

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Chairman Richard Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on
THE MIDDLE EAST: RETHINKING THE ROAD MAP
February 24, 2004

The conflict in the Middle East is one of our most intractable foreign policy problems. It has brought not only bloodshed and suffering to the people of Israel and Palestine, it has contributed to the poisoned ideology of radical Islamic extremists who have perpetrated terrorist acts on people in countries all over the world. American national security would be dramatically improved by the achievement of an Arab-Israeli peace agreement.

Today, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee welcomes former Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger to help us re-think prospects for the “Middle East Road Map” and consider new ideas to stop the cycle of violence. We look forward to having the benefit of his extraordinary expertise as we analyze U.S. options.

We also are pleased to welcome our second panel of experts, Ambassador Dennis Ross, Director and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mr. Rob Malley, Middle East Program Director of the International Crisis Group, and Ambassador Martin Indyk, Director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at The Brookings Institution.

We have asked our distinguished experts to help us challenge the prevailing pessimism that, as we enter this election year, no progress can be made toward peace in the Middle East. Despite election year politics, the United States must remain engaged in the Middle East peace process. We must take advantage of any opportunities to promote new strategies that might lead to a viable settlement.

The United States should explore with our partners in the Quartet — the United Nations, Russia, and the European Union – whether the momentum of the Road Map can be restored. We also must encourage Arab nations to take on greater responsibility for moving the Palestinians toward decisive actions to stop terrorism. In addition, as I mentioned in a speech at the Wehrkunde Conference in Munich a few weeks ago, NATO should consider how expanding alliance involvement in Middle East security could improve the climate for a Middle East peace settlement.

Accepted last summer by the Israelis and Palestinians as a route to a comprehensive and permanent two-state settlement, the Road Map appears to have reached a dead end. A six week cease-fire last fall bolstered optimism that the violence could be stopped through the steps in the Road Map. Over the past few months, however, these hopes have been shattered by suicide bombings, targeted killings, and charges of deceit and bad faith. Egypt’s efforts to re-establish the cease-fire have been stymied. Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Qureia has yet to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Sharon to discuss the Road Map. The divided Palestinian leadership appears unable or unwilling to control the extremist and terrorist factions that continue to undermine the peace efforts.

Claiming that progress through negotiations is impossible under present circumstances, Israel has announced plans to unilaterally withdraw from 17 of 21 settlements in Gaza and disengage from further talks. These moves have been viewed by some as imposing a unilateral settlement. Others worry that Israel's move will harden Palestinian positions. Terrorist groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad may attempt to portray the withdrawal as a sign of Israel's weakness that vindicates their use of violence. Others consider Israel's moves an opportunity to create a new opening for a stalled peace process.

Whether Israel's unilateral approach can reinvigorate the peace process depends on the details of the plan and on how the Palestinians, other Arab nations, the United States, and the international community respond. As Secretary Colin Powell stated before our Committee two weeks ago, "...we want the settlements closed; but we want to know exactly how that is going to be done and where those settlers will go and how does it affect settlement activity in the West Bank. We have to understand the total picture."

At the same hearing, Secretary Powell underscored that the Administration is closely following Prime Minister Sharon's proposals and pressing the Palestinians to come forward with a plan to control terrorism. He added: "I would do anything to find a magic bullet to solve this one. But the problem is terrorism -- terrorism that emanates from Hamas, from Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other organizations that are not interested in peace, not interested in a state for the Palestinian people. They are interested in the destruction of Israel. Until the Palestinian leadership and Authority [goes] after those organizations that feel that way, it will be difficult to get the kind of progress we need moving down the Road Map."

Despite these difficulties, I believe that the broader context of events in the Middle East can improve the chances for a peace agreement. The United States and Coalition forces are working to bring new freedoms, economic growth, and political change to Iraq and Afghanistan. If we can succeed in stabilizing those countries, the political calculations of leaders and populations in the Middle East will change. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Friedman cites numerous examples of leading Arab opinion makers arguing for political reform in the Middle East in the wake of Saddam Hussein's downfall. Already, Libya has opened its weapons of mass destruction programs to international inspectors. Syria has sent messages to Israel that it is ready to restart peace talks. Moderate Arab nations increasingly are focused on their own internal economic and security problems, many of which would be improved by an Arab-Israeli settlement. There are indications that both the Israelis and the Palestinians have had enough of violence. The United States and our allies must be prepared to take advantage of these trends.

Given the new dynamics in the region, what additional steps can the Administration take to move the peace process forward? Are there alternatives to the Road Map or detours that should be considered? The Committee looks forward to our experts' discussion of these questions and their assessments of the way ahead in the Middle East.

###