

## Terrorism Casts Pall on 'Road Map'

Aug 14, 2003



Articles & Testimony

**O**n Tuesday, Hamas and Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for two Palestinian bomb attacks that killed an equal number of Israelis. The bloodshed is the first major test for the 1 1/2-month-old Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire and, more broadly, the stalled "road map for peace."

Both the Palestinian Authority and the Sharon government quickly reaffirmed their commitment to the road map. The real problem is that the Israelis and Palestinians evidently have radically different understandings of what the road map really means.

In recent weeks, negotiations have centered on Palestinian prisoner releases and the Israeli fence. Neither issue is in the road map, although both preoccupations threaten it.

In an effort to shore up Palestinian support for their fledgling leader, Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon agreed to free about 350 prisoners. The plan backfired, however, when the Palestinian public condemned Sharon's gesture as a public relations ploy. Indeed, the released prisoners did not include hard-core terrorist detainees, and most of the prisoners were slated to be released in the coming months anyway.

Not only did this road map sideshow fail to build goodwill for Abbas, but Hamas and Islamic Jihad now stipulate that the truce holds only if the remaining 5,000-plus Palestinian prisoners are likewise set free. This does not bode well for the truce; Sharon has stressed that Palestinian prisoners with "blood on their hands" will remain firmly in Israeli custody.

Similarly, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are snagged over the so-called fence. Originally proposed by the Israeli Labor Party to physically separate the disputed territories from pre-1967 Israeli land, the barbed-wire barrier has visibly changed course. Whereas the Israeli right used to condemn it as a unilateral retreat -- a surrendering of the 200,000-plus Israeli settlers who would be trapped inside the Palestinian-controlled West Bank -- the Sharon government has tweaked the concept to its liking. Instead of following the 1967 Green Line, the fence now snakes its way into the West Bank proper. This upsets Labor, but mostly, it infuriates the Palestinians.

Though construction of the fence currently enjoys widespread popularity in Israel, a prolonged period of quiet -- if history is any guide -- would probably usher Sharon's Likud Party out of power. At that point, the Israeli left would have to decide whether to continue building the fence along the Green Line, as many Palestinians have begun to advocate, or to dismantle the structure altogether.

Unfortunately, all of this talk about prisoner releases and dismantling the fence has overshadowed the crux of the road map: the need to dismantle the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure itself.

Whereas the Oslo framework presumed that an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty would ensure both groups' security, the two subsequent intifadas painfully demonstrated the opposite -- security must precede peace.

Detractors of the road map contend that the current peace plan is nothing more than Oslo II. In fact, the road map improved upon Oslo by reversing its logic.

This, at least, is what the document requires. In reality, Abbas has turned the cease-fire on its head. The Sharon government agreed to curtail aggressive counter-terror operations if the soft-spoken Palestinian leader assumed that job on his own. Now Abbas claims the Palestinian Authority cannot possibly crack down on the terrorists in a time of relative peace.

Such logic might be compelling if it weren't for the fact that Oslo proved that delay in dealing with terrorists did not make the issue disappear. In fact, the Israel Defense Forces have solid evidence that it is the terrorists themselves who are making the most use of the quiet. In Gaza and the West Bank, the rejectionist groups are not only gaining political support, they are reconstituting their forces. We may be witnessing the calm before the storm.

Sharon, to be fair, has not made Abbas' unpopular job any easier. Sharon has dragged his feet on removing the 100 unauthorized settlements as stipulated in the road map. Instead, he insists that the Palestinians must first show signs of progress in getting tough on terrorists. This question of sequence -- which party must compromise first -- is largely responsible for the current deadlock.

For a peaceful Palestinian state to take root, Sharon must be prepared to make honest concessions in the West Bank. But as former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once remarked, "There is no moral equivalency between suicide bombers and bulldozers, between killing innocent people and building houses." ❖

Los Angeles Times

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