

Final outcome: A critical flaw in the road map to peace

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Only days after President Bush stood in Aqaba, Jordan, on June 4 and touted a road map to peace in the Middle East—with Israel’s Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas at his side—his plan was nearly in shreds. The Palestinian militant group Hamas snubbed the road map, rejected Abbas’s appeals for a cease-fire and launched terrorist attacks in Jerusalem. The Israelis struck back, targeting Hamas leaders in Gaza. Hamas pledged to continue to strike Israel, while Israel vowed to pursue Palestinian terrorists.

The post-Aqaba cycle of violence underscores a critical flaw in the road map to peace. It calls for a cease-fire as the first step toward eventual negotiations on the shape of a Palestinian state, thereby giving the extremists immediate veto power. All it takes is another suicide bombing to ensure that the first steps on the road are never taken.

There is a logic, of course, in the road map’s sequence: first reduce the violence, create trust, and then deal with the most problematic questions—the shape of the Palestinian state, the future of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, and compensation for refugees. But the Middle East standoff demands a different kind of logic. It will end only when some dramatic first steps are taken, steps that serve to marginalize the extremists.

Why not start at the other end of the process and offer both sides a clear vision of the final outcome? Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, has been pressing this point, arguing that moderates need to be able to point to concrete, not hypothetical, gains that peace will bring. They need to point to a viable state for the Palestinians and security guarantees for Israelis. Only then can the extremists be outflanked.

The shape of a final outcome is not impossible to formulate: Israel would return roughly to its pre-1967 borders, adding a section of Jerusalem. A Palestinian state

would include the West Bank and Gaza, including East Jerusalem. To address the vexed issue of refugees, a limited number of Palestinians could be allowed to resettle in Israel each year, taking into account the country's demographic realities. Meanwhile, Palestinian refugees could be compensated out of an international fund set up for that purpose.

This is essentially the agreement tentatively reached by Israeli and Palestinian officials at Taba, Egypt, in January 2001, just before the election that brought Sharon to power and before high-level negotiations collapsed completely under a new round of violence. Palestinians reportedly agreed at Taba to a map that allowed Israel to keep some West Bank settlements and about 4 percent of the West Bank territory.

A Taba-style solution, says Lerner, "would find immediate support from the majority of the population on both sides on those days when they are thinking about solutions and not about revenge for the latest outrageous act of inhumanity that the other side has committed." Such a vision needs to be at the center of discussion, especially in the U.S. and in the U.S. Congress. Israel and Palestine may not be able to manage any first steps toward peace until more people talk plainly about the final steps.