

Road Map Torn by Ambiguity

May 28, 2003



Articles & Testimony

There is something intellectually dishonest about a "peace process" that tacitly promises mutually exclusive demands to the Israelis and Palestinians by papering over their differences until they inevitably collide. In the parlance of diplomacy, this is called "creative ambiguity." It formed the basis of the failed Oslo accords in the 1990s, and it will surely spell the demise of the current "road map" for peace.

The Oslo accords, agreed upon by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, was an exercise in creative ambiguity. At the signing ceremony, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin called Jerusalem the "ancient and eternal capital of the Jewish people" and said it "must remain united and be our capital forever." Conversely, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat interpreted Oslo to mean "the Palestinian flag will soon fly over Jerusalem."

Rabin would later show signs he was willing to trade parts of East Jerusalem for peace, but contrary to common opinion, Arafat never pledged to crack down on the rejectionist Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Why were these issues not explicitly addressed in the Oslo accords? "The reason for this silence is not hard to understand," one Oxford professor noted at the time. "If these issues had been addressed, there would have been no accord."

The seeds of conflict were there from the start, but the so-called "interim period" belied this fact. It addressed the easy questions while putting off the thorny "final status" issues. The theory was that the two sides would begin with confidence-building measures, and by the time compromises were needed, both sides would be ready. Israel would begin withdrawing from Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho. Simultaneously, elsewhere in the Palestinian-dominated West Bank, Israel would transfer authority over education, health, social welfare, direct taxation and tourism. Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank would then hold elections to create their own government, the Palestinian Authority.

Unfortunately, it was a honeymoon built on false pretenses. What were the issues on which the 1993 agreement was mute? None other than the core components of the conflict itself -- not just the future status of Jerusalem and Arafat's strategy to clamp down on terrorists but also the borders of any Palestinian state, limitations on Israeli settlements and the so-called Palestinian right of return. On the crux of the conflict, Oslo said nothing at all. Both the Israelis and Palestinians believed that the empty vessel of Oslo would ultimately be filled with their dueling visions of Palestine.

The collapse of Oslo can be traced to the aftermath of the July 2000 Camp David talks, when Israel and the Palestinian Authority decided to address the final-status issues. Creative ambiguity may have made the fateful conference possible, but when the cards were finally shown, the house collapsed. The ensuing intifada, to a large extent, was the child of unrealized expectations.

The road map takes off where Oslo failed. It again postpones the difficult final-status issues. Take the Palestinian right of return. The Sharon government has made its position clear: Palestinian refugees will be free to resettle in any future Palestinian state but not within Israel proper. Otherwise, unfettered Palestinian immigration into Israel would

effectively destroy the Jewish state.

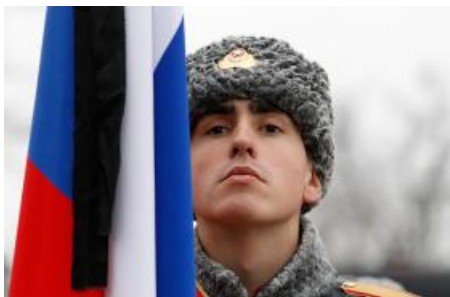
The new prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, has other ideas. Although he contends that "the right of return is part of the final-status issues and we shouldn't be talking about it now," his position, when pressed, is that "the right of return means a return to Israel, not to the Palestinian state." This is diametrically opposed to the Israeli view.

Sharon has stressed that the first step to peace must be Palestinian acceptance of Israel's existence. This means zero-tolerance of Palestinian extremism. Although Abbas has promised to round up illegal weapons in the disputed territories, he has not explicitly pledged to crack down on the rejectionist groups that scuttled Oslo.

The road-map initiative implies that a peaceful resolution is in hand -- just don't ask the Israelis or Palestinians what they are agreeing upon. Creative ambiguity may give the illusion of progress, but it will only inflate expectations and lead to disappointment. The result is often more violence and a hardening of mutually exclusive demands. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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