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## The major roadblock on road map to peace

By Herbert C. Kelman, 5/16/2003

THE ISRAELI settlements in the West Bank and Gaza present major obstacles on the road to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

First, the presence of the settlements - along with the roads built to connect them and the troops deployed to protect them - restricts Palestinians' freedom of movement, interferes with their livelihood, and generally makes their life unbearable.

Second, the continued expansion of settlements even after the 1993 Oslo agreement has undermined Palestinians' trust in Israel's readiness to make peace: They ask why Israel continues settlement activities in territories slated for Israeli withdrawal and establishment of a Palestinian state.

Third, the number and distribution of settlements may soon make it physically and politically impossible to create an independent, viable, and contiguous Palestinian state and thus put in place the two-state formula that is widely accepted today as the optimal solution to the conflict.

The "road map" released by the State Department on behalf of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations earlier this month recognizes the centrality of the settlements problem. It calls for immediate dismantlement of settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and a freeze of all settlement activity (including natural growth) in Phase I of the plan and further action on settlements in Phase II.

Achievement of these goals will not be easy. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, though acknowledging that Israel will have to make "painful concessions," has given no indication so far of willingness to dismantle any settlement - even in Gaza or the West Bank's heartland. He has also insisted that he will not contemplate the steps on settlements mandated for Phase I of the road map until the Palestinian Authority puts an end to violence, even though the road map calls for simultaneous actions by both sides.

It is unlikely that the Palestinian Authority, despite Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas's clear stand against violence, can prevent all acts of violence to the satisfaction of Sharon. The irony is that Palestinian violence is most likely to lose public support and hence diminish if Abbas can demonstrate that his policies produce visible political benefits - such as halting settlement activities. Thus, making Israeli actions on settlements contingent on a total halt to Palestinian violence increases the probability that both violence and settlement activities will continue.

Despite these difficulties, if the road map is to have any chance of success, the United States and its coauthors must exert pressure on the Israeli government to take immediate steps and make firm commitments on the issue of settlements - parallel to the steps and commitments on the issue of violence demanded of the Palestinian Authority.

At the same time, however, we need to complement these pressures with positive incentives to reverse the settlement process that do not depend on the Israeli government.

A creative idea along these lines is at the center of a campaign to "bring the settlers home" just launched by Brit Tzedek V'Shalom - the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace - which describes itself as "a national organization of American Jews deeply committed to Israel's well-being through the achievement of a negotiated settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The campaign's logic derives from the fact that a large majority of the settler population is not motivated by ideological or religious commitments to the settlement enterprise. Thus, in a recent poll of settlers, 80 percent said they moved to the territories to improve their quality of life, taking advantage of economic incentives offered by the Israeli government that enabled them to obtain better housing at a lower cost. The same poll revealed that 60 percent of the settlers were prepared to accept a withdrawal from the settlements in exchange for suitable financial compensation.

The alliance's campaign calls on the US government:

to urge the Israeli government to reverse its financial inducements to settlers and instead redirect these funds to settlers willing to return to Israel.

to take the initiative in an international effort to provide financial incentives for the settlers to relocate, whether or not the Israeli government agrees to participate.

An orderly move back by thousands of settlers would not in itself resolve the settlements issue, but it would greatly reduce its negative impact on the peace process and help to break the deadlock that is likely to stymie the road map.

It would make it easier for the Israeli public to accept the major compromises on the settlements issue that a final agreement requires. It would give the Palestinian public a palpable sense that change is underway. It would create the momentum that is now so desperately needed.

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