

Road Map to Nowhere

By Col. Dan Smith (Ret.) | May 1, 2003

According to the Bush administration, settling Iraq was to be a prelude to settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict via the Bush “road map.” Although yet to be formally released, a draft of the road map was deposited in the British House of Commons library by the Foreign Office on April 13. The following are highlights of and commentary on the draft.

The road map has one immediate problem: it’s already running late. Its general timelines envision “Phase III” negotiations at the beginning of 2004 to reach a “final, permanent status resolution in 2005, including on borders, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, and to support progress toward a comprehensive Middle East settlement” encompassing Israel, Syria, and Lebanon. But “Phase I,” which calls for the end of terror and violence by both sides, the “normalization” of Palestinian life (ending curfews, easing curbs on the movement of people and goods, and improving the humanitarian situation), and building Palestinian institutions, is supposed to run from the “Present to May 2003.” The “present” is virtually May, so in one month, from essentially a dead start, Palestinians and Israelis have to:

Palestinians

- issue, at the outset of Phase I, an “unequivocal statement reiterating Israel’s right to exist in peace and security and calling for an immediate and unconditional cease-fire;”
- declare an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism and make “visible efforts ... to arrest, disrupt, and restrain” those planning attacks “on Israelis anywhere;”
- begin “comprehensive political reform ... including drafting a Palestinian constitution and [preparing for] free, fair, and open elections;”
- rebuild and refocus the security apparatus, consolidating it into three services reporting to the Interior Minister; and
- appoint an “empowered executive” and take steps leading to a “genuine separation of powers.”

Israelis

- take steps to normalize Palestinian life;
- “withdraw from Palestinian areas occupied from September 28, 2000 ...;[and] freeze all settlement activity” as per the Mitchell report;

- issue an “unequivocal statement affirming its commitment to the two-party state vision of an independent, viable, sovereign Palestinian state ... and calling for an immediate end to violence against Palestinians everywhere;”
- cease “deportations, confiscation and/or demolition of Palestinian homes and property as a punitive measure or to facilitate Israeli construction.”

In addition, Palestinian and Israeli security forces will “progressively resume security cooperation,” and Arab states are to “cut off public and private funding” to groups involved in violence and terror.

Stumbling Blocks

The stumbling block comes with the last point dealing with security, for only if “comprehensive security performance moves forward” will the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) be required to withdraw progressively from the post-Sep. 28, 2000 lands it has occupied. This effectively is an “until and unless” clause, meaning that if suicide bomber and other attacks are not completely (or substantially) stopped (as they probably cannot be), the IDF will not have to begin or continue its “progressive” withdrawal. Moreover, there is no mechanism to settle disputes about the pace of events; the closest thing to a structure for resolving disputes about performance is whatever mechanism for scheduling meetings is established by the “Quartet” (U.S., UN, European Union, and Russia) monitoring the process.

Note also that while Palestinians must issue, at the outset of Phase I, their “unequivocal statement reiterating Israel’s right to exist,” there is no such requirement for Israel to affirm the two-state formula.

Another controversy that might ensnare the Phase I process deals with settlements. One requirement is for Israel, “consistent with the Mitchell Report ... to freeze all settlement activity (including natural growth of settlements).” A second, more controversial one, requires Israel to “dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001.” The problem is that, as the Mitchell Report states,

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“From the GOI [Government of Israel] perspective, the expansion of settlement activity and the taking of measures to facilitate the convenience and safety of settlers do not prejudice the outcome of permanent status negotiations.” For the Palestinians, however, settlement expansion and new outposts constitute facts on the ground that will be hard to reverse. This is both a policy question—will the ultra-right parties in the Sharon cabinet allow retrenchment to occur—and a program question—will the IDF actually employ force to dismantle outposts if armed settlers resist?

Phase II, running from June to December 2003, calls for a revival of discussions on regional water issues, the environment, arms control, refugees, and economic development. In a curious phrase, it also states a requirement to focus on the “option” of creating an independent Palestinian state with “maximum territorial contiguity.” This suggests that, should the Quartet determine that there is insufficient progress in developing the organs of democratic government, the formation of a Palestinian state “with provisional borders and attributes of sovereignty” will be postponed. Critically, the whole enterprise at this point depends on “a process of Israeli-Palestinian engagement.”

The same policy pitfalls in Phase II exist for the two-year-long (2004-2005) Phase III. Resolution of the problems that seem most resistant to solutions is wholly dependent on the Palestinians and Israelis reaching “a settlement negotiated between the parties.” Significantly, just as regime change in Iraq is viewed by the Bush administration as the key to ending the current Israeli-Palestinian impasse, ending that stand-off is to be the precursor to the discussions on the more intractable issues as well as the key to opening the door to wider peace and even more democratic governments evolving beyond Palestine.

Like many pronouncements of the Bush administration, the road map eschews specifics of how the process will proceed other than by “negotiations between the parties.” More importantly, the road map does not specify what will happen when roadblocks are encountered.

In fact, the whole process nearly suffered a fatal accident at the very first intersection when Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his newly appointed prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Marzen), went down to the deadline for forming a provisional cabinet because each wanted the final say on ministerial appointments.

In the end, Abbas named many Arafat loyalists to senior cabinet positions, most notably Saeb Erekat, Nabil Shaath, and Yasser Abed Rabbo, all of whom were in the old cabinet dominated by Arafat. Arafat yielded on the key sticking points: Abbas will also be Interior Minister, and his choice, Mohammad Dahlan, will be security chief. These two posts are considered the most important to curbing Palestinian violence. Arafat remains president of the Palestinian Authority, where he can influence events behind the scenes. Nonetheless, the provisional cabinet probably will be ratified this week by the 88-member Palestinian Legislative Council.

In addition to establishing his own power base in an Arafat-dominated organization, Abbas’ ability to reform the Palestinian Authority, and most specifically its security services, may entirely depend on whether and how quickly Israeli Prime Minister Sharon is willing to ease restrictions in the Palestinian territories that have paralyzed travel, isolated towns and villages, and incapacitated security agencies. This is a matter of trust, which over the past 31 months, has been conspicuous by its absence.

Until this elusive quality is re-established through renewed, effective contacts—and settled to the satisfaction of Bush and Sharon—the Bush plan is a road map to nowhere.

(Dan Smith <dan@fcl.org> is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org) and a retired U.S. army colonel and senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.)

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Writer: Col. Dan Smith (Ret.)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

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