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A Roadmap Leading Nowhere: The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse

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More than five months after the official publication of the Quartet's "Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," the process prescribed in that document has failed to unfold. Like all the other initiatives launched since the outbreak of the so-called intifada in the fall of 2000 – the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, the Mitchell Committee report, the Tenet work plan, the Zinni work plan – this one may technically still be on the table. But for all practical purposes, it is, if not dead, then at least in a state of suspended animation. The Palestinian Authority has not undertaken a serious reform in governing structures, unified its security services, or taken any substantial steps to end hostile incitement or dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructures. Israel, for its part, has failed to halt the targeted attacks on wanted terrorists and the demolition of houses belonging to terrorists or their relatives, ease roadblocks and closures, or redeploy forces to positions held before the outbreak of the intifada. Nor did it respond to requests for the release of prisoners held for security offenses, a step that was not specified in the roadmap but was raised after its publication as the kind of confidence-building measure that might have strengthened the political stature of the Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud al-Abbas (Abu Mazen). While Israel's non-actions might be explained by the Palestinian failure to end its campaign of terrorism, the government has also refrained from undertaking other measures with no direct bearing on security, especially the dismantling of all settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and the immediate freeze on new settlement activity.

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This was almost certainly not how the US administration expected events to unfold when it actively reengaged in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation at the beginning of May 2003. As far back as the fall of 2001, the administration had begun to articulate a vision of how Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were to be revived and in what kind of general arrangement those negotiations were to culminate. The most notable expression of this vision emerged in a speech delivered by President George W. Bush in June 2002, in which he described and prescribed a prosperous and democratic Palestinian state co-existing in peace with Israel. During the rest of that year, the US, in contrast to prior administration behavior, consulted and coordinated with its Quartet partners – the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations – to delineate the guidelines subsequently incorporated into the roadmap. Partly because it felt that the Israeli government would be unable to respond positively before the elections in early 2003, the United States resisted the urgings of its partners to publish the roadmap in the fall. However, the principal reason for the delay was the American belief that the implementation of governmental reforms in the Palestinian Authority and the elimination of Saddam Hussein were necessary in order to create the appropriate local and regional conditions for further progress. These conditions were ostensibly met by the end of April following the coalition victory in Iraq and the Palestinian Legislative Council's actions to create the post of prime minister and approve Yasir Arafat's nominee, Abu Mazen. As a result, the roadmap was officially published on May 1.

At first, conditions seemed relatively auspicious. Bush quickly brought Abu Mazen and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon together at a summit in Aqaba, and both principals made the right "noises." Abu Mazen committed himself to unify the Palestinian security services and put an end to terrorist attacks on Israelis. This was consistent with his long-standing argument that any and every self-respecting state or proto-state had to assert its legal monopoly of force and that the armed intifada was a mistake that harmed Palestinian interests. While Sharon did not explicitly endorse the roadmap, he did vow to dismantle unauthorized settlement outposts and promote Palestinian territorial contiguity. This was consistent with his previously declared position that occupation was not a viable long-term solution and that peace would require "painful concessions" on the part of Israel leading to a Palestinian state with territorial contiguity. Moreover, these declarations of intent were followed by some material results. There was noticeably less incitement in the Palestinian media and, most significantly, Palestinian terrorist organizations at the end of June announced a conditional three-month truce (*hudna*). Israel, for its part, dismantled a few unauthorized settlement outposts, withdrew a few roadblocks in the West Bank, withdrew its troops from Bethlehem, and in early August, released more than 330 Palestinian prisoners.

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The Obstacle Course

It quickly became obvious, however, that neither the publication of the roadmap nor the *hudna* reflected a transformation in the way the two sides perceived their relationship. Neither was genuinely committed to closing the chapter of the three-year intifada and reengaging in serious peace negotiations, if only because neither believed that the other was similarly committed. Instead, the Palestinians and Israel appeared to be acting out of fatigue and a desire to pause and regroup, as well as in response to international and, in the case of the Palestinians, domestic political pressure. Indeed, the extent to which the three-phase roadmap was detached from reality on the ground was symbolized by the irony that it was formally launched only after the scheduled date for completion of the first phase had already passed.

