

Mideast Roadmap Leads to a Dead End

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The United States is on the verge of embarking on a diplomatic campaign to implement an Israeli-Palestinian "roadmap" toward peace that risks sapping the political gains of victory in Iraq to advance a plan that has stunningly little chance of success.

The basic idea of the roadmap, written jointly by a quartet of American, European, Russian and U.N. diplomats, is to define incremental steps by which Palestinians and Israelis can extricate themselves from the tangled web of terrorism and retribution that has left hundreds dead since September 2000.

Any plan advocated by governments and institutions that oppose virtually every other aspect of U.S. Middle East policy should be enough to make the roadmap suspect, and in this case, the suspicions are well-founded. In both conception and substance, the roadmap is deeply flawed. Most of its advocates surely have not read it.

By its design, the roadmap differs from previous efforts to end violence and jump-start diplomacy by offering a complete "peace plan," a soup-to-nuts menu that begins with confidence-building gestures and culminates in the establishment of a fully sovereign Palestinian state within three years.

At its very core, that formula is a clear victory for those who favor the Palestinian intifada, or uprising. And given that Israelis and Palestinians had virtually no hand in its drafting -- hence the drum-roll run-up to its formal publication -- the roadmap represents the demise of the generation-old U.S. policy of opposing an imposed settlement (Europe's favorite solution) in favor of direct negotiations as the path to real peace.

In substance, the roadmap fails to live up to claims to reflect lessons learned from the 1993 Oslo peace accords. The most important is the need to jettison deadlines and insist on full implementation of obligations before moving from one phase of peacemaking to another. The roadmap claims to be "performance-based," but it actually advocates a series of time-limited phases in which real implementation cannot possibly occur.

For example, one phase outlines five months that are crammed with the consolidation of a dozen Palestinian security forces into three, the rebuilding and retraining of these forces by foreign instructors, the resumption of security cooperation with Israel, the commencement of weapons confiscation and the dismantling of terrorist capabilities and infrastructure.

Each of these tasks would require months of effort. The notion that all could be accomplished in 150 days is

ludicrous, as is the prospect of verifying that such hasty changes were structural, not merely superficial.

Local leaders -- both Israel's Ariel Sharon and the new Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas -- seem to recognize this, as evidenced by strong hints from both sides that they want to work out arrangements bilaterally. In this regard, the roadmap could resemble U.S.-Soviet diplomacy in 1977, which so scared Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin that they made their own peace just to avoid it.

Having made wartime commitments to the roadmap -- especially to British Prime Minister Tony Blair -- President Bush cannot now chuck it altogether. But rather than see U.S. authority dissipate in insipid shuttle diplomacy on behalf of a cockeyed peace plan, the administration can take advantage of its postwar prestige to place the roadmap in the proper political context. The key is to shift responsibility for early success to those Arab capitals that clamor for the "peace process" as a way to channel U.S. energies and deflect calls for political change at home.

Specifically, Washington should look to the Arab troika of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan to perform three critical tasks.

First, they need to ensure that the roadmap is not the vehicle for the resurrection of Mr. Arafat by investing Mr. Abbas and his colleagues with full authority as the "new Palestinian leadership." A good place to start would be to host Mr. Abbas at a meeting in Cairo. For the message to be crystal clear, he needs to be welcomed by heads of state, not their powerless prime ministers.

Second, they need to put their money where their mouth is. That means ensuring that all Arab assistance money gets directed to the coffers of the Palestinian Authority's reformist finance minister, a former International Monetary Fund economist. Private Palestinian organizations, which often act as fronts for terrorist groups, and the numbered accounts of Mr. Arafat should get zero.

Third, they need to put flesh on their commitment to Israel that peace with the Palestinians means peace with all Arabs. That requires immediate steps to end anti-Semitic incitement in state-run Arab media, restore pre-intifada trade and consular links and begin direct, public engagement with Israelis, in Israel.

To be credible, the administration should make these requests of Arab leaders as part of -- not substitutes for -- U.S.-Arab dialogues on the urgency of domestic political reform. If Arab leaders know they are off the hook on the issue of democratization, they are unlikely to do much heavy lifting on the peace process.

Victory in Iraq provides a rare opportunity to have Arabs make important movement on both fronts. That, in turn, would limit the near-term damage of the roadmap, encourage Israelis and Palestinians to meet their own responsibilities for peacemaking and raise the chance for success of U.S. engagement in Arab-Israeli diplomacy down the road.

As the Bush administration pursues vital Middle East interests in rebuilding Iraq, fighting terrorism, confronting Iranian nuclear advances and promoting democratization, less direct U.S. activism now on behalf of the roadmap would actually make real peace more possible later. ❖

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