

Israel: US “road map” offers nothing to the Palestinians but continued repression

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The publication of the so-called US “road map” for the Middle East on April 30, officially titled “A Performance-Based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, should dispel the illusions of even the most naive that Washington intends to act as an honest broker between Israel and the Palestinians.

The promise of a US-backed settlement for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was offered to help various Arab regimes defend their support for the war against Iraq before their hostile subjects. Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair was particularly keen to secure such a guarantee from President George W. Bush, so he could claim that US intentions in the Middle East were philanthropic rather than predatory. Bush proclaimed his support for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state at the Azores summit in March, immediately prior to the start of hostilities against Iraq by the “coalition of the willing”.

The circumstances surrounding the final release of the road map and its contents make clear that the purpose of US intervention on the Palestine question, just as its war against Iraq, is to consolidate America’s position as the Mideast hegemon. Unlike previous such initiatives, the road map was unveiled without even a US presidential appearance, much less the Rose Garden handshake between Palestinians and Israelis that has accompanied previous initiatives. As the *Financial Times* of London accurately reported: “It emerged ... surreptitiously, dropped out of the back door of the White House press office.”

Israeli reaction was swift and unmistakable. In the immediate aftermath of the road map’s publication, the Israeli Defence Force launched a number of operations in the West Bank and Gaza. The most devastating was on May 1 in Gaza City, claiming 12 lives, including those of top Hamas member Yusef Abu Hein and his two brothers and three children—one aged just two years.

The road map was only issued after the US successfully forced part of the first stage on the Palestinians—“comprehensive political reform”. This translates into the removal or sidelining of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat and the installation of a regime that is ready to do Washington’s bidding.

Arafat by any measure has been desirous of a settlement with Israel, as was demonstrated by his signing up to the Oslo Accords in 1993. But both Tel Aviv and Washington have wanted to remove him because of his subsequent refusal to go along with Israeli efforts to rewrite the Oslo agreement in order to reduce the territories making up a Palestinian state and legitimise the vast increase in Zionist settlements on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arafat’s fate was sealed when he failed to suppress the *intifada* that erupted in September 2000 as a result of Likud leader Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount.

Washington’s chosen replacement for Arafat is Mahmoud Abbas—known as Abu Mazen—a businessman and adviser to the rulers of Qatar, who sits on the right wing of Arafat’s Fateh and who led the discussions culminating in the Oslo Accords.

His elevation to the post of prime minister, which he assumed by making a speech promising to combat terrorism “by any party and in all its shapes and forms”, was backed by Washington. So was his slate for cabinet posts—particularly the nomination of Muhammad Dahlan as top security official because of his proclaimed readiness to crack down on militant Palestinian groups.

Only after Abu Mazen was successfully installed was the road map published. An unnamed Bush official told the press candidly of Washington’s intentions: “We’re telling people that this is the moment to build up Abu Mazen, and it undermines that objective if you treat Arafat like he’s still in charge. That cannot happen and must not happen.”

As for the road map itself, the document offers little to the Palestinians other than a series of demands that they abandon and suppress any struggle against Israeli occupation. Its proposals are divided into three phases, culminating in the founding of a Palestinian state by 2005.

“The Quartet”—the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia—are to decide whether each stage has been completed successfully. But each stage is progressively less well defined and no definition is given as to what would constitute a Palestinian state. From the general tenor of the document, it can only be an apartheid-style bantustan, wholly subservient to its more powerful Israeli neighbour and answerable more or less directly to Washington.

The first demand placed on the Palestinian Authority is that it suppresses militant groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Fateh’s own Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. The document declares, “A two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will only be achieved through an end to violence and terrorism, when the Palestinian people have a leadership acting decisively against terror”.

Phase One begins with an immediate and unconditional cessation of violence by the Palestinians, “visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt, and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis anywhere” and the mounting of “effective operations aimed at confronting all those engaged in terror and dismantlement of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure”.

The “restructured/retrained Palestinian security forces” are to resume security cooperation with their counterparts in the Israeli Defence Force, “with the participation of US security officials”.

This is all supposed to happen by the end of this month!

Only after such a massive security clampdown is deemed by Washington to have been successful is Israel to begin a “progressive withdrawal” of its troops—and then only from those areas occupied from September 28, 2000, the start of the *intifada*—and freeze any further settlement activity.

Phase Two is meant to focus on “the option of creating an independent Palestinian state”, but with only “provisional borders” and “attributes of sovereignty” as determined by “the consensus judgment of the Quartet” and only after Palestinian elections are held that it is hoped will further marginalise both Arafat and any group opposed to Washington’s dictates.

The fate of the Palestinians is also linked in the document to securing “the goal of a comprehensive Middle East peace (including between Israel and Syria, and Israel and Lebanon)”.

Phase Three, a “final, permanent status resolution in 2005”, is meant to include a settlement of all outstanding issues including borders, sovereignty over East Jerusalem settlements and the disputed right of nearly 4 million Palestinian refugees to return to the lands from which they were dispossessed in 1948. None of this is defined, other than with a prescription that it should be “agreed, just, fair, and realistic”.

