

The Road Map: Toward a Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?

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The Road Map drafted in December 2002 by the Quartet (the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations) is a turning point in the violent history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially since the collapse of the Oslo Process and the eruption of the new wave of violence in September 2000. This is the most serious international effort to intervene in the conflict, with the aim of ending the violence, resuming peace negotiations, and resolving the conflict.

The Reasons for Drafting the Road Map

The drafting of the Road Map came too late, after more than two years of the cruel and brutal wave of violence that erupted at the end of September 2000, and which brought the Oslo Process, following seven years of negotiations and interim agreements, to a total collapse. All the attempts made since September by those involved and by others to halt the violence and to resume negotiations have failed. Endeavors have included the attempts of three American envoys: Mitchell, Tenet, and Zinni. These failures have proved that Israel and the Palestinians were neither ready to resume negotiations nor even to reach an effective cease-fire. The situation of mutually damaging stalemate has not even reached the necessary point to put an

end to the violence. The reciprocal mistrust on the one hand and the lack of any political initiative on the other have prevented any effective political action. Nevertheless, it has become clear that the two sides cannot overcome their mutual animosity and distrust alone, and that an external initiative is required which will encourage or even force them to bring the violence to an end and resume a political process of peace. It was clear to both sides that only Washington was in a position to release the adversaries from the situation of mutually damaging stalemate. However, President Bush was too busy with the events of September 11 and the war in Afghanistan to become involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The escalation of the violence in the spring of 2002 forced Washington to accelerate its efforts. The first serious attempt was presented by President Bush's speech of June 24, 2002, in which he raised the idea of the two states solution, living side by side in peace and security. Bush related peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state with fighting terrorism, creating a new and different Palestinian leadership and the democratization of the Palestinian authority. Though Bush did not elaborate a specific plan for the accomplishment of his ideas, the essence of his speech was to become the guidelines for the Road Map. Bringing the EU, Russia and the UN in as sponsors further internationalized and legitimized the new plan.

The Road Map Plan

The Road Map aims to conclude a final and comprehensive resolution of

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by 2005. The plan introduces phases, timelines, target dates, and benchmarks aimed at progress via reciprocal steps taken by the two sides in political, security, humanitarian and institutional fields, under the auspices of the Quartet. The Road Map is based on three sequent phases. The shift from one phase to another will be dependant on the consensual judgment of the Quartet as to whether conditions are appropriate for proceeding, taking into account the performance and implementation of the obligations of both sides in each phase.

In the first phase, entitled «Ending terror and violence, normalizing Palestinian life, and building Palestinian institutions», planned for May 2003, the Palestinians should immediately enforce an unconditional cessation of violence and terrorism, and make visible efforts on the ground to arrest, counter, and restrain any individuals or groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis. In addition, the Palestinians should undertake a comprehensive political reform in preparation for statehood, including the appointment of an interim prime minister or cabinet empowered executive authority, and drafting a constitution, free fair and open elections. Israel, for its part, should take all necessary steps to help normalize Palestinian life, including affecting the withdrawal from Palestinian areas occupied since September 28 2000, dismantling settlement outposts erected since March 2001, and freezing all settlement activity.

In the second phase, to be affected between June and December 2003, efforts will be focused on establishing an independent Palestinian state with

provisional borders. Progress into Phase II will take place with an international conference attended by the Quartet, and its resulting convention. In this phase Arab states will restore pre-intifada links with Israel, and the multilateral talks on regional issues will be resumed. In Phase III, during 2004 and 2005, a permanent status agreement and the end of the conflict will be reached. This will be made via another international conference at the beginning of 2004, which will lead to a negotiated resolution between the parties including the issues of borders, Jerusalem, refugees, and settlement. The concluding permanent agreement will be followed by the Arab states' acceptance of full and normal relations with Israel, and security for all the states of the region regarding comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

The Prospects of the Road Map

The Road Map is a wide-ranging peace plan that aims to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a period of two years. This aim is too ambitious, being unrealistic, ambiguous, and too limited a period of time. Not only because the adversaries are not yet ready to resolve the conflict, but also due to the difficulties of overcoming the traumatic effects of the bloody cycle of terrorism and violence of the last three years in such a short time. Indeed, the first phase, which should have been concluded by May 2003, is still far from reaching its aims, and thus the shift to the second phase remains a distant step.

The plan includes far-reaching aims that require a long process of learning and implementation, of which the link of the peace process to democratization is the most important aspect. However, the transformation of a non-democratic society into a democracy may take more than two years, if possible at all. Is the Palestinian society prepared for such a significant change?

None of the parties involved have really taken the political, social and cultural obstacles to such a move into account. President Bush's speech and the Road Map exclude Arafat from governing Palestinian decisions, yet Arafat still has the power of decision, and the EU representatives meet with him and in reality consider him the only true Palestinian leader. This situation limits the new Palestinian government under Abu-Mazen in carrying out any independent policy. There is an ambiguity within the whole idea of an independent Palestinian state delimited by provisional borders. What is the meaning of a state with provisional borders? What are provisional borders and who will define them? Will the state therefore be feasible? Will it be possible to establish such a state without confronting and resolving essential problems between Israel and the Palestinians, such as the refugees issue?

The progress of the Road Map depends on the execution and implementation of the parties' obligations, and on a consensual judgment being reached by the Quartet on whether conditions are appropriate for proceeding to the next phase. Neither the exact level of execution and implementation that will be required to complete the shift, nor why the two parties concerned are not consulted about such developments, is clear. Moreover, what is meant by a consensual judgment? And do the members of the Quartet have the power of veto?

Both sides have accepted the Road Map with caution and many reservations, not only because it is perceived as an insufficient response to their interests and concerns, but also due to doubts of its viability. Nevertheless, under the encouragement of the United States, some positive steps have been taken toward Phase I of the Road Map. Among them have been the appointment (against the will of Arafat) of Abu-Mazen as the Palestinian prime minister; the bilateral meetings between

Abu-Mazen and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon; and the Aqaba Summit of both leaders with President Bush in June, in which both Abu-Mazen and Sharon committed themselves to take full advantage of the new opportunity for peace. These developments were followed by a temporary cease-fire of three months, beginning on June 29 (although it was more an internal agreement between the Palestinian government and the opposition Palestinian groups), and to agreements concerning Israeli-Palestinian redeployment in Gaza and Bethlehem. The dismantling of some of the Israeli settlement outposts in the West Bank and the release of a few hundred Palestinian prisoners (although this issue was not part of the agreement) have also been encouraging signs.

Both sides have remained apprehensive as to the intentions of the other. While Israel was suspicious and fearful that the terrorist organizations will use the period of cease-fire to accumulate strength for the next round of conflict, and as a result demanded the immediate disarmament of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad organizations, Abu-Mazen refused to comply with this demand or even to make any public commitments on the issue. The Palestinian Authority complained that Israel was neither releasing a sufficient number of prisoners nor continuing with the dismantlement of settlement outposts. Moreover, the Palestinian terrorist groups continued their activities, which reached a climax with the suicide bomb aboard a Jerusalem bus on August 19. Israel's retaliation with the killing of one of the Hamas leaders shattered the already unstable cease-fire, putting the future of the Road Map in peril. Without effective intervention on the part of the Quartet and especially of the United States, the breakdown of the cease-fire will escalate the conflict to new levels of violence, which will eliminate any chance of the accomplishment even of Phase I of the Road Map.