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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Middle East Peace Through Anxiety

By MICHAEL B. OREN

Annapolis, Md.

LAST week's multi-national summit meeting here was about many things, the least of which, perhaps, was the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Behind the calls for the creation of a Palestinian state that would live serenely and stably alongside the Jewish state, beyond the vision of a Middle East at last absolved of its longest-running conflict, was the paramount question of power — who in the region wields it and who in the region wants it. Indeed, while Annapolis is unlikely to succeed in bridging the gaps between Israeli and Arab positions, it effectively drew lines in the sand between those nations siding with America and the West and those allied with Iran.

As a rule, international conferences have never served as effective frameworks in the search for Middle Eastern peace. The British held the first one, the St. James Conference, back in 1939, and failed to reconcile the warring Jews and Arabs of Palestine. The United Nations tried next at Lausanne in 1949 and met with similar results; Arab delegates refused to sit at the same table with the Israelis. The Geneva Conference, jointly sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union but without the participation of the Syrians and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, convened in December 1973, and unraveled a few days later without a single sentence exchanged between Arab representatives and Israelis.

Far more pomp and optimism attended the Madrid Conference in 1991 where President George H. W. Bush, flush from his victory over Iraq, heralded a new era of Arab-Israeli understanding. Such empathy was notably absent, however, as Israeli and Arab leaders exploited the forum for trading accusations. Stymied, the comprehensive talks dissolved into separate Syrian-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli tracks that led ultimately nowhere.

The Annapolis gathering, at least superficially, seemed different. Avoiding the rancorous rhetoric that poisoned previous gatherings, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, ardently reiterated their commitment to achieving peace, even at great sacrifice. Present at the table were not only the Syrians and the Palestinians but also the Saudis — talking to, if not yet shaking hands with, their Israeli counterparts.

Nevertheless, the chances for any progress emerging from Annapolis seem at best remote. Peace treaties in the past were forged by strong statesmen — Menachem Begin of Israel and Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and Jordan's King Hussein.

But Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas are two of the region's weakest leaders, unpopular among their own people and discredited by corruption charges. And President Bush, who, unlike his father, has not won a war in Iraq, is hardly perceived as muscular in Middle Eastern eyes. Indeed, Mr. Bush's refusal to engage in direct mediation in the manner of Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, and his insistence that comprehensive talks be broken down into bilateral and multilateral tracks, à la Madrid, further diminishes any hope for breakthrough.

Yet, in spite of its glaring handicaps, Annapolis must be deemed a triumph — not of peacemaking, paradoxically, but of girding the region for conflict. Though no doubt sincere in their desire to neutralize the Arab-Israeli irritant in Middle Eastern affairs, participants in the conference were above all motivated by their fear of a radical and relentlessly aggressive Iran. This fear has deepened with the success of the Iranian proxies Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and Gaza, as well as the expansion of Iranian influence westward into the Iraqi vacuum.

The inability of the international community either to entice or deter the Iranians from producing nuclear weapons adds urgency to the need to unite those countries threatened by those bombs. That, and not American fiat, brought 49 states and organizations to Annapolis; that, and not the yearning for an Israeli-Arab accord, impelled a Saudi prince to sit alongside an Israeli prime minister.

Not unexpectedly, the Iranians reacted ferociously to Annapolis. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pronounced it a “failure” and the government-controlled press promised to “bring down Islamic wrath” on its participants. But such rage merely betrays the anxiety induced by Annapolis in Tehran. For the first time a coalition of Western and modern Arab leaders has coalesced and declared its commitment to resist “extremism” in the Middle East — a well-known euphemism for Iran.

What's more, new efforts have begun to confront Iran outside of the United Nations and woo Syria from Iran's orbit. An international conference may not be the ideal formula for attaining Israeli-Palestinian peace, but it can provide a powerful forum for expressing solidarity in the face of war.

Situated on the Naval Academy campus, not far from where the meeting's delegates gathered, is America's oldest war monument. Carved out of marble in 1806, the 30-foot-high column commemorates the Navy's victory in America's first war in the Middle East — against the pirates of Tripoli.

Today, 200 years later, the United States is again taking the lead in rallying opposition to another rogue state in the region. The Barbary Wars, as they were called, lasted a long time, flaring off and on from 1801 to 1815. The struggle against Iran inaugurated at Annapolis is only just beginning.

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