On its face, it is inexplicable that such a witch’s brew could seriously be offered up as a realistic plan for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Its conditions are far more onerous on the Palestinians than anything contained in Oslo Accords, and it holds out potential rewards that are even less attractive. There is not a chance that any Palestinian entity created by this document would have even a semblance of independence. It would not enjoy territorial contiguity and would continue to be policed by Israeli forces as a virtual prison camp for a captive population.

The road map could only be advanced by a regime drunk on its own power, which believes it can do what it wants in the aftermath of the military crushing of Iraq.

Even as it was issued, Secretary of State Colin Powell was on his way to Syria to lay down the law and insist that Damascus end all backing for Hezbollah. Proclaiming that the fall of Saddam Hussein had created a “new strategic situation” in the entire region, he warned Syria that “there are consequences lurking in the background” if it failed to do so. Powell is reported to be demanding that the Arab League and the European Union both make millions of dollars in existing subsidies to the Palestinian Authority conditional upon the PA’s implementation of the road map’s proposals.

This same change in the “strategic situation” is the foundation for what amounts to an attempt by the US to impose its diktat upon the Palestinian people, forcing them to accept the domination of an Israeli regime that rejects the creation even of an unviable Palestinian mini-state.

The Palestinians will inevitably resist efforts to impose a US-inspired settlement. Should Abu Mazen seek to clamp down on Hamas and other groups he will face stiff opposition. He has no popular base and is widely viewed as a tool of the US and Israel.

In the US, hawks within the Republican Party consider Powell’s response to the crushing of Iraq to be at best weak and at worst a betrayal of America’s national interests. Representative Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, called the road map dangerous to Israel and denounced its advocates as “neo-appeasers”. Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of House, said that the State Department under Powell was pursuing a policy of “accommodation ... that will clearly throw away all the fruits of hard-won victory in the region.”

Sharon calculates that he enjoys enough support in Washington to derail any negotiated settlement that requires Israeli concessions. The majority of his cabinet is on record as opposing an independent Palestinian state in any form, while some have come out forthrightly for what amounts to the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank and Gaza in order to establish a “Greater Israel”.

Benny Elon, the leader of the Moledet party and the tourism minister in Sharon’s cabinet, advanced as an alternative to the road map—which he described as “unworkable”—the forced “transfer” of the Palestinian population from the occupied territories to Jordan, which would then be declared a Palestinian state under the rule of the Hashemite monarchy.

Describing the Palestinian Authority as “one of the most dangerous regimes”, Elon declared that it must be destroyed, just as the “evil regimes of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were destroyed”. While Sharon rebuked Elon after he presented his plan in the US last week, it enjoys considerable backing within the ruling rightist coalition.

Even in its official response to the road map, Tel Aviv offered little but

a litany of reservations. It stressed that Israel was not bound to do anything until it deemed that the Palestinians had halted the violence. It also rejected any timetable and urged that the US alone be responsible for monitoring security issues. Spokesmen insisted that the Palestinians drop their demand for the “right of return” and said there would be no “hasty withdrawal” of troops. The only settlements tagged for possible dismantlement were two outposts near Hebron out of a total of over 100, populated by 200,000 right-wing zealots. Needless to say, there is not even a suggestion that Israel will cede Arab East Jerusalem to create the capital of a new Palestinian state.

Speaking to *Haaretz* on April 14, Sharon granted that the “Iraq war created an opportunity with the Palestinians we can’t miss”, but boasted that he had told President Bush “a number of times—I made no concessions in the past, and I will make no concessions now, or ever make concessions in the future, with regard to anything that is related to the security of Israel.”

More broadly he claimed that Iraq may have been dealt with but, “Iran is making every effort to produce weapons of mass destruction and is engaged in making ballistic missiles.... Libya is making a very great effort to acquire nuclear weapons” and “in Saudi Arabia, too, there is a regime that grants sanctioned aid to terrorist organisations here.” He implied that in the future, after a period of recovery, the US may have to do something about these regimes also.

Sharon’s far-right coalition partners in the National Religious Party were less diplomatic. Their journal, *Hatzofeh*, commented on April 20: “No, esteemed Mr. President of the United States, your initiative to give a prize to terrorists is not acceptable to us.”

Other leading Zionist spokesmen were equally hostile. Senior vice president of the World Jewish Congress, Isi Leibler, wrote in the pro-Likud *Jerusalem Post*, “There are thus no circumstances in which Israel should accept the road map as it presently stands.... On the international level, Israel could never accept as honest brokers the perfidious Europeans and the dysfunctional United Nations, dominated by tyrants and governments whose anti-Israeli bias in recent months has reached unprecedented heights.” Whatever his official posture, Sharon agrees in essence with this stance.

After the Israeli raids last week, the PA’s chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said Israel was using tanks to respond to the publication of the road map. Sharon’s modus operandi has long been to carry out bloody provocations in order to generate reprisals by militant Palestinian groups. These, in turn, justify even harsher measures by the IDF so as to create “new facts on the ground” conducive to his abiding goal of a Greater Israel.



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