This disjuncture between formal and actual commitment was evident on the Palestinian side even before the roadmap was published. Despite longstanding domestic demands for reform and growing expressions of doubt about the efficacy of the intifada, Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat tenaciously resisted the appointment of a prime minister, particularly one with any semblance of independence. Only when faced with a palpable threat that he might be ousted from power did he succumb to Israeli, American, and even European pressure. Still, he continued to ward off demands to unify the security services under the command of Abu Mazen and his Interior Minister, Muhammad Dahlan. Instead, he retained direct control of several services, just as he had retained control of significant Palestinian financial resources following his reluctant appointment of Salam Fayyad as Finance Minister in a previous round of externally induced reform. Consequently, even the diminished capacity of the security services that remained following a prolonged and vigorous Israeli campaign against the Palestinian Authority was not mobilized. Finally, the perception, assiduously cultivated by Arafat and his supporters, that the new prime minister was imposed on Arafat in order to do America's and Israel's "dirty work" further undermined the little credibility Abu Mazen may have had. The latter was in any case not inclined to confront the terrorist organizations directly lest that precipitate a Palestinian civil war, and his diminished stature left him with few tools to work with other than persuasion and dialogue.

These tools were not irrelevant to the decision to declare a *hudna*, given the desire of the general Palestinian public for some relief from the hardships inflicted by Israel in its counter-terrorist operations. But that sentiment was balanced by a widespread reluctance to end the intifada without a clear political horizon, i.e., without Israeli political concessions. Thus, the most immediate catalyst of and strongest stimulus for the *hudna* was the need for a reprieve of sorts, following the intensification of targeted assassinations by Israel, particularly the abortive effort to kill Hamas spokesman Abd al-Aziz Rantisi just days before the *hudna* was declared. In short, the adoption of the roadmap by the Palestinian Authority was not followed by compliance with the roadmap's demand for "sustained, targeted, and effective operations aimed at confronting all those engaged in terror and dismantlement of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure." Instead, the *hudna* was punctuated by a few "successful" attacks (in Rosh Ha'ayin and Ariel) and even more intercepted or foiled attacks, despite the overall decrease in their incidence. Meanwhile, terrorist organizations, unimpeded by any interference from the Palestinian Authority, exploited the relative quiet to smuggle in and manufacture weapons and otherwise consolidate their infrastructure.

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If some kind of major Israeli concession was necessary to enable the PA to act more vigorously, that was precisely what the Israeli government was not prepared to offer. There is no indication that Sharon viewed the notion of offering a political horizon as anything other than a reward for terrorism. And even if he felt otherwise, he was unwilling to confront the settler movement or the right wing of his own Cabinet and coalition in the absence of the serious anti-terrorism campaign that the PA was unwilling or unable to launch. Instead, the government contented itself with cosmetic gestures – a half-hearted effort to dismantle a few settlement outposts and roadblocks, and the release of prisoners, most of whom were incarcerated for criminal rather than political or security offenses and/or were scheduled to be released soon anyway – even as it continued its own operations against the "terrorist infrastructure." Apart from domestic political concerns, Israeli policy was governed by the basic belief that the *hudna* was a trap,

i.e., a temporary lull designed to elicit Israeli concessions, after which the terrorists – their capacity undiminished – would resume their attacks. But the effect of Israeli acts of commission and omission grounded in that belief was to erode whatever Palestinian willingness there might have been to transform the relationship into a "virtuous circle" of de-escalation, and the belief therefore became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If the Palestinians and Israel were, at best, ambivalent about the roadmap, the United States too was less invested and engaged in its pursuit than might have been inferred from the President's appearance at Aqaba. Perhaps this was because the administration in the same period was more distracted by events in Iraq than it had anticipated. In any case, the US government designated only a relatively low-ranking State Department official, Special Middle East Coordinator John Wolf, to oversee developments, and it made little determined effort, either alone or in coordination with Quartet partners, to monitor compliance by the main protagonists.

As a result, the roadmap and the *hudna* produced only a veneer of stabilization, and even that survived little more than six weeks until mid-August, when a massive suicide bombing on a bus in Jerusalem killed twenty-three people. That signaled the end of any Israeli self-restraint in targeting the leadership ("political echelon") of terrorist organizations, especially Hamas. It also marked the end of any faint hopes that Israel and America still had left in Abu Mazen. Bereft of any authority except that delegated to him by Arafat, in early September Abu Mazen carried out his recurrent (the third since his appointment) threat to resign. Following two more bombing attacks, Arafat appointed Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala'a) as Abu Mazen's successor. That appointment prompted some speculation that Abu Ala'a might succeed where Abu Mazen had failed, if only because he was less "contaminated" by expressions of American and Israeli approval. A few observers also expressed the hope that Arafat would now want to demonstrate through his own actions that only he could deliver what was demanded of others, on condition that his authority was clearly acknowledged.

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However, neither the United States nor Israel viewed this move as ushering in a more promising stage in efforts to contain the conflict. Instead, the Israeli Cabinet voted to designate Arafat an obstacle that needed to be removed, and while the United States opposed any action to expel or otherwise get rid of him, it seemed to have no constructive alternative to suggest.

