

The Road Map: Detours and Disengagements

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I. Introduction: A Strategic Conflict

The history of the Arab – Israeli conflict is full of moments of success, and plenty of failures and lost opportunities. For the last four years, the Palestinian – Israeli part of the conflict has defied all plans for reconciliation the latest of which is the Road Map.

The Egyptian plan could face the same fate unless it was treated by the United States and of the world concerned community in much more serious ways than what is already taking place.

Plans and initiatives do not work in their own, or because of their internal consistency and logic, or because they are just and fair, or even because they are accepted by the parties; but rather because there is a political commitment that understands the gravity of the situation and has the stamina, the patience, and the resources to achieve results.

Such a commitment will not be obtained unless the concerned parties, particularly the United States, have come to the conviction that the Arab – Israeli conflict is endowed by three characteristics:

First, the conflict is a conflict of strategic magnitude. It is not a dispute that time will ameliorate its acuteness, reduce its agonies, heal its wounds, and ends its pains. The Arab – Israeli conflict has been one of the most

important chapters of the cold war and now it could be the most important chapter in the war against terror. Without any exaggeration, it will be at the center of the “Clash of Civilizations” if the predictions of Samuel Huntington, and, ironically in a completely different way, Osama bin Laden ever come true.

Second, the conflict is part of a larger regional context. A strategic conflict is by definition a protracted one with security, social and political implications that go beyond the direct interests of the conflicting parties. The Middle East regional context of the Arab – Israeli conflict is a highly integrated strategic area in which all the subjects of Iraq, Palestinian – Israeli problems, terror, reform, fundamentalism, are all related and interdependent. Unless all the concerned parties, particularly the United States, understand the regional and the global reach of the conflict, the commitment to solve it will not be obtained.

Third, the Arab – Israeli conflict is in a state of flux and change. It is as many issue areas in the Middle East such as Iraq and reform are in transition. And transition is a state of uncertainty and the competition of opposing forces. Those are the times when the devils of history do not wait much for presidential election cycles, nor could they wait for plans or initiatives to be stacked for posterity. One of the greatest achievements of the peace process in the last three decades has been the transformation of the Arab- Israeli conflict from being an existential conflict to be a conflict about how can the Arabs and Israelis live with each other. Such achievement in the time of transition is susceptible to reversals by forces that opposed peace from the start.

II. The Egyptian Initiative

If such understanding of the strategic magnitude of the conflict, its regional context, and its transitional nature has established the commitment for the resolution of the conflict, the Egyptian initiative will have a chance for success. The measure of success is to jump start the peace process and put it back into the road map track. So far, the Egyptian initiative has achieved the following:

- 1- It has kept the interest in Sharon unilateral disengagement plan going despite the series of setbacks in his own Likud party who voted against his plans and the constraints which are imposed by his cabinet on the substance and the timetable on his initiative.
- 2- It has initiated a dialogue process within the Palestinian political factions for a strategic and political program to reach an independent Palestinian state that live in peace side by side with Israel, the Jewish state, according to President Bush's vision of a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Such a dialogue will include the unification of security organs under one single leadership and will be concluded in Cairo, hopefully, before November 2nd, 2004. Just on time for the new American administration to take action if it so will.
- 3- It has the support of the Palestinian public. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in 24-27 of June, 2004, 64% of the Palestinians support the initiative and 32% oppose it. Support for the various aspects of the initiative varies but all indicate a

willingness to make it succeed: 81% for the unification of the security services under the control of the cabinet, 87% for the appointment of a strong minister of interior, and 53% for the deployment of Egyptian military advisers and security experts in the Gaza Strip.

- 4- It has initiated a process of Egyptian–Israeli dialogue, coordination and cooperation over issues related to the disengagement plan such as the tunnels and the use of Israeli forces in Gaza near the Egyptian borders. And, over other issues that are neither related to the disengagement plan nor to the Egyptian – Israeli peace treaty such as the QIZs and the export of Egyptian gas to Israel.
- 5- It has filled the diplomatic vacuum that was generated by the American engagement in Iraq and the coming presidential elections. The meetings of the Quartet started to give a sense of new possibilities for the peace process. As Henry Kissinger once said: the Arab – Israeli peace process is like riding a bicycle uphill, you have to keep going up, or you will fall down. The Egyptian initiative is struggling to continue upward.

All these are tactical achievements, temporary, and all reversible. Few trends are emerging to endanger the Egyptian initiative:

- 1- There are several negative changes in the original Israeli unilateral disengagement plan that is making it less and less attractive to the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab World. The plan which is supposed to achieve a clean Israeli withdrawal of forces and settlements from Gaza and part of the West Bank has been staged

over a long period of time and always subject to Israeli cabinet approvals, and maneuvers. The new amendments have allowed for several Israeli types of control in Gaza which makes the withdrawal more as redeployment of forces than being a serious disengagement.

