

In Focus Transatlantic News Digest

An electronic Newsletter of the Atlantic Council of Canada

#5, November 19-30, 2007

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Middle East Peace Conference

The United States hosted a **three-day conference in Annapolis, Maryland**, on November 26-28, after a seven-year freeze **in the Middle East peace process**. On November 26, **U.S. President George Bush** had private meetings with top Israeli and Palestinian officials as diplomats from around the world convened in Annapolis for the first such high-level international gathering on Middle East peace in 16 years.

The conference, a gathering of more than 50 organizations and countries, including some 16 Arab nations, is taking place 60 years after the UN voted to partition British-mandate Palestine on November 29, 1947. President Bush vowed that the conference would try to provide international support to the two rivals in their efforts to solve the final status for an independent Palestinian state as well as many other outstanding issues.

At a State Department dinner Bush said, "We've come together ... because we share a common goal - two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," and "achieving this goal requires difficult compromises."

"I am going to Annapolis in an effort to realize the dream of the Palestinian people for an independent state," **Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas** told reporters. "We have a great deal of hope that this conference will produce permanent status negotiations, expanded negotiations, over all permanent status issues that would lead to a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian people," Abbas told while meeting with Bush.

"I hope this meeting will allow us to engage in serious negotiations on all the problems to the end that there could be two national states for the two peoples," Israelis and Palestinians, **Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert** told journalists.

The U.S.-sponsored peace conference - first proposed by Bush in July - is designed to build momentum toward the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to immediately resume long-stalled negotiations toward creating an independent Palestinian state.

In a [joint statement](#) both sides pledged to seek a peace deal by the end of 2008 and before the end of Bush's term in the office. "We express our determination to bring an end to bloodshed, suffering and decades of conflict between our peoples; to usher in a new era of peace, based on freedom, security, justice, dignity, respect and mutual recognition; to propagate a culture of peace and nonviolence; to confront terrorism and incitement, whether committed by Palestinians or Israelis", the statements says.

Seven years after the [Camp David peace talks](#) presided by then **president Bill Clinton** disintegrated and plunged the region into a new cycle of violence, the two sides remain deeply divided on core issues including the status of Jerusalem, the borders of a future Palestinian state and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

Israeli and Palestinian officials were involved in last-minute discussions aimed at trying to adopt a document outlining the parameters of peace negotiations that the Bush administration hopes will lead to a Palestinian state. The first peace talks are to be held on December 12 and are to continue biweekly after that.

Despite this optimism, chances for any breakthrough pointing toward that "final peace" seem slight. The domestic weakness of both **Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas** and **Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert** raises doubts about their ability to make the tough concessions needed for a final settlement, let alone implement it: Olmert is a deeply unpopular prime minister and Abbas has control only over half of the Palestinian territories since Hamas seized Gaza in June.

Some Middle East experts said Olmert and Abbas might need more than Bush administration rhetoric to reach a final settlement. The track record of accomplishment in past meetings between the two is not enough even though the relationship has warmed and they are said to have begun discussing some of the most troublesome issues in settling the conflict.

Failure to achieve concrete results would have "devastating consequences in the region and beyond," some former U.S. officials said including former White House national security advisers Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, former House International Relations Committee chairman Lee Hamilton and former diplomats Thomas Pickering and Carla Hills.

Past U.S. presidents staked much on the Middle East; some even achieved encouraging results. **President Carter's 1978 Camp David sessions** led to a [peace treaty](#) the following year between Israel and Egypt. A **1991 Middle East peace conference in Madrid, Spain**, which was sponsored by the first President Bush and the Russians, paved the way for the [Oslo peace accords](#) and establishment of the Palestinian Authority. **President Clinton** brokered Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at [Wye River](#) in Queenstown, MD, in 1998; at [Camp David](#) in 2000; and in [Taba](#), Egypt, in January 2001 - all to no avail.

Canada's Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier took part in the conference. Bernier spread the message that Canada is assessing new contributions to security, governance and development in the Middle East and will provide aid to Palestinians. A final decision hasn't been made on how much money will be involved and exactly where it will be directed. In July, Canada contributed \$8 million to the Palestinian government and another \$1 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross to protect civilians and offer assistance to those most in need. It was part of \$30 million in humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, including refugees, in the last fiscal year.

Canada supports the vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, with secure and recognized borders. In his statement, Maxime Bernier told, "The dual pillars of Canada's principled policy on the Middle East are our long-standing support for the security and well-being of Israel and its legitimate place within the Middle East and the international community, and our support for the establishment of a democratic, peaceful Palestinian state. "Canada will continue to support the parties and U.S. leadership as negotiations move forward toward everyone's goal: two states living in peace and security."

Useful links:

Text of [Abbas statement](#) at the Middle East summit

Text of [Quartet Statement](#) (U.S., UN, EU, and Russia)

Update on Russia

- [Russian Withdrawal from the CFE Treaty](#)
- [U.S., Russia and the European Missile System](#)

Moscow announced earlier this year and then voted in the Parliament earlier this month that it would stop implementing the **1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty** (CFE) as of December 12. **President Vladimir Putin** has then signed into law Parliament's decision to suspend Russia's adherence to the treaty, which limits the deployment of tanks, aircraft and other heavy weapons across the continent.

