

New (Im)Balances: American Policy after the Disengagement

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After the disengagement is completed, the United States will almost certainly strive to implement the roadmap, a direction already determined when Washington decided to back the disengagement and announced that the plan was consonant with the roadmap. The intention to return to the roadmap has been reiterated over the last two years, most recently by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her visit to the Middle East in July 2005, and there are reasons to assume that the Americans mean to do so. The United States, the Quartet, Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the entire international community are committed to the roadmap. Even if at first the administration formulated the roadmap as lip service to the Europeans, the map has acquired the status of a *sine qua non*. Abandoning the roadmap would be fatal to the international credibility of the United States and the chances of progressing toward a permanent resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore when it approved the disengagement plan, the United States insisted that Israel reaffirm its commitment to the roadmap's outline such that "the roadmap is the only plan on the table."

The Roadmap

The "Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," published in April 2003, contains three stages. The first, intended as a two-month period, is designed to stabilize the volatile situation by ending terror and violence, normalizing Palestinian life, and establishing the PA's institutions. The second or intermediate stage, to last one year, is to strengthen and broaden stability, and upon its completion a Palestinian state will be established with "provisional borders" and "maxi-

mum territorial contiguity." The third stage will last for two years, during which negotiations will be held and culminate in implementation of the permanent agreement. The process was originally designed to end in late 2005, but by the time Yasir Arafat died in November 2004, the process had essentially not yet been launched. President George W. Bush announced after his reelection that the two and half to three year plan would be completed by 2008.

The "performance-based" roadmap is built on steps to be taken by

each party. In the first stage the Palestinians are supposed to institute a serious reform of the PA (which includes drafting a constitution and holding elections); unite all the security forces into three organizations free of links to terror; dismantle the terrorist organizations; confiscate illegal weapons; and apprehend terrorists. Israel, for its part, is expected to help the Palestinians carry out these steps, including the opening of institutions in East Jerusalem, by allowing freedom of movement, the transfer of funds, and humanitarian activity; ceasing all ag-

gressive acts, including the expropriation of land, expulsion of Palestinians, and leveling of houses; gradually returning its forces to the September 28, 2000 lines; removing illegal outposts; and freezing "all settlement activity" (including natural growth).

Some of these steps have already been taken. However, at least one pitfall threatens each side that, if not carefully negotiated, is liable to bring the whole process to a halt. Abu Mazen may be able to satisfy the Americans with his reforms, but his ability to unite the security mechanisms effectively remains in doubt. It is almost certain that the dismantling of the terror organizations will not occur. Israel will be able to take risks – including a return to the September 2000 lines. But the dismantling of the outposts, a difficult step especially after the trauma of disengagement, will be well nigh impossible since only a government dominated by the left would implement a total freeze on construction activity in the settlements, and this option seems highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. The question then is: how will the United States deal with these two pitfalls?

Dismantling the Terrorist Organizations

It is apparent that the United States will not insist on dismantling the terrorist organizations as a stipulation for advancing the political process. "Dismantling" refers to the Israeli demand to declare the terrorist organizations illegal, confiscate their weapons, apprehend their leaders

and activists, and cut off their financial sources. However, the more that Hamas strengthens its position and political involvement, the more that American willingness to accept it as a partner in the dialogue will overcome the demand to dissolve Hamas as a terrorist organization. A number of reasons substantiate this claim.

First, al-Qaeda is the only case to date in which the United States has demanded the ostracism and total dismantling of a terror organization.

Abandoning the roadmap would be fatal to the international credibility of the United States and the chances of progressing toward a permanent resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the case of the IRA, the Americans were satisfied if it laid down its weapons without surrendering them (this experience might serve as a model). In Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr was defined as a terrorist, but the campaign against him ceased after he became part of the political system, even though his militancy potential (and possible intentions) still exist. For twenty years Hizbollah has been defined as a terror organization, but the American administration said and did nothing against its participation in the Lebanese elections. Washington appears

to accept with quiet blessing the integration of terror organizations into the political system, even if they have not laid down their weapons and renounced their intentions. The theory of "democratic peace" that holds sway in the United States is based on the pragmatic, rational, and "very American" hope that terrorists can be transformed into moderates. During the transition period low-scale terrorist activity may be tolerated, similar to what happened during the *hudna* that Abu Mazen initiated after Arafat's death.