- 2- The Israeli side is refusing to link the disengagement plan to the road map. The best that the Israeli leadership is coming with is that its plan is not inconsistent with the road map. As the road map is having three stages, and Israel is planning now to withdraw, or redeploy its forces, in three stages, the absence of a direct linkage with the road map is undermining Egypt's position and its legitimacy in Egypt and the Arab World regarding involvement in the Israeli Palestinian negotiations.
- 3- Most thoughtful observers in Israel are indicating that the essence of the Sharon plan is to consolidate the Israeli presence in the West Bank. Former Israeli Labor minister Ephraim Sneh wrote to the Israeli Policy Forum in July 13, 2004: "He (Sharon) expects that leaving the Gaza Strip will enable him to assume greater control over the West Bank, perhaps annexing at least half of it". Neither Egypt, nor the world, has any interest in allowing Israel to have a de facto annexation of the West Bank or parts of it. Israeli leadership did not make any effort to alleviate such worries.
- 4- The process of building settlements in Gaza and the West Bank have not abated but rather it shows signs of acceleration. Excessive Israeli violence against the Palestinian populations has put the

Egyptian initiative in serious danger of being like condoning Israeli behavior.

- 5- The American letter of assurances to Prime Minister Sharon in April that touched upon final status issues did not achieve its original objective of helping Sharon to win the support of his Likud members, nor has it helped the peace process. It was an embarrassment to Egypt and its efforts.

These negative developments have sucked some of the air out of the Egyptian initiative. However, the Egyptian leadership continued its efforts to make the disengagement plan possible if it ever is going to be implemented. But, unless there is a genuine help from the United States and the other Quartet members, Egyptian initiative will be added to a long list of failed attempts to resolve the conflict.

III. What can the US and others do?

The external support should utilize the available assets that are available in order to chart a meaningful process that will make the resolution of the conflict possible.

The first asset is the Egyptian and Jordanian peace agreements which give a living proof of the long lasting rewards of peace; namely the end of hostility and belligerence, the return of occupied territories, and the commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflict. These agreements have created stakes for Cairo and Amman to continue the search for peace in the region.

The second asset is the Palestinian and the Israeli citizens who want to live in peace. Despite the bloodshed since Sept. 2000, public opinion polls in Palestine and Israel all indicate that the majority of the population on both sides still favors the peace process. Israeli polls have shown increasing acknowledgement of the impossibility of a military imposed resolution of the conflict. On the Palestinian side also there is more acknowledgement of the futility of suicide bombing targeting civilians, as a means to advance the national interest.

The third asset is an emerging consensus over a historical compromise which responds to the minimum requirements of both parties; i.e. Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967, equal exchange of 3% of the land, and establishing the Palestinian state with East Jerusalem minus the Jewish quarter and the wailing wall as its capital, whereas West Jerusalem plus the Jewish quarter and the wailing wall becomes the capital of Israel, and a just settlement of the refugee problem that does not deny the right of return, while preserving the Israeli demographic balance at the same time. The Geneva accords are a living evidence of the possibility of agreement between the two sides. Today, we miss the tunnel, but most already see the light at its end.

The fourth asset is the international support for a peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict. This support has become more institutionalized through the Quartette; the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN.

The fifth asset is the Arab initiative supported by Egypt and Saudi Arabia who are in fact the backbone of the Arab world. Saudi Arabia has informed the US that it will be willing to implement the normalization process with

Israel upon signing a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel could have normal relations with the majority of Arab states upon accepting withdrawal from the Arab occupied territories in 1967. Elsewhere Shai Feldman and I have outlined the possible use of the Arab initiative in supporting the road map process. (Ecopolitics: Changing the regional Context of Arab- Israeli Peace Making, Harvard University, August 2003).

The sixth asset is that an absolute failure of the peace initiative will mean a nightmare for the Palestinians and Israelis. After four years of futile warfare, both societies have lost opportunities for peace and for economic and social progress.

These assets are encountered with serious liabilities:

First, there is no trust left between the Palestinians and Israelis as result of four years of intensive fighting that shattered the good will that was developed during the implementation of the Oslo agreements.

Second, there are active and highly potent minorities in both sides that are more determined to prevent a historical reconciliation between the Arabs and Israelis.

Third, other problems in the Middle East and elsewhere are always capable of distracting international attention from the peace process. The War on Terror and the War in Iraq have put the Palestinian conflict away from the priorities of the international community particularly the United States.

