

Saving Middle East roadmap?

A cursory glance at the provisions included in the roadmap clearly indicates how much has been asked from the Israelis and how much has to be undertaken by the Palestinians. Different people have interpreted the visible imbalance differently. Some call it as another useless exercise for further colonisation. Not much is expected to come out of this effort unless those who wield considerable influence over the Israelis reflect their determination to take the roadmap to its logical conclusion. Since the autumn of 2001, Israeli measures of collective punishment of the civilian population have not only produced a massive crisis in the Palestinian economy but has virtually altered the geo-political and security landscape in the occupied territories beyond recognition. In addition, not only the Israeli rulers have already raised so many objections regarding many clauses of the roadmap but also so far has not redeployed their troops either. The killing of the Palestinians continues either deliberately or by default but it continues.

The Middle East three-phased roadmap entailed cession of violence by both the Palestinians and the violence caused by the Israeli army's brutal operations against the Palestinian, the establishment of the Palestine state with provisional borders initially and later with its permanent borders and the international conferences along with monitoring mechanism. The commitments to end violence by both sides are certainly commendable but realistically speaking it may not be all that easy. In the past, the Israelis have ruled out any kind of agreement stressing that trace only provides the much-needed respite to

militant groups who invariably use that time to reorganise and to replenish their firepower. In fact the Israelis have always reached and retaliated with force to almost all violent acts perpetrated by the militant organisations. Using good intelligence the Israelis have even gone to the extent of targeting the individuals.

Whether or not the roadmap would make any major headway is an open question. However it is not too far fetched to assume that if the Quartet is determined to have it implemented, it can be achieved though not without some difficulties. But one must not forget that the Zionist lobbies are not only actively watching the process of implementation but would not hesitate to demonstrate even more aggressive attitudes under favourable circumstances and developments. One such attractive and conducive environment could be the product of the approaching US elections in which the Zionist lobby could exert the requisite pressures and have the roadmap changed. Undoubtedly the contestant candidates would have to give due considerations to such factors. Perhaps the way out is that the Quartet should assert and undertake a collective decision. Whether or not they would evolve some collective formula in order to cross over these hurdles that may surface from time to time still dwells in the realms of uncertainties. If the announced roadmap were not allowed to be implemented, the chances of reverting to violence would quickly intensify.

The latest bomb blast in Jerusalem on August 19 and the consequential severing of contacts with the Palestinians by the Israelis along with military actions including air strikes against the Palestinian militants are not only likely to impede



Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema

The writer works for Islamabad Policy Research Institute
picheema@ipri-pak.org

progress towards peace but it would also be a major test of President Bush's initiative and his commitments to roadmap. Efforts must be made to restrain the Israelis especially when Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas has already issued orders to arrest those responsible for the attack. While it is a well known maxim that violence begets violence, the quick Israeli retaliatory military action appears to reflect either the Israeli government's compulsion to react militarily in order to pacify critical voices within their own ranks or a tactical move of a long term strategy which aims to enable them nibble more Palestinian lands and reduce the concessions that had already been committed.

The first stage entailed cession of violence, which has so far not been secured. If violence continues in one form or the other, how can one expect to move to the next phases of the roadmap and to initiate negotiations on much more complicated issues? Much more difficult and complex issues are three that revolve around the final borders of an independent Palestine, the status of Jerusalem and the likely return of the Palestinian refugees.

To begin with the roadmap does demand the total withdrawal of the Israelis to the border that existed prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Logically one expects that the Israelis should withdraw from all occupied areas. But then logic doesn't work in international relations; it is the supremacy of national interests coupled with existing ground realities that dictates terms and produce policy suitable to various sets of environments. Given the Quartet's interest in pushing the roadmap forward and the aspirations of the Palestinians, it is not too far fetched to assume that the borders that existed in 1967 with some minor modifications can elicit the much-needed support from the Palestinians.

Notwithstanding the periodic Palestinians uprisings, the Israeli settlements activity have been gradually and regularly nibbling Palestinian lands over the years making the issue of final border rather too complicated. It is commonly known as Israel's creeping expansionism. It has been reported in the newspapers that Ariel Sharon's view of the size of Palestinian state is only 42 percent of the West Bank and most of the Gaza strip. He has not only been encouraging settlement activities but has also been projecting a distorted picture to the world. According to a newspaper report Israel claim there are 141 settlements in the occupied areas but an independent sources state that there are 308 settlements. If the Quartet is serious about the implementation of the roadmap then they will have to take a serious view of Sharon's policy. The apathy of the Americans and the British, which amounts to an unwillingness to see the glaring changes that are taking place on the grounds, does not mean that no change has taken place. If the Israelis continue their nibbling policies, then the question of Palestine's final borders would indeed acquire the insolvable character.

The second complex issue that would certainly cause headaches to all concerned is the future status of Jerusalem. It is a well known fact

that Israelis have repeatedly stated that under no circumstances they will give Jerusalem to the Arabs. On the other hand no lasting solution is possible unless the legitimate portions of Jerusalem, which were in Palestine before the Israeli occupation, are handed back to the Palestinians. Both sides want Jerusalem as their capital. In addition, there are many holy places of the Muslims and the Christians in the city. In many ways it is going to be the most difficult and complex issue requiring a satisfactory resolution.

Third tricky question revolves around the return of Palestinian refugees. The Israeli authorities and more specifically Sharon has been stressing that the Palestinian authorities should abandon their demand for the right of the return of the Palestinian refugees. Almost all of these refugees were forced out of their homeland by the aggressive and brutal policies of the Israelis. Once an independent state of Palestine is established, how can one deny the right to the refugees? On the other hand it is also a well-known fact that the Zionists and the Israeli state not only encourage the Jews to migrate to Israel from various parts of the world but also actively arrange their passage to a land that once belonged to the Palestinians on one hand and totally oppose the return of the Palestinians who have been pushed out of their own homeland on the other.

It is extremely imperative for the US to influence the Israelis for strict adherence to the roadmap as well to the pledges made at Aqaba in order to save the roadmap. In the ultimate analysis the success of the roadmap is heavily dependent upon the fair and balanced approach of the Americans and the level of their interest in resolving the conflict.

The first stage entailed cession of violence, which has so far not been secured. If violence continues in one form or the other, how can one expect to move to the next phases of the roadmap and to initiate negotiations on much more complicated issues? Much more difficult and complex issues are three that revolve around the final borders of an independent Palestine, the status of Jerusalem and the likely return of the Palestinian refugees.

To begin with the roadmap does demand the total withdrawal of the Israelis to the border that existed prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Logically one expects that the Israelis should withdraw from all occupied areas. But then logic doesn't work in international relations; it is the supremacy of national interests

coupled with existing ground realities that dictates terms and produce policy suitable to various sets of environments. Given the Quartet's interest in pushing the roadmap forward and the aspirations of the Palestinians, it is not too far fetched to assume that the borders that existed in 1967 with some minor modifications can elicit the much-needed support from the Palestinians.