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ROAD MAP U-TURN

The road map is back in the news. On Monday President George W. Bush said a withdrawal from Gaza would be a positive development, but it would not 'replace the road map.'

The Americans reportedly do not want Sharon's disengagement plan to be seen as a surrender to the Arab terror. But how otherwise could the Arabs regard it? As a sign of strength and determination?

For the Arabs, the calculation is a simple one: A willingness by Israel to disentangle - that is, to run away - from one part of the Jewish homeland presages an ultimate readiness to abandon other parts, until the last frontier is reached.

Ever since the unveiling of the road map, there has been a wave of optimism, even triumphalism, in the thinking of leading Arab personalities.

The success or failure of the road map is of less immediate importance to them than the circumstances of its conception. Imagine, the president of the United States and the prime minister of Britain getting into a huddle with France, with the European Union, with Russia, with the United Nations, and in amity formulating a plan that is essentially hostile to Israel.

The immediate and unanimous Arab welcome to the road map was, of course, purely formal. Clearly, the Arabs understood that its august authors could not possibly compile and publish such a document for heralding a Palestinian state without laying down in it the essential first task of ending the terror. None of the Arabs have the slightest intention of doing anything of the sort.

There has been no sign of any serious initiative by the road map authors to press the Palestinians to act against the terrorist groups. Indeed, that they were aware that their formal demand for cessation of the terror had no teeth is demonstrated by the ridiculous term they set for its implementation. The so-called 'First Phase' of the road map (that was to end the terror) was to last one whole month.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT is the Israeli government's diplomatic policy that has kept the road map alive. When Israel first received the document and saw what it contained, minimal self-respect dictated that it send it back with the brief notation 'Unacceptable' and 'Return to sender.' Eerily enough, there is no more apt description of the road map's presentation to Israel than the precedent set by the Munich Pact in 1938. There, while the four architects of the Pact - from Britain, France, Italy, and Germany - plotted the break-up of Czechoslovakia, the Czech diplomatic representative, Hubert Masarik, sat waiting in an anteroom until a British official, Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, came out and informed him that an agreement had been reached.

To his query, he received the bald reply that no comment was required from him. All that Czechoslovakia had to do was implement the agreement. Never has the narrative of a dramatic diplomatic incident been so nearly accurately repeated as in the treatment of Israel about the making of the road map in 2003.

Sharon did not return the document as 'Unacceptable.' He brought it to the cabinet, and their reaction was in effect 'Nothing doing.' Whereupon it was agreed that amendments should be submitted. This was done. Fourteen amendments to various clauses were prepared and submitted to the US.

Particularly detailed attention was paid to that First Phase - ending the terror. Thus were included the obviously essential steps of dismantling the 'existing security organizations,' the means of prevention, the enforcement of legal groundwork for investigation, for prosecution and punishment - in short, the complete agenda for any serious attempt to put an end to the terror.

Secretary of State Colin Powell's lofty reply to the 14 amendments was that the US understood Israel's 'concerns' but would deal with them only during the implementation. That is, Israel was expected to start 'implementing' (whatever that meant) without the whole crucial subject of the terror being tackled at all. In principle, then, the Palestinian state could arise complete with existing armed units like Hamas. Apparently, the authors of the road map have abandoned the 'promise' (in any case quite worthless) of that state's 'demilitarization.'

As that first essential phase was never started, let alone finished, the road map in all honesty should be announced clinically dead - not revived by Bush when he meets Sharon today.

But then, as though on cue, this bright idea for 'reviving' and getting the road map moving came formally, from the European Community. Already in January it was put to the Israeli government by Brian Cowen, the president of the EU. In its proposed new format it meant (as Herb Keiron put it in *The Jerusalem Post*), 'letting the Palestinians off the hook.'

This leads us back to Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan. It was pounced upon at once - by Condoleeza Rice - as being a fitting part of the road map. Like the amended road map, it does not call for an end to the terror; and Sharon, after all, sets no preconditions to the Arabs for the handing over of Gaza. They can take it as a gift. Meantime, a message that terror is on the verge of a great victory is going out to its perpetrators wherever they are.

The cabinet has still not discussed the Gaza plan. Sharon first wants to get Bush to accept it and only then to take it to his government, carrying with it the weighty support of an American president. The members of the cabinet - together with the Likud rank and file - should join in an effort to halt the dangerous slide to Sharon's betrayal of the policy for

which he was elected and to denounce the manipulative way in which he is trying to foist this far-reaching defeatist policy on the Israeli people.

However Sharon worked out the plan in his mind, he has manifestly failed to understand its certain uplifting effect on Arab morale and the drastic historic consequences for the Jewish people. He acts as though he knew no history, as though he is even unaware of the major strategic importance of Gaza. He is prepared even to break down the peace treaty with Egypt by bringing the Egyptian army back to the borders of Israel.

As for the president, he can surely see from the crumbling of the road map that the advisers who steered him into that grandiose Five Power plot have failed.

No American interest can be served by experimenting with such a dubious project. The Gaza withdrawal does not replace the road map? Good riddance to both.