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## Give peace a chance

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### Indonesia's role in Mid-East is a positive development

THE peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland, in the US marks the first formal resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks in seven years. While expectations for the negotiations are understandably low after the conflict has festered for at least 60 years, the mere fact that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have developed a good rapport is positive. Admittedly, both men have little room to negotiate, given the expectations of their respective populations, but while hopes for outcomes are largely limited to the continuation of talks in the future, as Uri Dromi, the director of international outreach for the independent Israel Democracy Institute said, "In the Middle East, if you don't talk, you shoot, so talking is good for everybody".

George Bush was the first American president to call for an independent Palestinian state, declaring his support in 2002 for a "two-state solution" with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace. Many people have criticised the US for not doing more since then to bring about peace as if it were somehow the US's responsibility. In fact, the Palestinians and their backers in Syria and Iran have, up to now, done everything in their power to put up roadblocks to peace. After the Clinton administration brokered an agreement that would have set up an independent state in all of Gaza and virtually all of the West Bank, the Palestinians responded by launching a four-year suicide-bombing campaign targeting Israeli civilians. When Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Hamas launched another bombing campaign on Israel and a brutal takeover of the territory. Iranian-backed Hezbollah also launched an attack on Israel from Lebanon last year.

There is not much hope at Annapolis of progress on the main topics for discussion - borders, the right of return of refugees, the future of Jerusalem and the security of Israel - but it is hoped that the attendance of Arab and Muslim states will shore up support for the Fatah-ruled Palestinian Authority which continues to be threatened by Hamas.

The news that Indonesia is prepared to play a significant role in Middle East diplomacy is a welcome development. As Greg Sheridan recently wrote in *The Weekend Australian's* Inquirer section, Indonesian foreign policy is beginning to mature in such a way that it can begin to take its place in world affairs commensurate with its size and importance. Unlike China which has shown little interest in helping the international community to manage issues posed by rogue states such as Burma, Sudan or Iran, Indonesia is stepping up to the plate to play a positive role in one of the world's most intractable disputes. Israel and Palestine have both encouraged Indonesia to play a role but some other countries in the Middle East are resentful that a large, moderate Muslim nation such as Indonesia, which is committed to a two-state solution and secure borders for Israel, should play a part.

As its Foreign Minister, Hassan Wirajuda says Indonesia's active involvement may not be to the liking of some countries in the Middle East who consider that only they have the right to involve themselves in finding, or as is more often the case, blocking a solution to the conflict. The truth is that Jakarta has a long history of support for the Palestinian cause and most recently has sent 1000 soldiers as peacekeepers to southern Lebanon. With its experience in dealing with terrorism and conflict resolution and in establishing a multicultural, tolerant democracy, Indonesia may help to move Annapolis beyond the sterile rhetoric of long players in the Middle East drama.

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