syrian factions fear Damascus might regain lost influence in their country as part of a bargain with Washington. On the other hand, Hizballah could face Syrian pressure limiting its freedom to act as an armed resistance.

Already Lebanese politicians are vying to see if the Annapolis talks will affect the deadlock that has left the country without a president or an unchallenged government. On Friday, Parliament is due to make its sixth bid to elect a replacement for former President Emile Lahoud, whose term expired last week. But without some new dynamic in the region to which its fortunes are tied, Lebanon seems set for fresh instability.

Any US or Israeli attack on Iran over its nuclear program would have repercussions in

Lebanon, where Hizballah says it has rebuilt its rocket arsenal after the 2006 war with Israel.

So far Washington has sought tougher sanctions on Iran and kept military options open, but has also let the EU negotiate with Tehran on compliance with UN demands that it halt sensitive nuclear work. Iranian-EU talks on Friday could decide whether Iran will face wider sanctions soon.

Even if Annapolis launches another series of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, that is unlikely to help Arab governments working with UN demands that they halt sensitive nuclear work. Iranian-EU talks on Friday could decide whether Iran will face wider sanctions soon.

# Cycle of occupation and resistance won't end easily

Ari Rabinovitch and  
Arel Saad  
Reviews

TEL AVIV, Israel/NABLUS, Occupied West Bank: In a long-running, resurgent Haini Grotfied and Palestinian security officer Samir al-Shakhsir are committed to fighting for their people's security, but both long for the day they can lay down their arms.

Yet even as their leaders meet this week in Annapolis, Maryland, for a US-led peace to jump-start peace talks, neither man sees a quick fix to the 60-year-old conflict. In December, Grotfied, 26, will take leave from his studies in Tel Aviv and report for a six-month tour of reserve army duty required from most Israeli men his age. He will likely be stationed at a roadblock in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

"I am a firm believer in peace and human rights in the West Bank, but I'm also a realist and I know the security issues," Grotfied said. "I know what it's like to be on the Israeli side, knowing the recent history of [attacks]."

In the Occupied West Bank city of Nablus, a frequent flashpoint between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian militants, Shakhsir, 36, recently gave up years of guerrilla warfare against Israel to join President Mahmoud Abbas's security force.

Israel granted amnesty to Shakhsir and more than 100 other militants from Abbas' secular Fatah faction in a gesture to bolster Abbas against rival Hamas. In return, Shakhsir swore off violence against Israel.

"As long as there is occupation, there is resistance," Shakhsir said. "I don't think I've stopped resistance. I continue fighting in my new role, just by helping my people."

One of Israel's major sticking points in negotiations has been Abbas' inability to rein in militants. The Palestinians say Israeli raids and checkpoints undermine their efforts and that occupation of the West Bank deprives them of authority. For Grotfied, reserve duty is simply part of life in Israel.

Checkpoints and army raids are not the problem but a symptom of the larger conflict, he said. They may not be the ideal solution, but they prevent further escalation, he said.

"I just don't believe right now there's a better way of keeping things peaceful, unfortunately," Grotfied said. "I believe that things are slowly getting better, but I don't think that there is a miracle drug. It's up to Hizballah and Israeli soldiers to make the Occupied West Bank to allow his security force to act decisively against those who want to pursue the war in defiance of Abbas' orders. With frequent Israeli checkpoints and new security barriers dividing cities, he said it's like trying to work in a jail."

**'The Palestinian people have been paying a heavy price in all regards'**

"Palestinian security forces are able to impose law and order, but we feel the Israeli side is trying to make our mission come from a compromise. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Abbas have said they hope the Annapolis conference will lead to formal talks on creating a Palestinian state. But Shakhsir and Grotfied doubt that will be able to bring an end to the decades of violence.

"I think all Palestinians and even Israelis want good results to come from this conference ... but we're afraid of the Israeli side. The Palestinian people have been paying a heavy price in all regards," Shakhsir said. Grotfied said neither Olmert nor Abbas are the "visionaries" he would like to see.

"Both sides realize you can't go back to the 60 years and change the raids and checkpoints under their own efforts and that occupation of the West Bank deprives them of authority. For Grotfied, reserve duty is simply part of life in Israel.

# Occupied Jerusalem's residents have differing takes on summit

Rebecca Harrison  
Reviews

ARRAJIBI Jews just off Occupied Jerusalem's Route 1 artery which runs north from the Old City along the "Green Line" that once separated Israel from the Jordanian-controlled West Bank and now informally divides Jerusalem's Arab and Jewish neighborhoods. A few blocks south, 69-year-old Yirmiyahu has for decades lived on the other side of that line, comfortable in his belief that Palestine and all Jerusalem belong to the Jews.

