Political minefields policy potholes litter peace plan

Every successful trip requires knowledge of road conditions. So it is with the Israeli-Palestinian Authority road map for peace.

Developed by the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, the road map resurrects former proposals and calls for both sides to act simultaneously but independently of one another. Unfortunately, like previous peace plans, the current road map is incomplete and filled with obstacles that will undermine its promise.

To be sure, there's no doubt the context behind this effort is different. Saddam Hussein, a supporter of Palestinian militants, is out of the picture. Mahmoud Abbas (aka Abu Mazen) has replaced Yasser Arafat. And global public opinion strongly opposes terrorism. However, while the environment for peace has been altered, the path to peace can be diverted by factors supporters have no control over.

To wit, as we have seen over the past week, there's no viable authority on the Palestinian side capable of restraining the armed militias and terror groups in the region. To understand how difficult it is to stop violence with unilateral decrees or individual appeals imagine if President Bush asked inner-city gangs to stop killing each other and then diverted the path by factors supporters have no control over.

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The road map

The road map is a journalistic shorthand for the Middle East peace plan for Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Drafted by the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia (the Quartet), the road map has a three phase time table.

Phase I — End the violence/build confidence.

Key here is ending terrorism, violence and resolving the issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and in Gaza (see map). More than 70 illegal settlements have been set up since Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister, while the populations of previous "legal" settlements have increased sharply. Key here will be whether Sharon focuses only on recent outpost settlements, or will also include long-time settlements.

Phase II — Establish a provisional Palestinian state with a constitution by the end of 2003. Keys here are complex border issues and whether the state will be contiguous.

Phase III — Settle the status of Jerusalem (see map), which is claimed by both sides as their capital.

A majority of the U.S. Congress have signed a non-binding resolution urging rejection of the Road Map, charging that it demands too much of Israel.