

After the Conquest of Iraq:

Road Map or Road to Damascus?

By Jim Lobe | April 14, 2003

Will it be the “road map” for Israeli-Palestinian peace or the road to Damascus that will next grab the attention of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush in the wake of its convincing conquest of Iraq?

While senior officials, including Bush himself as recently as April 7th after his meeting in Belfast with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, have insisted that getting an Israeli-Palestinian peace process back on track will be the top regional priority after the Iraq war, speculation that administration hawks have their eyes set on Damascus suggests a possible detour.

It is clear that Washington's European and Arab allies, as well as Secretary of State Colin Powell, are desperate for Bush to follow through with his pledges to launch the implementation of the road map that was worked out late last year by the so-called Quartet, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia, as well as the U.S. itself. Blair and Powell see such a move not only as a way of mending ties between the U.S. and Europe that were badly strained by Bush's refusal to seek UN authorization for the war, but also as an essential step to bolstering pro-Western Arab governments which quietly supported the war despite the overwhelming opposition of their publics.

“Arabs don't expect the U.S. to muster another armada to militarily force Israel to end its occupation, but they do expect Washington to use its political, economic, and diplomatic influence to implement the ‘road map’ to Palestinian-Israeli peace, which aims for adjacent Palestinian and Israeli states enjoying equal security and national rights,” wrote Jordanian journalist Rami Khouri in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 10. “More American lassitude in the face of Israel's colonization of occupied Palestinian lands would only strengthen Arab critics who accuse the U.S. of a duplicitous double standard that mainly serves pro-Israeli interests,” he added.

Indeed, State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) advisers argue that Washington's failure to move on the Israeli-Palestinian front will only stoke the anger and sense of humiliation that is now rolling across the Arab world as a result of the U.S. victory.

But, despite Bush's assurances to Blair, there remains considerable doubt here that the president is prepared to

go much beyond officially publishing the road map, a step that his Quartet partners had first urged more than four months ago. Acting largely at the behest of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush opposed publication until now, arguing first that it would have improperly influenced the January 28 Israeli elections, and then interfered with the resolution of the Iraq crisis.

Road Maps

The road map amounts to a detailed plan for concurrent and parallel steps to be taken by Israel and the Palestinians designed to halt Palestinian attacks on Israelis and improve security while requiring Israel to withdraw its troops from Palestinian areas, dismantle illegal settlements, and eventually freeze all settlement activity. After recognition of a provisional Palestinian state in which decisive power would be exercised by the new prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas, as opposed to its president, Yassir Arafat, both sides would then negotiate a final border, the status of Jerusalem, the settlements, and the refugee question, with the aim of creating an independent and viable Palestinian state alongside Israel by 2005.

Most analysts consider that the road map's timetable is hopelessly optimistic at this point, and some, such as Uri Avnery of Israel's Gush Shalom, or Peace Bloc, have argued that the plan contains so many stages on which all members of the Quartet must agree and is so heavily weighted against the Palestinians in terms of what they are obliged to do compared to the Israelis that it amounts to “much ado about nothing.”

Others are somewhat more optimistic. “It's the wrong document for the wrong reasons at the wrong time, but it's the only game in town,” said Yossi Alpher, a special adviser to former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, at a Capitol Hill briefing here last week. Still, he thinks that Abbas' recent appointment and a serious commitment by Bush could propel the process forward. But that commitment remains very much in doubt here.



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In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney, and their top aides, have clearly strengthened their position vis-a-vis Powell. They are also closely identified with the views of Sharon and even the more extreme factions of the Likud Party, which have already rejected key elements of the road map.

Not only have the hawks generally been silent about the road map itself, but they also appear to be trying to change the subject to possible new targets of U.S. military might, especially Syria, and, to a lesser extent, Iran. On April 9, Rumsfeld accused Damascus of aiding senior Iraqi officials to escape, a follow-up to charges last week that Syria was committing “hostile acts” against Washington by allegedly supplying military equipment, such as night-vision goggles, to the Iraqis. On April 10, his increasingly influential and outspoken deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, told Congress, “The Syrians are behaving badly. They need to be reminded of that, and if they continue, then we need to think about what our policy is with respect to a country that harbors terrorists or harbors war criminals, or was in recent times shipping things to Iraq.”

Road to Damascus?

While few analysts believe that the administration wants to attack Damascus if it does not comply with U.S. demands—although reports circulated April 10 that the Pentagon is drawing up contingency plans—the hawks are arguing within the administration that the regional balance of power has shifted decisively in Washington’s and Israel’s favor as a result of the Iraq war. “They are saying, ‘Why should we immediately get all involved in Israeli-

Palestinian negotiations, especially with the Europeans and the UN, before the Syrians, Hezbollah (in Lebanon), and Iran have time to fully absorb the real meaning of our victory?’” said one former senior official. “It’s part of their ‘shock and awe’ strategy, only it’s directed beyond Iraq.”

Moreover, the hawks have strong support in the Congress where the so-called Israel lobby—in the form of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has been flexing its muscles over the past several weeks. It is lining up support from both the Republican and Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives to break with the road map’s plan for Israelis and Palestinians to take parallel steps and instead require the Palestinians to enforce a total halt on attacks on Israelis and implement more far-reaching political and economic reforms before Israel is obliged to begin withdrawing its forces or even dismantling illegal settlements. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay has even asked Bush to repudiate the Quartet altogether.

While Bush can’t afford to go that far, DeLay’s words were clearly a shot across the bow by a strong party leader, who sees the administration’s staunch support for Sharon to date as a major opportunity to woo Jewish votes and political organization and funding from the Democrats in 2004, an opportunity that is also recognized by Bush’s own political guru, Karl Rove.

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