Second, and in tandem with the first claim, the United States will not ostracize Abu Mazen (as it did Arafat) if he fails to disarm the terror organizations. In this case too, Bush's September 2001 statement "we will not distinguish between terrorists and those who harbor them" has been valid only for al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime. Syria has been protecting terrorists who kill American soldiers in Iraq for over two years, but the administration has taken only relatively moderate countermeasures. Furthermore, the United States was willing to work with Abu Mazen and Abu Ala'a at the same time that Arafat was consenting to, if not encouraging, terrorist activity. Therefore it is highly unlikely that it will be more forceful with politically-weak Abu Mazen when he invites Hamas to join his administration.

Third, there are already signs of American willingness to accept Hamas and not insist on the organization's disavowal of terror. In the

spring of 2005, President Bush hosted first the Israeli prime minister and then the chairman of the PA. During a news conference with Sharon, Bush called on the Palestinians to disband the terror organizations. He did not repeat this demand when Abu Mazen stood next to him, even though six weeks earlier he had no qualms about reminding Sharon that Israel would have to dismantle its outposts and freeze construction activity in the settlements. When reporters asked the president if he thought Abu Mazen was acting aggressively enough against the terror organizations, Bush chose to brush the question aside, lauding Abu Mazen for his commitment to democracy. Afterwards the White House spokesperson hedged the question on whether Bush expected Abu Mazen to disarm Hamas. A few weeks later the secretary of state also felt it sufficient to declare that the United States viewed Hamas as a terror organization, without saying a word about Abu Mazen's flirtations with its leaders. In an announcement by the Quartet (led by the United States) in May 2005 there was a lengthy reference to steps that Israel would have to take to assist the Palestinians, but again no mention was made of the Palestinians' obligation to combat terrorism.

There are currently low key, unofficial contacts between the Americans and elected Hamas officials of the local councils. In addition, in the middle of June, the United States ended the ban that had been in effect for over a year and a half on visits

by American diplomats to the Gaza Strip. The ban, instituted after an attack on a diplomatic convoy in which three American security guards were killed south of the Erez crossing in October 2003, was lifted even though the Palestinians have not imprisoned the attacker, whose identity is known. Although National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told the delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in the middle of June that the administration would continue to demand the disbandment of the terrorist infrastructure, the Americans are sending a different message to the Palestinians. This trend has continued for over two years.

For Israel the effort against terror peaked in President Bush's speech of June 2002, when he announced that the Palestinians' campaign against terror would serve as the first condition for moving any process forward:

The United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure. This will require an externally supervised effort to build and reform the Palestinian security services. The security system must have clear lines of authority and accountability and a unified chain of command.

The Palestinians rejected this approach outright, and ten months later, the roadmap no longer stipulated the Palestinians' struggle against terror as

a condition for the process, but as an effort that should continue during the process. This basic change not only generated disappointment among the Israelis and a list of reservations that the Israeli government affixed to the roadmap, but it also prompted a letter signed by eighty-eight senators criticizing the administration's flagrant divergence from its position on the Palestinians' struggle against terror.

Over the years Washington persisted and succeeded in pressuring Sharon to relax his staunch anti-terrorism position: hence the reduced prerequisites, from a demand that the Palestinians produce results in their anti-terror campaign to a demand that they make an effort; from a demand for a 100 percent effort to a demand for a partial one; from thirty days of quiet to one week, and so forth. At the same time, the administration held talks with Arafat and the heads of his government despite their declared refusal to dismantle the terror organizations. American moderation on this issue reached a new climax in the single anemic sentence that the president devoted to the matter when he hosted Abu Mazen in late May 2005: "All who engage in terror are the enemies of the Palestinian state, and must be held to account."

The Settlements

The American attitude to the settlements pitfall, which stands firm on the Israeli government's doorstep, is less understanding and forgiving. Thus, even during Sharon's visit to the United States, which was intended

to strengthen his position as the disengagement approached, President Bush reminded him of Israel's obligation to freeze settlement growth. In the press conference with Abu Mazen, Bush explicitly stated for the first time that Jerusalem was one of the places where Israel had to cease construction activity that was contrary to its commitment to the roadmap. When Secretary of State Rice visited Israel, she warned Israel – albeit very tactfully – against a confrontation with the United States over settlement construction that altered the status quo by creating facts on the ground. According to Rice, the administration would not tolerate unilateral changes in East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods, in the link to Ma'ale Adumim, and in the settlements in general. It seems that only because of the approaching disengagement an American team has not been dispatched yet to Israel to survey the building area permitted to the settlements, as agreed upon by Condoleezza Rice and Dov Weisglass in the summer of 2004. The prime minister's chief advisor understands American policy better than anyone else in Israel, and his public statements in June 2005 regarding Israel's intention to dismantle the outposts after the withdrawal would seem to testify to the Americans' degree of determination.

