

Don't Treat the 'Road Map' As Gospel, and Tread Cautiously

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After last week's synchronized terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia and the management shake-up of the U.S. occupation team in Iraq, Americans were reminded that victory over Saddam Hussein did not miraculously compel the region's lions to lie down with its lambs.

If dealing with these and other challenges were not daunting enough, President Bush will lend his considerable postwar prestige this week to the fourth Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative of his presidency. Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visits the White House on Tuesday, and Bush is likely to urge his guest to seize the opportunity of Iraq's transformation from a state sponsor of terrorism into a potential Western ally by following a "road map" to peace with a newly reformed Palestinian leadership.

Designed by diplomats from the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the United States, the road map suffers the common ills of committee-drafted work. It is long on text but short on detail; it claims to be performance-based but it is actually timeline-driven. Having been presented to Israel and the Palestinians as a *fait accompli*, the road map has the dubious distinction of being the first U.S.-endorsed peace plan in decades that the local parties did not themselves negotiate. At best, it is a tool to jump-start bilateral diplomacy; at worst, it is the opening act of a new drama of terrorism and violence.

Against this backdrop, the president's decision to wade into Middle East diplomacy makes little sense.

2003 is not 1991, when the first President Bush made Arab-Israeli peacemaking his top priority after Operation Desert Storm. Then, Europe was deferential, Russia was quiescent and the world was generally at peace -- yet Bush still had to invest much time, effort and political capital just to get negotiations started in Madrid.

Today, when allies often act as adversaries, when clear and present dangers loom at home and abroad and when both Arabs and Israelis, for different reasons, share a bitter legacy from the Oslo peace accords of the 1990s, there is good reason to question why the current President Bush would throw himself into the peace process. That is especially the case when his briefcase carries a flawed plan written in Brussels, Moscow and Turtle Bay, not places known for their staunch support of U.S. Middle East policy.

Several factors, however, weigh in support of U.S. engagement. One is that most Israelis and Palestinians want to live apart via "separation." Another is that many Palestinians recognize that Palestinian Authority President Yasser

Arafat's failed leadership and the continued resort to terrorism have led to calamity. A third factor is that growing percentages of Israelis, including Sharon himself, realize the political and demographic impracticality of permanent retention of the West Bank and Gaza.

More dubious rationales for peace activism are the ones often cited, such as the need to accommodate wartime ally Tony Blair, the British prime minister, or to respond to wild accusations, rampant in the Muslim world, that America intends to colonize Iraq.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for Bush to pursue Arab-Israeli peace is that his failure to take advantage of the opportunity provided by victory in Iraq to invest in the prospect of a secure peace for Israel and its neighbors would constitute a dereliction of U.S. leadership.

The real question, then, is not whether Bush is politically smart in seeking peace -- domestic politics is unlikely to be an obstacle. Rather, it is: Will he seek peace wisely? Such wisdom starts with knowing what not to do. Bush might well consider these "don'ts."

Don't view the road map as divinely revealed, closed to amendment and impervious to interpretation. Fixation on a scheme imposed by outsiders will obscure the enduring aim of U.S. diplomacy: to help Sharon and new Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas reach their own understandings that end terrorism, ease the humanitarian situation and restart political negotiations.

Don't repeat a cardinal error of the past: to focus so intently on winning the next agreement that short shrift is given to guaranteeing compliance with the terms of the last agreement. Ensuring that diplomacy remains properly directed is more important than insisting on a predetermined or unsustainable pace for its conclusion.

Don't make the peace process such an "American project" that other participants are relieved of their responsibility to make it succeed. Bush should refrain from diplomatic heavy lifting until Arab states, Palestinians and Israelis make the environment ripe for success. For example, Arabs need to delegitimize terrorism, repudiate anti-Semitic incitement and recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state; Israelis need to fulfill promises to dismantle illegal settlement outposts and alleviate the Palestinians' severe economic hardship.

Don't be moved by world leaders who stroke your ego -- or challenge your manhood -- by daring you to make peace as vigorously as you made war. Not only is Bush the first president to formally endorse Palestinian statehood but, in March 2002, he helped secure a U.N. Security Council resolution to that effect. Astonishingly, this unrequited concession to Palestinian demands was made with the support of Israel's Likud-led government, reflecting Sharon's confidence in Bush. Bush tapped into Palestinians' grass-roots desire for reform by conditioning U.S. support for Palestinian statehood on the emergence of a post-Arafat leadership "not compromised by terror." Bush can justifiably lay claim to being the most pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian president in history.

Don't underestimate your power to be an agent for hopeful change throughout the Middle East. A generation ago, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, in the name of God, led a revolution that ushered in a dark age of totalitarianism and terrorism. Today, America's conservative president is leading a counterrevolution.

This improbable campaign, triggered by 9/11, began with the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and continued with Bush's powerful call for freedom in Iran, his demand that Arafat be sidelined and the U.S.-led toppling of Hussein. Now, Washington says it will persist with a Middle East agenda of democratic reform and open markets.

Peacemaking needs to be advanced as part of this larger, long-term plan of profound change, not a special indulgence to prove America's credibility to incredulous critics. If pursued in that context, Bush just might shake up the region enough to make the miraculous possible, with Arab-Israeli peace a prime beneficiary. ❖

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