On Fridays at sunset, Yirmiyahu joins hundreds of fellow Jews, many of them Orthodox in black hats, walking down Route 1 through the cobble-stoned streets of the Old City's Muslim quarter, to pray at the Western Wall - one of Judaism's most sacred sites.

"The bible says this is the Promised Land for Jews. It's like we say, 'Next year in Jerusalem,'" Yirmiyahu said. Arrajibi and hundreds of Muslims also pray in the Old City on Fridays. They head for Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third-highest site, which is adjacent

to the Western Wall and occupied spots of real estate on earth.

With the slender minaret of a mosque in the skyline behind him, Yirmiyahu grudgingly concedes that sharing control of his beloved Jerusalem with the Arabs might make good sense as part of a deal to secure peace.

"If America and Abu Mazen and all the people would promise to stop harassing the Jews ... then it would be good for Israel and the Arabs," he said, calling Abbas by his familiar name.

"Yirmiyahu is more flexible than most of his neighbors, some of whom are praying fervently that next week's conference in Annapolis, Maryland will fall and talk of a Palestinian state evaporate with it.

Up the road, Arrajibi is also counting on divine intervention - but of a different kind. "Do I expect to see a Palestinian state in my lifetime? Absolutely, I hope," he said. "But I don't expect the conference to start anything new, even though I pray to God for that."



A Jewish man recites a special prayer against the Annapolis summit.

FIRST PERSON

## A new approach

For 100 years, the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict has been elusive. This is because the equation was set wrong: it was all about land, settlements and borders, conceived under a zero-sum paradigm. What Palestinians (or Arabs, or Muslims) gain, Jews lose, and vice-versa, down to the wire.

There is no reason why the paradigm will not go on for another 100 years, similarly marked with violence, limited and faded throughout, massive at times in full-fledged wars and atrocities. The equation is wrong, and needs to be changed.

I propose a new paradigm to be started at Annapolis. Call it the egalitarian paradigm, or the human-rights paradigm, or the Kantian paradigm, or the Maimonides/Abu Ala paradigm, for the two towering figures of humanism in the classical Islamic-Jewish age. I'll call it the E-paradigm for short. E for empathy and for a new generation marked by the democracy of e-mails and the Internet.

The E-paradigm says that real and difficult issues that have divided us over a century on the land of Israel-Palestine. In our search for a lasting peace, we declare that attachment of land, settlements and borders should recede before the enhancement of security, dignity, freedom of movement and other basic human rights understood under a universal standard; that means to peacefully work with our resolve to forswear violence, and to work together in empathy so that the suffering of any one of us will be felt as the suffering of all of us. We will be seeking in this conference a common legal standard, rooted in non-violence, and which, as individuals and communities, we can start putting to the test."

is professor of law in Utah and Lebanon, and a candidate for the Lebanese presidency.

# Illegal settlements pose especially thorny problem for peace process

Alastair Macdonald  
Reviews

ARIEL/MARDA: Occupied West Bank: The rolling hills in Israel's busy coastal strip are dotted with towns and villages among 2.5 million Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank. Look closely, though, and one sees differences. Some towers are the minarets of mosques; others are concrete lookout posts for Israeli troops guarding Jewish settlements in the Occupied West Bank.

These are uneasy neighbors and the future of the settlers, who have built illegally on land occupied by Israel in 1967, is among the "core issues" Palestinians and Israelis must resolve. If they are ever to make peace in negotiations to be launched at Tuesday's US-hosted Middle East conference in Annapolis, Maryland.

Few around the settlement of Ariel see much chance of that - a string of smaller settlements meant to stay and build, whatever their government decides, and Palestinians insist the settlers must go in order for them to establish a functioning state.

"My vision is ... to build here a city of 60,000 people," says Ron Nachman, mayor of Ariel, today home to about 18,000. "As long as I live and I have the strength to do it, I will do everything in order to fulfill this vision," Nachman added, sitting in his office in the neat, brick apartment tower, 40 kilometers east of Tel Aviv's beaches.

"I want to live in peace with my neighbors." A few hundred meters down the hill, that vision is not shared by Sadeq al-Khuffash, the mayor of Marada, an hour's drive away. "Do I expect to see a Palestinian state in my lifetime? Absolutely, I hope," he said. "But I don't expect the conference to start anything new, even though I pray to God for that."

lements built illegally on our lands. They should be removed. You can't expect me to live with the people who took our land by force.