As long as disengagement is on the agenda, the Americans will refrain from pushing Israel too hard on the settlement and outpost issue. American administrations are very much aware of the effect of domestic

political pressure, as they themselves are vulnerable to it. They understand the Israeli political arena and realize that Sharon's faltering government is unable to remove the outposts and freeze the settlements while the disengagement is in progress. They have no doubts about the disengagement plan's extreme importance. On the other hand, the United States often reminds Israel, and especially the prime minister, of the promise to the president to dismantle the outposts. We may assume that Sharon's failure to keep this promise could well damage his credibility in Bush's eyes, even if the situation is not identical to the *Karine A* incident, which dealt a fatal blow to Arafat's credibility.

After the Disengagement

Since the administration believes that "a successful Israeli withdrawal will energize the roadmap," after the pull-out the United States will apparently strive vigorously to implement Phase I of the roadmap. Although the Iraqi issue still heads the Americans' list of priorities in the Middle East, this focus does not preclude intense American activity in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, the administration feels that its conduct in the conflict not only impacts on its efforts in the region – including Iraq, the war on terror, advancing democratization, and even its relations with Europe – but also forms a central pillar in the attempt to stabilize the Middle East. An example of this sentiment is the statement by the chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Sen.

Richard Lugar, that progress toward solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is vital to the war on terror because that conflict serves as a means for al-Qaeda and its offshoots to recruit terrorists. The United States does not wish to be seen by the Palestinians, Arab states, and international community as though it is satisfied with the Gaza withdrawal alone.

The implementation of Phase I will require both sides to execute a list of tasks according to timetables and detailed benchmarks. This relates primarily to security matters and their implications for the fabric of Palestinian life: the unity and increased effectiveness of Palestinian security forces; removal of checkpoints and gradual pullback to the September 2000 lines; the Quartet's establishment of monitoring mechanisms; the institution of civil reforms according to the blueprint of the Task Force on Palestinian Reform; a relaxing of restrictions in the economic-humanitarian sphere; and so forth. The United States will work with the parties to reach an acceptable interpretation of Phase I along the lines of a mini-roadmap. One of the main practical recommendations for progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena made by Dennis Ross in 2001 was the need to deal with details and establish strict monitoring measures. At the time, the Bush administration announced that this is how things would be done – "when there's someone to talk with." Thus, General Ward has been handling matters this way since he stepped into the role of security coordinator,

and we may assume that his replacement will continue in this direction after the pullout (Ward is slated for a promotion). Nevertheless it should be remembered that the list of tasks still omits the two key stumbling blocks: dismantling the terror organizations and freezing settlement expansion.

American policy will be heavily influenced by what happens during the disengagement and immediately afterwards. First, the direction that the Palestinian arena takes will serve as a test for Abu Mazen. If the Gaza Strip falls into a state of chaos and/or the Kassam rocket barrages resume, then progress will be impossible unless the PA takes control of the situation and proves that it is the party in charge and a serious partner for negotiations. In this case, the United States will have expectations of Abu Mazen, but it will also demand that Israel provide "first aid" in the form of easing restrictions and granting work permits in Israel so as to enable the PA leader to strengthen his control in the Gaza Strip. At least in the initial weeks following Israel's "courageous step" in implementing disengagement, the administration will not pressure it to take additional steps of this sort.

The second factor that will influence American policy will be the election timetable that the two sides face. Until elections for the Palestinian parliament are held (the estimated date is January 2006) the United States will do everything in its power to bolster Abu Mazen. Washington will urge Israel to be generous and

flexible, and to curtail its responses to terrorist attacks. In contrast, the impact of the elections in Israel will be less significant. Out of respect for the democratic process, the United States will not expect Israel to make significant progress while the campaign and installation of a new government are underway. On the other hand, the official date for Israeli elections, November 2006, is more than one year after the disengagement, and the administration is not likely to grant Israel a "time out" for a whole year.

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As long as there is a government in Jerusalem (center or right) and until a date is decided for elections, the United States will count on Sharon to keep to his word and proceed according to the roadmap.

