

Middle East Road Map: Will Bush Become Sharon's Lackey?

by Dean Andromidas

When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon approved the road map for a Middle East peace, he attached 14 "reservations." After the reservations were made public, senior Israeli commentator Akiva Eldar warned in the daily *Ha'aretz* on May 27 that if they were accepted, they would turn the road map "from a diplomatic initiative into an Israeli *diktat* of a Palestinian surrender agreement." He warned, "If President Bush announces that he adopts these reservations, at best he will be considered a Sharon lackey, and at worst lacking any understanding whatsoever of the politics of the region."

Eldar said that the authors of the document "apparently assumed that President George Bush was only asking for the formal approval of the Sharon government of the road map, and to hell with the implementation."

The road map was drafted by the "quartet" of Middle East mediators from the United States, United Nations, European Union, and Russia, and is a phased plan, which should end with the creation of a Palestinian state. In its first phase, Israel would commit itself to a settlement freeze and the dismantling of all settlements established since Sharon's government came to power. It is stipulated that so-called "natural growth" of old settlements is forbidden, because they are all illegal under international law and the various UN resolutions.

President Bush, scheduled to hold a summit with Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) in Jordan on June 4 or 5, is to attend another summit in Egypt with the heads of state of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. After these meetings, it might become clearer whether Bush accepts any of Sharon's reservations.

A look at Sharon's 14 reservations reveals that 90% of them detail how the Palestinians must totally and completely eliminate any form of violence and incitement before any-

thing is implemented on the Israeli side. This includes the crushing of all militant groups, including collecting all weapons. Yet, reservation number one states that "the road map will not state that Israel must cease violence and incitement against the Palestinians." It also calls for a new Palestinian leadership, in a totally reformed Palestinian Authority that meets the approval of Israel.

As for the so-called "provisional state," this would be no state at all. It would have to be fully demilitarized, but Israel would have "control over the entry and exit of all persons and cargo, as well as of its air space and electromagnetic spectrum." Although Israel appears to accept a settlement freeze, this is to occur only after virtually all violence and incitement cease. There is to be absolutely no discussion about settlements until the end of the process. There would be no withdrawal of Israeli troops to the September 2000 lines until there is "absolute quiet." It is this stipulation which killed all previous attempts to restart the peace process, such as the Mitchell and Tenet plans.

Eldar commented, "The reservations confirm the Palestinian claim that Sharon's cabinet approval of the road map is akin to throwing a ball into their court. In fact, Sharon sent Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Mazen a transparent balloon that any analyst will find easy to deflate." Eldar said that the security demands, including the crushing of the militant groups, demands Abu Mazen "succeed where the strongest army in the Middle East has failed in more than 30 months." Only at the end of the process, with security provisions obviously calculated to fail, "will Jerusalem be willing to freeze settlements and outposts. . . . In other words Israel will then do Abu Mazen a favor, granting him the authority to collect the trash."



Beit Hanoun on the West Bank, in late May 2003, after demolition by Israeli Defense Forces armored vehicles. While "accepting" the Road Map, Sharon has his forces continuing incursions, killings, and demolitions throughout the occupied territories.

Seeing Is Believing

Prime Minister Abu Mazen, in his first interview with an Israeli newspaper, told *Ha'aretz* on May 28 that he has no illusions about Sharon. "I know him inside and out. I'll believe him only when he implements the road map." Commenting on Sharon's 14 reservations, he said, "They don't interest me. . . . We understand from the Americans that there are no changes in the road map. This is an historic opportunity to return to a track of normalcy."

As for Sharon's far-reaching demands for "absolute quiet," Abu Mazen reminded his interviewer that in the last two years, Israel has destroyed the entire Palestinian security service in the West Bank and 70% of the security service in the Gaza Strip. He said, "We hope and think it is important to control violence, put an end to it, and we expect the Israelis to understand that even if here and there some violent incident takes place, we don't agree to it." But, he added, "It is important that the Palestinians see change on the ground, like cessations of assassinations and demolitions, and prisoners be freed, and the Palestinian civilian should feel something has changed in the atmosphere, and he can go to work and move around."

Abu Mazen rejected Sharon's demands that the Palestinians give up the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees to their former homes, that they were driven out of during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Abu Mazen said, "We cannot accept

relinquishing the right of return. The Arab League initiative refers to a just and agreed solution, based on UN decisions. That is a very clear statement. . . . This does not mean we want to destroy the state of Israel, we recognize it in the borders drawn by Resolution 242." The demand to drop the "right of return" has always been used by Sharon and others as a provocation, knowing that no Palestinian government can make such a statement. Sharon's demand to make it a precondition for accepting the road map, was rejected out of hand by the Bush Administration.

Another of Sharon's reservations, his refusal to link the road map in any way with last year's Saudi peace initiative, was also rejected. Abu Mazen said that the solution to this conflict is key to stabilizing the region. "That's what prompted the Arab initiative presented by Saudi Arabia last year. That was a balanced initiative and its implementation would lead to peaceful relations and normalization between Israel and the Arab states and other Islamic states. . . . I am amazed the Israeli government did not take it into account. I hear that among the Israeli public it won 60% support."