The World Court says settlements, home to some 270,000 Jews among 2.5 million Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank, are illegal. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reiterated a pledge to curb expansion this week and to abandon outposts while arranging land swaps to make Ariel and others part of Israel.

**'You can't expect me to live with the people who took our land by force'**

For the 2,400 people of Marada, where minarets and blue gates are flanked by visiting activists from Spain brought on the dusty main street, Ariel is a string of smaller settlements meant to stay and build, whatever their government decides, and Palestinians insist the settlers must go in order for them to establish a functioning state.

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Water is an increasingly scarce resource in the Middle East and is, in itself, a core issue for any future peace accord. Khuffash also complains his 3-kilometer trip to the town hall have an impact on generations to come around the world. "We are normal people, we just want to have fun," said Tami Helgort, a television producer, in a trendy cafe in Israel's secular metropolis on the Mediterranean coast. "Palestinians go through shit, but on the other hand Israel has to defend itself so we can't here and have coffee in Tel Aviv."

Soudah works for an education aid organization in Ramallah, the Palestinians' administrative center in the Occupied West Bank. She also wants to live a "normal" life.

Israeli roadblocks create a 20-kilometer detour. Locals say olives are rotting on the trees this month because Israeli troops keep them from harvesting.

Nachman rejects charges the town he helped found in 1978 took any private land. "There was nothing, only builders." "If we establish a Palestinian state, how would they make a living?" he asks. "What water would they drink?"

Pointing to daily attacks from the Gaza Strip, from which Israel withdrew in 2005, Nachman says Israel cannot be secure living next to an independent Palestine. The formula of handing over land in return for peace does not work, he insists.

Olmert's expression of readiness to end settlements angers him: "The government asked me to come. So I came to me and say 'I'm an obstacle to peace, it's not only stupidity, it's evil.'"

In Marada, Khuffash sees little hope of change. "The siege is not going to end. Nothing will go on. Nothing has changed, and after Annapolis there will be no real change in our lives." Hundreds of people from Marada have sought work abroad, he says - many of them half-way round the world, in Venezuela.

Asked about an incident this week in which gunmen killed a settler nearby, Khuffash says: "This is our home, and resistance is a part of it. I have no respect for agreements and international law, things will go on like this, with or without it."

But neither violence nor the Israeli government persuade Nachman that Ariel's future is in doubt. "What I have done here is a fact on the ground," he says. "When Tony Blair has passed away and President Bush and I, this will remain."

# Frustrated Palestinian, Israeli youths mull travel abroad to escape conflict

Lianne Gross and  
Rebecca Harrison  
Reviews

TEL AVIV, Israel/RAMALLAH, Occupied West Bank: Both young and articulate with a penchant for cappuccino, 40-year-old Nour Fami-Helgort and Palestinian Nelly Soudah share common goals: leave conflict behind and live a normal life.

As Israel and the Palestinians head to Annapolis, Maryland, for a US-led peace conference, Fami-Helgort, 28, said she longs for a peace deal that will free her husband from annual reserve duties and remove the fear of suicide bombings. Soudah, 24, said she wants a Palestinian state that will ensure the freedom she says she's denied by Israel's occupation of the West Bank, and hopes one day

she can travel without authorities "freaking out" when they see her Palestinian documents.

Born into a conflict that is now more than twice as old as they are, the way the lives of these young people unfold will have an impact on generations to come around the world. "We are normal people, we just want to have fun," said Tami Helgort, a television producer, in a trendy cafe in Israel's secular metropolis on the Mediterranean coast. "Palestinians go through shit, but on the other hand Israel has to defend itself so we can't here and have coffee in Tel Aviv."

Soudah works for an education aid organization in Ramallah, the Palestinians' administrative center in the Occupied West Bank. She also wants to live a "normal" life.

But her future looks dismal as Israeli travel restrictions shut down opportunities for work, study and leisure and she is plotting her escape to the US.

"It's like something is choking me ... and as an ambitious young person who wants to achieve something, it's getting very hard," she said in a Ramallah cafe where the Western fashion and the frothy milk drinks differ little from Tel Aviv.

As an undergraduate, Soudah was unimpressed by final exams due to an Israeli curfew, and says she limits travel within the West Bank to avoid long waits at military roadblocks. She also accuses Palestinian leaders of squandering cash and falling ordinary people, and says even if peace talks yield a Palestinian state, she would think hard before opting to stay.