

# The Bush-Sharon Correspondence (Part I):

## Analyzing the Text

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

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### Brief Analysis

The exchange of letters that occurred yesterday between President George W. Bush and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon marked an important watershed in the diplomatic history of the Middle East peace process. The short-term impact of the correspondence will be felt in domestic Israeli politics, as Sharon tries to parlay the warm embrace of the U.S. president into a Likud Party referendum victory for his disengagement plan. The long-term implications may be even more profound, however.

The most significant aspect of the correspondence was a joint U.S.-Israeli commitment to a bold new strategy of peacemaking based on the idea that Palestinian failure to fulfill security and governance responsibilities may not only delay the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, but also result in the rejection of key Palestinian negotiating claims even before negotiations are resumed. By publicly signaling U.S. rejection of Palestinian demands for Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 armistice lines and for implementation of the "right of return" to Israel, Bush brought home to Palestinians the fact that they would pay a price in substance, not just time, for their anti-peace actions. To be sure, Bush's statements were couched as observations, not firm policy directives. Many of these statements were simply official articulations of ideas that President Bill Clinton had unofficially endorsed in 2000. Moreover, Bush reminded his audience that peace requires "mutual" agreement between the parties, effectively endorsing a Palestinian veto. Nevertheless, the tone, tenor, and circumstances of his letter left an unmistakable message: certain scenarios are now effectively off the table.

At the same time, the correspondence represented the culmination of a process begun in previous administrations by which Middle East peace diplomacy has become a matter of U.S.-Israeli negotiation rather than Arab-Israeli negotiation, all conducted in an environment defined and protected by the United States. Although Israel appears to have benefited substantially from this diplomatic shift at present, it is important to note that such benefits may not always accrue, whether under the current president or future administrations. Moreover, Sharon secured these benefits only by promising Washington that he would undertake measures never contemplated by his predecessors. Indeed, the price for American favor is not cheap; should Israel fail to fulfill its promises, American wrath is likely to be considerable as well.

As has been widely reported, the main elements of Bush's letter are as follows:

- U.S. support for Israel's plan to disengage from Gaza, including the retention of existing arrangements for Israeli control of land, sea, and airspace even after withdrawal;
- U.S. support for Israel's construction of a "barrier" in the West Bank so long as it is a temporary security measure that does not prejudice final-status negotiations;
- U.S. recognition that the 1949 armistice lines are no longer the presumptive baseline for negotiations, and that any prospective border talks must now account for "major Israeli population centers" in the West Bank;
- U.S. support for the view that the Palestinian refugee problem should be resolved within the borders of a new Palestinian state, not inside Israel, which Bush specifically defines as a "Jewish state."

### The Roadmap

The relationship (or lack thereof) between disengagement and the Roadmap produced both discrepancies and nuanced formulations in the Bush-Sharon correspondence. Sharon specifically defined "disengagement" as an "independent Israeli plan . . . which we are not undertaking under the roadmap," though he went on to say that it is "not inconsistent with the roadmap." For his part, Bush seemed more interested in characterizing the Israeli move as a logical element of his own strategy for Arab-Israeli peace: "We are hopeful that steps pursuant to this plan, consistent with my vision, will remind all states and parties of their own obligations under the roadmap." Bush affirmed this steadfast attachment to the Roadmap by going so far as promising that the United States "will do its utmost to prevent any attempt by anyone to impose any other plan." Of course, now that the Roadmap has spread its umbrella wide enough to accommodate unilateral Israeli disengagement, other novel ideas may also seek endorsement under its terms (e.g., European suggestions for the deployment of international forces or observers in Gaza).

### Palestinians: Still a Partner?

Sharon and Bush seemed to part company on the question of whether the existing Palestinian leadership has the potential to serve as a negotiating partner. Sharon explained the rationale for "disengagement" as follows: "Having reached the conclusion that, for the time being, there exists no Palestinian partner . . . I have decided to initiate a process of gradual disengagement with the hope of reducing friction between Israelis and Palestinians. . . . It will enable us to deploy our forces more effectively until such time that conditions in the Palestinian Authority allow for the full implementation of the Roadmap to resume." That statement, whose conclusion comes quite close to suggesting that implementation of the Roadmap has been suspended, finds no echo in Bush's letter. Instead, the president focused on repeating the litany of political and security responsibilities that the Palestinians must fulfill within the Roadmap. Indeed, the fact that senior Palestinian officials (Foreign Minister Nabil Sha'ath and Finance Minister Salam Fayyad) will be in Washington this week to confer with senior U.S. officials suggests that the Bush administration does not endorse the idea that "there exists no Palestinian partner." This difference is not merely semantic; it goes to the heart of the question of whether Israel has adopted disengagement as a new long-term approach to providing security or as a simple stopgap measure until Palestinian political circumstances change for the better.

### Ambiguity, Creative and Otherwise

Both letters contained their fair share of ambiguous formulations. In discussing final status, for example, Bush did not formally offer a U.S. plan, nor did he indicate any official changes in U.S. policy regarding the appropriateness of settlements. Instead, he offered two observations: first, "that it seems clear" that a solution to the refugee problem cannot be found inside Israel, and second, that it is "unrealistic to expect" a border demarcation along the 1949

armistice lines. Both are descriptive rather than normative statements—that is, not quite the full loaf Sharon would have liked, but certainly more than a sliver. Some of Sharon's statements contained a measure of ambiguity as well. In reiterating the list of Israel's obligations under the Roadmap, he said nothing about the major issue of whether limitations on settlement growth apply equally to communities on either side of the ongoing security fence. Indeed, the fact that neither Bush nor Sharon reiterated the Roadmap's requirement for a settlement freeze can hardly be seen as an oversight.

#### Post-Withdrawal Gaza

In a paragraph pregnant with implications, Bush stated that Israel will retain the right to take action against terrorism emanating from Gaza following withdrawal, including "action against terrorist organizations," a reference that can be interpreted as sanctioning continued strikes against the leadership of groups such as Hamas. At the same time, Bush outlined a strategy by which the United States would "lead efforts" with Jordan, Egypt, and "others in the international community" to build the "capacity and will" of Palestinian antiterror institutions so that Israel is not forced to act in Gaza. In other words, the United States has taken upon itself a major new responsibility. Depending on the pace and progress of antiterror efforts in Gaza, this raises the unpleasant possibility of U.S.-Israeli diplomatic clashes should Israel decide it needs to take military action against terrorists there.

Robert Satloff is director of policy and strategic planning at The Washington Institute.

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