

Middle East: a road to nowhere

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ONE would like to feel optimism and hope on reading of the new 'roadmap to peace' in the Middle East. If any global hotspot is long overdue for resolution and peace it is the Holy Land. But sadly, when one looks at the motivations of the various parties involved, and at the many points left unmarked along the roadmap, the predominant feeling is not optimism but deep pessimism. This is a roadmap to nowhere.

Two parties — Israel and Palestine — are to journey along the road marked out in the map, guided by the United States. Three travellers in all, of whom two are insincere: they do not wish to end up at the destination in the map. The Israelis have quite different destination in mind, while the Americans have about as much enthusiasm for their job of guide as conscripts forced to join an army.

No great imagination is required to guess what the ideal Israeli destination would be. For moderate Israelis it would be a series of sealed Palestinian Bantustans, connected to each other by Israeli-controlled highways but cut off from the land around them. With the Palestinians tucked away out of sight in these Bantustans, Israelis would be free to expand their settlements throughout the West Bank and Gaza. For hardline Israelis, the ideal would be an Israel purged of Palestinians altogether — sent into permanent exile in Jordan or some other Arab country.

The common denominator in Israeli thinking (especially Israeli government thinking) is the impossibility of a viable, independent Palestinian state — the destination marked in the roadmap. For such a state would require compromises and sacrifices that the Israelis — long used to taking what they want by force — are simply unable to make. A viable Palestinian state would, for example, require at least East Jerusalem as its capital. How many Israelis would agree to give it up?

Since the Israelis have no intention of ending up at the marked destination, they will do everything possible to slow down the journey and put obstacles in the path.

The first of these is already apparent: rejection of the 'simultaneity' principle for the journey. According to the roadmap guidelines, Israelis and Palestinians are supposed to walk along it side by side. Concessions and implementation by the Palestinians — ending violence — are to be matched by simultaneous Israeli implementation — rollback of post-2000 settlements. But Ariel Sharon is insisting that 'the terror' must end

before Israel takes a step — meaning Israel will follow behind the Palestinians. The inherent risk for the Palestinians in this — that they will take an implementation step and the Israelis will not follow suit — is obvious.

This is where the duty of the guide comes in: it is up to America to insist that both its charges walk side by side. Will George Bush do this? Unlikely. The American president's extreme reluctance to embark on the journey towards Middle East peace was apparent to all from the moment he assumed office. The only reason he has finally come up with a roadmap is to appease his coalition allies (notably Tony Blair) in the war against Iraq (as well as to perpetuate the farce that American military action in Iraq will have beneficial consequences for the whole region.)

This very modest desire on the part of George Bush to woo inter-

Palestinian compliance in phase one will effectively strip them of all their bargaining chips and leave them at the mercy of US and Israeli negotiators. Put simply, there is no guarantee of what the Palestinians will get at the end.

'Viable independent state' can be defined in many ways. For the Palestinians a viable, independent state is one with (at minimum) pre-1967 borders, East Jerusalem as its capital, and the right of return for Palestinian refugees. For the Israelis, returning Israel to its pre-1967 borders is ruled out by the establishment of hundreds of settlements in the occupied territories. Their definition of a viable Palestinian state is therefore considerably narrower than the Palestinian one. They also have no wish to see either state (Israel or Palestine) swamped by returning Palestinian refugees, or to concede any part of Jerusalem.

These issues of refugees, borders, Jewish settlements, Jerusalem, etc are the most sensitive and difficult of the whole peace process. On the roadmap they are represented by vast stretches where no trail is marked. Israelis and Palestinians are supposed to find their way through with only American guidance. It is not difficult to foresee that if and when they get to those unmarked stretches, they will lose their way. The Oslo Accords (of which this roadmap is a continuation) made the same fatal mistake, assuming that when the time came, Israelis and Palestinians would be able to reconcile deeply held and vastly polarised positions. They could not do so then, and (after two years of intifada) they are even less likely or able to do so now.

Settlements, refugees, etc — the unmarked stretches — form phases two and three of the roadmap. Phase one is an end to Palestinian violence. What this might entail in practice is a Palestinian civil war. For the task of reining in Hamas and Islamic Jihad has been shifted from the Israelis to the Palestinian leadership of Arafat and Abu Mazen. Hamas' fight-back will therefore be directed against the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, as much as against the Israelis. If Hamas win, the Palestinian journey will be over. If they lose, that journey will continue but the Palestinians as a whole will have been weakened by in-fighting. It is this weakened Palestinian party that will then have to negotiate tough concessions out of the Israelis and Americans. Their chances of success are bleak at best. Little wonder that Hamas and other Islamists have no wish to follow the roadmap.

Three parties journeying along a road: one trying to veer off somewhere else, the other fighting amongst themselves, and a guide all too ready to shirk his duties. Will they reach the destination marked on their map? Fat chance.

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national opinion is vastly outweighed by domestic opposition to the roadmap. Ignorance and bias are what formulate American thinking on the Middle East: ignorance on the part of the public, and bias (towards Israel) on the part of politicians, businessmen, academia and the media. As a president running for re-election next year, George Bush will not go against the wishes of his electorate (especially in Florida, which has a powerful Jewish lobby). As a son, he will be painfully aware of the damage that applying post-Gulf war pressure on Israel did to his father's re-election hopes. When the time comes for America to keep Israel on the 'roadmap to peace', George Bush will give way.

And what of the Palestinians? Some elements in the Palestinian leadership have welcomed the roadmap (albeit with reservations about Israel's willingness to follow it). But many others have rejected it. There are two major problems from the Palestinian rejectionist perspective. One, as seen, that Palestinian compliance might not be matched or followed by Israeli compliance. Two, and more serious, that