Potential Alternate Routes

In effect, the current impasse and the lack of enthusiasm for further engagement by anyone in the international system indicate that the pattern of Israeli-Palestinian interaction over the past three years has become so deeply entrenched that nothing short of a *deus ex machina* can provide a mutually acceptable escape. One such *deus ex machina* could be a true international crisis, i.e., an escalation that would drag in other players in the Middle East and transform the ongoing confrontation from a tragic drama into a threat to regional stability. Fears of such a crisis have arisen since the outbreak of the intifada in late 2000 but have not yet been realized. Nevertheless, the potential still remains, as indicated by the Israeli attack on an alleged terrorist training camp in Syria following the bombing of a restaurant in Haifa in early October. If such a crisis were to develop, others in the international system might feel compelled to intervene directly with a physical presence in order to impose, if not some political settlement, then at least some stabilization/crisis-management mechanism. But the constraints that argue against loss of control remain potent. The Palestinians might well have an interest in encouraging a process of escalation, but that is not true of the United States or of other regional parties, including Israel

(whose government must take into account public aversion to any expansion of hostilities). And short of such a crisis, it seems unlikely that outside parties, especially the United States, will overcome their reluctance to risk their own personnel and resources and develop effective plans of the type that currently elude even those who do advocate more robust international involvement.

Barring international intervention, the only action that could conceivably divert events from their current course is unilateral action. For the Palestinians, a unilateral change of course might entail a practical rather than simply rhetorical renunciation of terrorism and acceptance of the political settlement proposed by the previous Israeli government. But only Yasir Arafat has the authority to initiate such a change, and while he might encourage others to explore this path, there is nothing in his historical record to suggest that he would be capable of committing himself to it in a decisive and unambiguous manner. Consequently, there is little chance of this happening as long as Arafat remains in power, and even after he departs the scene, there seems little prospect of a near-term Palestinian reassessment of Palestinian policy and strategy, especially if his departure is caused by Israeli intervention.

On the Israeli side, there is no serious consideration being given to unilateral reversal of policy in the sense of accepting Palestinian demands that were previously rejected, or even of reviving, except in broadest principle, the formula that was formerly offered by Israel and rejected by the Palestinians. There are, to be sure, some incipient signs of public discontent with the government's fundamental approach. An open letter by twenty-seven active-duty and former reserve pilots indicating their refusal to fly attack missions in Palestinian-populated areas aroused a brief flutter of debate about the legality and morality of Israel's counter-terror operations in the West Bank and Gaza and about issues of conscientious objection and refusal to serve. In addition, a Track-II exercise by opposition politicians in the Labor Party produced a draft peace agreement with Palestinian interlocutors. This appeared to challenge the government's contention that there was no one to talk to and nothing to talk about until the infrastructure of Palestinian terrorism, including its psychological components, had been entirely and decisively eliminated. Publicity surrounding this exercise stimulated some expression of public support, not only concerning its conceptual underpinning but also with respect to the specific terms, which went far beyond what the government showed the slightest inclination to consider.

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Notwithstanding these developments, however, the bulk of Israeli public opinion seemed less inclined to challenge the government than to support it and even demand that it go further in its counter-terrorism measures. Consequently, Israel's debate about unilateral action has focused mostly on tactical measures to block the access of Palestinian terrorists to Israeli cities, i.e., on the question of the physical obstacle, barrier, wall, or fence. Because the claim that the barrier is simply a security measure with no political implications has failed to convince any of the protagonists in the conflict, the debate has become highly contentious and the projected outcome is decidedly problematic. Although the government has given no indication that it will withdraw from territories beyond the barrier, the concern of settlers that they would be denied the same degree of protection as other Israelis, along with the suspicion of settlers and others on the right that the barrier would mark the limit of Israel's territorial ambitions, produced pressure to project the route of the barrier deeper into the West Bank. But evidence of willingness to accommodate those concerns and parallel suspicions by others that the route of the barrier would predetermine the ultimate disposition of the territories (and disrupt the lives of Palestinians remaining on the "wrong" side of the barrier) led to

protests by Palestinians and criticism by the United States and others. Caught between these conflicting pressures, the government temporized and compromised. The outcome was a route that is longer and more costly to build and maintain than one hewing close to the so-called Green Line but which nevertheless leaves significant gaps in order to avoid predetermining the ultimate disposition of some of the larger but more remote settlements.

As a result, not even the one decision that Israel is capable, in principle, of taking unilaterally is likely to transform the overall context of Israeli-Palestinian relations. It may produce some marginal improvement in the security situation. But while that may cause the conflict to alter its character, it holds little promise of moving it any closer to resolution.

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