If and when Abu Mazen proves that he is firmly in charge, whether before or after the Israeli elections, the American orientation points to increased friction with Israel. On the one hand, the United States will not demand the dismantling of the terror organizations as a condition for progress. Current signals are that the administration will be satisfied if

Abu Mazen continues to mouth the right lines and make weak-to-moderate efforts at curbing terror. Although the roadmap is based on accomplishments, the determining factor in this area will be the size and frequency of attacks. Paradoxically, the more successful that Israel is in rooting out and foiling Palestinian terrorism, the less the Americans will pressure the PA to disband Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other factions. This deviation from the first section in the roadmap will be perceived as a necessary move for the map's realization, and will be made possible by loosely interpreting the term "dismantle" to mean the cessation of activity. If terrorism escalates, the United States will pressure the PA to rein it in (perhaps at first as a condition for political progress), but not to completely dissolve the organizations. It is doubtful whether the administration will demand of Abu Mazen in 2006–7 what it did not demand of Arafat in 2002–3.

On the other hand, the United States will urge Israel to honor its obligations regarding the outposts and settlements. The asymmetry in Washington's relations with the two sides – not a new phenomenon – is based on the view that Israel is the stronger and more institutionalized party, hence the more responsible one. If the dismantling of the terrorist organizations is made a stipulation for progress, it will lead to a dead end and/or transfer of power in the PA from Fatah to Hamas. Pressure on Sharon, on the other hand, may lead to his replacement in the Likud lead-

ership by Netanyahu but not to the ascension of a government further to the right. The Americans know that any Israeli government that chooses settlements over negotiations has no chance of surviving; the Bush family has experience in helping topple an Israeli prime minister against this background. The forecast, then, is for increased friction between the United States and Israel on these two issues.

It is of course possible, as is suggested by a number of assessment agencies in Israel, that precisely because the issues of terrorist organizations and settlements impede progress, the United States may prefer to deal with “maintenance” under conditions of low-level conflict. Such a scenario may indeed be the norm during the elections period. Yet while perpetual foot-dragging might result if the terrorist organizations have their way, it is doubtful whether this will happen. The Palestinians have proven on a number of occasions that violence erupts unless progress is made in a political process favorable to them, and the last situation the United States wants in the Middle East is a return to the state of military confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians.

Implications for Israeli Policy

The implications for Israeli policy should be derived, first and foremost, from Israel's political goal. This goal, however, is vague. Does Sharon intend for Israel to retain most of Judea and Samaria, or is he headed for another disengagement plan – whether unilateral or part of the permanent

arrangement – that will transfer the majority of the area to Palestinian control? At the same time, it can be assumed that he is anxious for American support, and to achieve this, Israeli policy will have to live up to the following American expectations.

First, Israel will have to prove that it intends to pursue the peace process by taking the initiative. Counter to its tendency to avoid investing time and energy in the conflict, the Bush administration was dragged into drafting the roadmap in part because of Israel's political passiveness during 2002–3. Furthermore, the disengagement initiative has shown that Israel is capable of taking the lead in a process when it suits its interests, and can even enlist United States involvement. If Israel hopes to influence American policy after the disengagement, it will have to propose its own “roadmap” that details Phase I, rather than waiting for an American initiative. Naturally this mini-map will not be accepted in its entirety, but Israel will be able to utilize it in order to achieve greater influence on the American trend than without it. In any case it will demonstrate Israel's intention to make progress and not rest on its laurels.

Second, Israel has to display flexibility in all facets of security arrangements by relaxing restrictions on the Palestinians. This will be easier to accomplish after the completion of the separation fence. Israel will also have to comply with official and personal promises that Sharon made to President Bush by dismantling all of the illegal outposts. Without this step

Sharon will lose his credibility in the eyes of the administration.

The presentation of a mini-map for Phase I, the display of maximum flexibility on less important issues, and its fulfillment of its commitment to remove the outposts will prove to the administration that Israel is the responsible partner. Israel will be able to declare honestly that it intends to meet its obligation to freeze settlement activity after the Palestinians reciprocate by fulfilling their commitments, including the dissolution of the terror organizations. Under these circumstances, and with emphasis on the terror issue, Israel will be able to rely on certain power groups in the United States, first and foremost the Christian fundamentalist right, for their support. If Israel regards the disbandment of the terrorist organizations as a condition for progress, then a series of preventive acts will have to be taken before the United States concedes it either formally or in practice. It will be necessary to remind the United States of its previous experience with the PLO (i.e., American willingness to accept the PLO as a partner in dialogue only after it recognized Israel's right to exist and abandoned the path of terror) and to the current American campaign against radical Islam.

If Israel takes the initiative and unilaterally abides by most of its commitments, it will be able to forestall the approaching friction from developing between the two countries, or at least prepare for it with a politically optimal public relations position.