Fourth, there is some sort of a diplomatic fatigue in the Middle East conflict. The failures of many diplomatic initiatives have created reluctance

in the United States and even in Europe to invest the necessary political resources in the settlement of the conflict.

Fifth, American Presidential cycles always disrupts the working for peace in the Middle East.

The balance between assets and liabilities will be decided by the American strategic evaluation of the conflict and its centrality to other Middle East interests. These interests include success in Iraq, victory over terror, increasing the space for reform in the Middle East countries, in addition to all other traditional American interests in the region such as oil, security of Israel, and stability in the region.

As has been mentioned above, the United States and its partners in the Quartet should deal with the Arab – Israeli conflict as strategic conflict, in a highly integrated strategic area, going through uncertain transitional period with highly historical implications.

If that is the case, it has to be understood from the start that the Egyptian initiative is limited to bridge the current situation to the first phase of the road map. As Egyptian – American cooperation has been essential in all the previous successes of the peace process through out the 1990s, continued cooperation between Cairo and Washington is necessary.

Attempts to pollute the air between the two capitals at this stage, and in particular through using the Assistance program, or playing up a non-issue such as the Gaza tunnels, will not be helpful, and will shift the Egyptian-American dialogue away from advancing the causes of peace and change in the region. In fact, now is the time to appreciate Egyptian efforts on the

Israeli–Egyptian borders and increase American help and assistance to Egypt in order to build a coalition of moderation in the region. This coalition will not be only instrumental in working for peace in the Middle East but also it will be a cornerstone for the rebuilding of the region.

More specifically, the United States and its partners could help Egypt in her efforts to bring this strategic objective closer by doing the following:

- 1- Make a commitment for the original Sharon Plan of clean disengagement and make it clear that the plan is part of the first phase of the road map. Subjecting Egyptian effort to the changing winds of Israeli politics will put in doubt the chances of Egypt's success, and even its continued engagement.
- 2- Support this commitment by a congressional bipartisan resolution that will make American policy in the Middle East less likely to be affected by domestic American politics.
- 3- Support an active international, and in particular European, security role in the areas that Israel will withdraw from, and convince Israel to accept.
- 4- Work out a formula for Palestinian legislative and Presidential elections and a referendum on a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Such a process will help to give the PA the legitimacy it badly needs and isolate the extremists. And, do that soon enough before the support for the Egyptian initiative erodes.
- 5- Give material support and assistance in the rebuilding of Palestinian institutions particularly security ones.

- 6- It is important for the Palestinians to feel that a change is taking place in their lives and the Gaza first will not be Gaza last. Therefore, make sure to open the Gaza airport and the corridor between Gaza and the West Bank.
- 7- Ask Arab countries to restore their relations with Israel once the IDF withdrawal takes place from Gaza and to communicate to the Israelis in different ways their commitment to the Arab peace initiative.
- 8- Make preparations and consultations for the next phase of the road map particularly as related to the international conference which is responsible for starting the final status negotiations.
- 9- Create support for the Geneva accords in both sides through hearings, congressional missions, dialogues, and other tools.
- 10- Work out a formula that will deal with contingencies such as terror acts against Palestinian civilians and suicide bombings.

IV. Conclusions

There are moments in history that are more important than others are. They come usually after defining times that make what is after significantly different from what was before.

These defining moments came to the world and the Middle East after World War II, the end of the Cold War, and now after September 11th and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Now is the time to act to change the course of history in the Middle East, and the world. Failure to do so will be a submission to the law of nature. And, when nature takes its course all parties loose.

The beginnings of the loss are already there. Palestinians are deprived not only of their national goals but also from the basic needs of life. In fact, life has become not more rewarding than death. And, let me stray here from my line of thought to elaborate on this point. I might have been the Arab World's most vocal and consistent critic of the Palestinians' use of violence, and the particular tactic of suicide bombing.

I always thought that it is morally wrong, and politically harmful to a cause I believe is just. It is important to understand, though, that such acts are the result of a distorted mind and a desperate soul. Those minds and souls will not be cured by encirclement and punishment, if anything; this will most definitely lead to even worse kinds of behavior. The best antidote for this downward spiral and I am talking out of first hand knowledge, and a genuine desire for an end this spiral, is hope.

Israelis are not much better. Walls now surround the national dream of a safe and accepted homeland. Israel is increasingly becoming the largest ever-Jewish ghetto in history. Other regional powers are totally entangled in a conflict that so far resisted solutions, their national agendas are delayed and extremism is ready to attack.

It could be a dim future indeed. Now is the time to change this future. It is time for a long-term vision not a short term management of events. It is the time for strategy not tactics. It is the time to deal with history by creating a better future, not by eternally reliving the past.

Thank you.