

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Road Map to Middle East Peace

Immediately after the Iraq war ends, the top priority of international diplomacy should be peace between Israel and the Palestinians. That conflict remains the fundamental issue—the underlying cause of turmoil—in the Middle East. Relaunching the peace process is certainly what our Arab friends expect from President Bush, Prime Minister Tony Blair, and other European leaders.

On March 14, President Bush, accompanied by Secretary of State Colin Powell, read a statement in the White House Rose Garden, saying that the United States supports the so-called “road map” to Middle East peace. The road map to which he referred has been in preparation for many months by the Quartet group: the UN, the European Union (EU) and Russia, the US, and some of the Arab states. The Quartet’s intent is to devise a text that could provide the framework for renewed negotiations toward a final settlement, namely, security for Israel, an independent state for the Palestinians, and an end to the conflict between them.

President Bush’s decision to make public his support of the road map only a few days before launching the attack against Saddam Hussein was interpreted as fulfillment of a commitment to some of our coalition partners, especially Prime Minister Blair. Blair had been a strong proponent of linking the war against Iraq to progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

What is this “road map?” While it has never been officially unveiled, its broad outlines are fairly clear. It suggests several phases of implementation and calls for creating a Palestinian state by the end of 2003, assuming that both sides meet certain conditions, such as (for Israel) freezing settlement activity and (for Palestinians) ending terrorist attacks against Israel. The aim is a final permanent status agreement. The importance of the road map is its demonstration of international concern about the consequences of doing

nothing. Given the absence of a US-led process, the road map has permitted other concerned parties to put forward proposals for consideration by the Quartet.

From the official US standpoint, the road map represents, to a degree, a relinquishing of the monopoly over the peace process that the US has exercised since the Nixon administration. Other countries, which the US has long stiff-armed out of the process, may now have a more significant role to play, to the dismay of Israel’s Sharon government.

One problem, however, is that the road map has never been made public or officially presented to the warring parties. Thus it has no real status. Accordingly, neither Israel nor the Palestinians have had to respond to it in any formal sense. It is safe to say that the Palestinians, who believe the UN and the Europeans are more understanding of their position, are more favorable to the road map than is Israel.

Bush’s advisers may well urge him not to touch the Israel-Palestinian issue until after the November 2004 elections, because the road map will require pushing Israel and that will not go over well with the strong pro-Israel lobby in the US. Yet after 55 years of American administrations trying to avoid making the hard decisions about the fate of the Palestinians, President Bush should, immediately after the Iraq war, act on his commitment to the road map. Not only does he owe it to Tony Blair, but he has already stated publicly his commitment to the goal: two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace. The road map already has the support of the Quartet. It represents an even-handed attempt to work for a just solution. This approach to Middle East peace, more than anything else, will advance the international battle against terrorism by addressing the root cause of so much antagonism toward the United States.

—Donald Kruse
American Foreign Service Officer (retired)

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P.O. Box 48368 * Washington, DC 20002 * 410-571-6300 * Fax 410-571-6365 * www.cpjustice.org *
capcomm@cpjustice.org

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