Abu Mazen denounced Sharon's relentless campaign to isolate Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, which included Sharon's refusal to meet any diplomat or foreign minister who met Arafat in Ramallah. "Arafat is the elected President of the Palestinian Authority and should not be isolated. I reject, both morally and politically, all the pressure on countries

and persons not to meet him. That has ramifications for the Palestinian street and for us in the leadership. It is difficult for me to explain to our citizens that we have a new government, conducting negotiations with Israel, and our President is isolated in the Muqata. There is no justification for it.”

The campaign against Arafat is a transparent attempt to sabotage the peace initiative, because everyone knows that Arafat’s approval is necessary to give legitimacy to any agreement.

Making this point, Abu Mazen said that “without Arafat, there never would have been Oslo. He put all his weight behind the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] accepting Resolution 242 in 1988 and even called it the peace offensive. . . . We thought the Israelis would respond in kind, but they responded precisely the opposite. After the U.S. decided to begin a dialogue with us, Prime Minister Shamir called it a black day.”

Abu Mazen thoroughly rejected the idea that the Palestinians had planned the Intifada. He laid the blame on the collapse of the Camp David peace talks in July 2000, and the “continuing settlement activity. . . . It creates the impression that a peaceful solution cannot be achieved. And there was another factor—Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount. As a result, 22 Palestinians were killed. The Intifada began with Palestinian rocks, and Israel responded with killing, and it was all compounded by the sensitivity of Al Aqsa.”

Sharon Continues to Scheme

After getting his cabinet to vote in favor of the road map, Sharon again spoke of “painful concessions.” He even used the words “ending the occupation” and “dividing the land.” For a Jabotinskyite, there is no “occupation,” because the territories are part of the “land of Israel,” which can never be “divided.” Are these words from Sharon’s heart? Not at all.

It was revealed in *Ha’aretz* on May 22 that Sharon’s government hired three U.S. political consultants, including the Republican consultant Frank Luntz, the Democratic Party-linked consultant Stanley Greenberg, and another consultant, Jennifer Laszlo-Mizrahi. All three conducted “focus group” surveys of Americans, at the end of which they wrote a memo for the Sharon government on how best to sell the cause to the American public. The memo advises that they may do what they want, but should always speak in positive terms and of their support for the peace process.

For example, on how to deal with Prime Minister Abu Mazen: “It is essential that you use positive language when asked about Abbas. However, that does not mean you must compliment Abbas himself. While knocking him down now does little to help your long-term goals, building him up is also counter-productive. Therefore you must remain positive about the peace process and indifferent about Abbas.”

As for the Palestinians in general, “If you express your concern for the plight of the Palestinian people and how it is unfair, unjust, and immoral that they are forced to accept

leaders who steal and kill in their name, you will be building credibility for your support of the average Palestinian while undermining the credibility of their leadership.”

But above all, the memo states, show “humility,” for although it “is a bitter pill to swallow, it will inoculate you against critiques that you have not done enough for peace. Admit mistakes, but then show how Israel is the partner working for peace.” Thus when the whole process collapses, blame must be clearly placed on the Palestinians.

A few hours after Sharon, on May 28, spoke about “occupation” and the need to “divide the land,” *Ha’aretz* revealed that Sharon had just postponed a military operation in the occupied territories that was to be “an unusually large-scale one aimed at substantially changing the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.” Moreover, the operation could still be launched after a serious Palestinian attack.

Nonetheless, ongoing military operations have not skipped a beat since the release of the road map. Targeted assassinations continue, house demolitions are an every-day occurrence, and children throwing stones are shot dead by Israeli soldiers.

The road map might end these military operations, but will it stop the “Berlin Wall” which Sharon is constructing throughout the West Bank? Although the impression given is that this wall is along the “green line” constituting the 1967 border, the reality is quite different. According to a feature in the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* on May 23, the map demarcating where the fence is being built corresponds to the Bantustan state Sharon is planning for the Palestinians. When Ron Nahman, the mayor of the West Bank settlement of Ariel, saw the map, he told *Yedioth Ahronoth*, “That’s the same map I’ve seen every time I’ve visited Arik [Sharon] since 1978. He told me he’s been thinking about it since 1973.”

Unless the road map process substantially reverses these facts on the ground, the Palestinian state will constitute no more than the unacceptable 42% of the territory of the West Bank, which Sharon was willing to give the Palestinians two years ago after the “terror” ended.

Whether Sharon is forced to implement the road map, or continue a policy that will ultimately lead to a war, will be determined in Washington. For the war party led by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney and their flock of chicken-hawks, Sharon and Israel continue to be the hand grenade that could ignite a new Middle East conflagration. Defeat them, and Sharon is defeated along with them.

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