

THE MONDAY BEFORE TUESDAY

I don't believe we're going to wake up at the end of tomorrow, after the Annapolis conference, and discover peace has broken out across the Middle East. I'm not developing some newfound faith in Condi's ability to negotiate real diplomatic deals. But I am intrigued by the degree to which pieces are falling into place, just on the eve of tomorrow's conference.

First there was the news that Syria will attend the conference. The most telling explanation of what that might mean, I think, is Iran's response.

Syria's decision to attend the conference will please many U.S. and Israeli officials eager to make the talks appear successful. But it will likely upset Iran, which has become Damascus' biggest ally at a time when the West and fellow Arab states have spurned the country of 19 million over its support for Iranian-backed militants in Lebanon, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Tehran has vehemently denounced the Annapolis conference.

"They [the U.S. and Israel] intend to deceive a bunch of people who are like themselves in a watery conference and make them give concessions to the criminal Zionists," Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said today, according to the Fars News Agency.

Damascus may have decided to buck Tehran because Americans met its condition of including the Golan Heights on the agenda and would face criticism as an obstacle to peace if it then failed to attend, an analyst said.

Sending Moqdad instead of the more senior foreign minister, Walid Moallem, may be a concession to Iran, said the analyst, speaking on condition of anonymity. But Moqdad, a seasoned Syrian diplomat, is considered a relative heavyweight within the Damascus political elite.

Emad Mustapha, Syria's well-connected envoy to Washington, will also attend the talks, the official in Damascus said.

Ahmadinejad and Syrian President Bashar Assad spoke today in a phone conversation and issued a joint statement affirming that conferences such as Annapolis "are destined to failure even before they start," Fars reported.

Usually, Ahmadinejad manages to achieve coherent demagoguery, not this futile sputtering. Which suggests Iran has some real concerns that Syria might be seduced by what it sees in Annapolis. Which is kind of what Colonel Lang thinks:

I am still of the opinion that little will result from the Palestinian-Israeli meeting at Annapolis, but there is a real chance that the Syrian aspect of the festering mess that is the Middle East could be cleared up in the near future.

Syria is extremely uncomfortable with its hostile non-relationship with the US and would go a long way in attempting to resolve that situation.

Lebanon, the "alliance" with Iran, past support of terrorist groups, all of those things could be "in play" if the United States (and Israel) accept the concept of real reconciliation with Syria.

So, on Sunday, the Bush Administration managed to pull one of Iran's interlocutors into the party. And today, Bush and another of Iran's

major interlocutors—Iraq's Maliki-led government—have announced some common understanding.

- Iraq's leaders have asked for **an enduring relationship** with America, and we seek an enduring relationship with a democratic Iraq. We are ready to build that relationship in a sustainable way that **protects our mutual interests, promotes regional stability,** and requires fewer Coalition forces.
- In response, this Declaration is the first step in a three-step process that will normalize U.S.-Iraqi relations in a way which **is consistent with Iraq's sovereignty and will help Iraq regain its rightful status in the international community** — something both we and the Iraqis seek. The second step is the renewal of the Multinational Force-Iraq's Chapter VII United Nations mandate for a final year, followed by the third step, the negotiation of the detailed arrangements that will codify our bilateral relationship after the Chapter VII mandate expires. [my emphasis]

Call me crazy, but that declaration reads to me like a thick soup of code words meaning, "Iraq will dance with the US instead of Iran, and that will prevent Iran from destabilizing the region." As well as (as Spencer Ackerman points out in his reporting on this), "permanent bases in Iraq."

I don't know what kind of arms got twisted to bring everyone—everyone except Iran, of course—to the Annapolis conference. But someone is sure putting a lot of pieces into place to ensure that the conference's primary accomplishment turns out to be countering growing Iranian strength.