

Whose road map?

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Nov. 6, 2007

As did his pronouncements last August in Jericho, where Prime Minister Ehud Olmert indicated a willingness to withdraw from an area equivalent to 100% of the occupied territories, his latest declarations to the Saban Forum, in the presence of Condoleezza Rice and Tony Blair, sounded promising, even stirring. "Annapolis is a landmark," he said, "on the path to negotiations and of the genuine effort to achieve the realization of the vision of two nations: the State of Israel - the nation of the Jewish people; and the Palestinian state - the nation of the Palestinian people."

Moreover, he expressed the hope that the two-state solution would be achieved before US President George W. Bush's term ends in January 2009.

The speech sounded sincere, even impassioned. Olmert gave the impression that he was willing to confront all the difficulties - including the necessity of Israel fulfilling its part of the road map bargain. He stated firmly and clearly that Israel had now "partners for peace" in the Palestinian leadership. All the bases appeared to have been covered; the commitment of the Israeli government to the road map and a two-state solution beyond doubt.

SO WHAT is the problem? The missing piece, the crucial document that subverts any viable two-state solution, a factor in Israel's strategic considerations mentioned by Olmert as an aside only a few days ago, is Bush's letter of April, 2004, to then-prime minister Ariel Sharon. This little-noticed document fundamentally changed the parameters of what is to be discussed in any "peace process" and what Israel's obligations are under the road map. It is considered by the Israeli government as perhaps the most crucial element in its effort to retain the major settlement blocs and in that way foreclosing the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

The essence of the Bush letter, which was subsequently ratified by the House of Representatives by a vote of 407-9 and by the Senate by 95-1, is the following passage: "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949."

In one seemingly innocuous sentence, President Bush fatally but knowingly undermined UN Resolution 242, the very basis of the two-state solution since

1967 and of his own road map initiative, by nullifying the requirement that Israel return to the Green Line (with agreed-upon adjustments) so that a viable Palestinian state might emerge.

Israel takes the American position - rejected by the other three members of the road map Quartet, the UN, Europe and Russia, but so what? - as agreement to its retaining its major settlement blocs. They are six or seven in number: the Jordan Valley, the Ariel bloc, the Modi'in bloc, the three blocs that make up "Greater Jerusalem" (Givat Ze'ev, Ma'aleh Adumim and the Etzion Bloc/Efrat), and perhaps a salient into Hebron.

When, then, Olmert speaks of "conforming to the road map," he speaks of withdrawal from all the occupied territory outside those settlement blocs, since the Bush letter de facto annexes them to Israel. The massive building of settlements and highways within these settlement blocs does not, therefore, constitute a breach in Israel's responsibility to end settlement construction in the first phase of the road map, since they are no longer parts of the occupied territory.

The area of the settlement blocs that Israel wishes to retain may not seem like much; between 10-20% of the West Bank, including "Greater Jerusalem." But they are crucial for a viable Palestinian state - and "viability" is a term of reference in the road map.

The settlement blocs of an Israeli "Greater Jerusalem" remove from the Palestinians the economic heart of their future state, since up to 40% of the Palestinian economy, according to the World Bank, revolves around tourism in Jerusalem. The other blocs carve the West Bank into three "cantons" (Sharon's term, since Olmert's Convergence Plan, which he never abandoned, is based on Sharon's Cantonization Plan). The Jordan Valley bloc ensures Israeli control of the border and of the Jordan River's water.

Indeed, while accepting the road map, Olmert has in mind a very different document than that of the UN, the Europeans, the Russians and the Palestinians themselves. Integral to Israel's version of the document are the "14 reservations" it appended, which effectively nullify the road map as a genuine path to peace.

Reservation # 5, for example, states that "The provisional state will have provisional borders and certain aspects of sovereignty, be fully demilitarized..., be without the authority to undertake defense alliances or military cooperation, and Israeli control over the entry and exit of all persons and cargo, as well as of its air space and electromagnetic spectrum."

IN THE end, the Palestinians may get 80-90% of the West Bank, but they do not get a viable state. They will have sterile swatches of territory whereas Israel retains control of the borders, movement of people and goods both within the Palestinian state and between it and the countries around, much of the country's arable land, almost all its water, the Palestinians' airspace and even control of their communications. The Palestinian state is deprived of a viable economy. Given that 60% of Palestinians are under the age of 18 and that mini-state must absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees, its prospects for being a viable, stable and truly independent state are nil given the unspoken parameters outlined in the Bush letter.

There will be a Palestinian state. Israel has an urgent demographic need to get the almost four million Palestinians of the occupied territories off its hands. It might even attempt to "swap" a couple hundred thousand Israeli Arab citizens of the Galilee Triangle under the pretense of giving the Palestinians more land. The crucial question is: will it be a viable state? If it's true that Olmert intends that Israel permanently retain the settlement blocs, an Israeli "greater" Jerusalem and effective control of the entire country to the Jordan River, then we will merely be substituting a sophisticated form of apartheid for occupation. The devil is in the details.

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