NATO has criticized Russia's withdrawal from the treaty. The **United States and the EU** urged Russia to not to go ahead with a threat to stop complying with this key European arms control treaty, which is seen as the cornerstone of European security.

Moscow says the CFE is not working because an updated version agreed on in 1999 has not been ratified by any country other than Russia. Russia ratified the updated treaty in 2004, but the United States and other NATO members have refused to follow, arguing that Moscow must first withdraw forces from Georgia and Moldova.

In his address to the annual **Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)** meeting in Madrid, Spain, **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** said Russia was still open to dialogue but he reiterated Moscow's demand that the US and other NATO partners sign the amended treaty.

"Russia fulfilled the CFE provisions in good faith while NATO bases sprang up in Romania, Bulgaria and the United States prepared to install its anti-missile defense system along Russia's border," said Sergey Mironov, speaker of the upper house of parliament.

The 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) is a landmark post-Cold War arms control agreement. It established parity and a reduction of forces between member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact.

Under the moratorium signed by Putin, Russia will halt inspections of NATO countries and verifications of Russian military sites and will no longer be obligated to limit the number of conventional weapons deployed west of the Ural Mountains, which stretch from central Siberia in the north to Russia's border with Kazakhstan near the Caspian Sea.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered the moratorium in July amid a row over U.S. plans to install an anti-missile shield in Eastern Europe. Washington appears willing to engage Russia in this projects, even after Russia's proposal to use a former Soviet radar base in Azerbaijan was deemed unpractical (for technical reasons) by the U.S. military.

Following discussions on October 11-12, United States has formally made new proposals to Russia aimed at easing tension over its plans in Europe. The suggestions included stationing Russian and American liaison officers at each other's missile defense facilities as part of a broader joint effort to protect against missile attacks.

The United States submitted the package to Russia last week. But Russia's foreign minister sharply criticized them after a meeting with **U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice**. Sergey Lavrov said that formal proposals presented "a significant rollback from what American representatives said" when he met with Rice in early October.

Speaking in Washington, Lavrov suggested the United States is determined to implement its own plans and merely wants Russian help, rather than real cooperation in defining and opposing threats.

"If by joint work they mean pursuing unilateral plans to install missile defense facilities in Eastern Europe, and inviting us only to help them and provide information we have, that's not what we have in mind when we propose ... together conducting analyses to determine threats and together discussing measures to neutralize them," he said.

Construction of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey strategic railway launched

On November 21, the presidents of **Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey** launched the construction of the strategic **Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway**, dubbed the "Iron Silk Road," to provide uninterrupted rail service from Europe to China. The railway will link the **capital of Azerbaijan (Baku), Georgia (Tbilisi) and the Turkish city of Kars** to allow goods to be shipped through the South Caucasus region to Turkey and on to Western Europe.

The project is one of several projects to link oil-rich Azerbaijan and Central Asia with Turkey and European markets. An oil pipeline from Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan via Georgia was opened last year, and a gas line along a similar route is in the works.

"Today is a historic day. We are launching the construction of a railway that will mark the revival of the great Silk Road," **Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili** said at the ceremony, calling the railway a "geopolitical revolution" and "a transport window to Europe" for goods traveling from as far away as China. **Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev**, whose country's economy depends on the expansion of oil and gas exports, described the railway as "a serious step in maintaining energy security in the region." "The project doesn't only connect Baku to Kars, but also connects China to London," **Turkish President Abdullah Gül** said at a ceremony.

The **\$600 million project** will see 30 kilometers of rail built in Georgia and 76 kilometers in Turkey. The three presidents signed an agreement for construction in February 2007, and the line is expected to be open by 2010. Traffic is expected to total 3 million tons of freight and 1.5 million passengers in 2010, rising to 16.5 million tons of freight and 3.5 million passengers in 2034.

Turkey is providing US\$220m to fund the 76 km of the line to be built on its territory between Kars and the Georgian border, while Azerbaijan has provided Georgia with a US\$200m credit to fund the construction of the final 30 km to the current railhead at Akhalkalaki and upgrade the route to the Azeri border.

This project has already attracted the interest of such countries as **Kazakhstan and China** that have expressed their interest in utilizing the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway to transport their goods to European markets.

The road will become an alternative to the existing **Trans-Siberian line** connecting major countries in Europe and Asia. It is bypassing **Russia** and another South Caucasus country, **Armenia** that has been left out of all regional projects.

As an alternative to the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway, Armenia is pushing for reopening the already existing **Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railway**. Presently, the railroad between the Turkish town of Kars and Armenia's Gyumri is not operational because of **blockades imposed on Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan**. Kars-Gyumri railway was predominantly used for passenger transportation in the Soviet times, and was the only railway immediately connecting the USSR with Turkey.

So far Turkey has ignored calls by the U.S. and Europe to reopen the border with Armenia. Although Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence from the USSR in 1991, it has seen its relations with Yerevan marred by the **1915 Armenian genocide**. Yet another motivation for Turkey to keep the border closed is its solidarity with Azerbaijan, which came to **war with Armenia over the Nagorno Karabakh region**. Turkey imposed a blockade on Armenia in 1993 as a result of an armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Sources: AP, AFP, Reuters, Washington Post, BBC News, Canadian Press, Canada News Center www.news.gc.ca, www.military.com. The American Society of International Law www.asil.org, National Public Radio www.npr.org, Railway Gazette, Today's Zaman, The Georgian Times.

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