

Minus a miracle: The Middle East impasse

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The release of President Bush's "roadmap" to peace in the Middle East, designed to lead to a Palestinian state by 2005, brings to mind the famous *New Yorker* cartoon in which a scientist, after filling a blackboard with a complicated mathematical formula, ends with the words "and then a miracle happens." A colleague observes: "I think there's a problem with your last step." In the case of the formula for peace in the Middle East, miracles will need to happen well before the final step.

The long-awaited "performance-based" plan issued by the U.S., along with Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, calls for Palestinians to declare "an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism and undertake visible efforts to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis." Inspired by this action, Israel's army is to "withdraw progressively from all areas occupied since September 28, 2000." These steps are to be taken by the end of June.

It is precisely such confidence-building steps—an end to terrorist bombings, a retreat by the Israeli military—that have proved unattainable, a failure that has precluded negotiations on the shape of a wider peace. Extremists on both side are quite content with the status quo of attack and reprisal.

On the domestic side, sniping at the peace plan began immediately among Bush's own supporters, including conservative Christians. As reported in the *Washington Post*, Pat Robertson accused Bush of trying to "placate" British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Europeans. Richard Land, social policy leader of the Southern Baptists, said it was not wise for the peace process to get entangled with the UN, and he warned of a "real problem" if it appears Israel is being pressured to make concessions. These remarks were shots over Bush's bow from the Religious Right—warnings to the president that he should not press the peace plan too vigorously.

Policy on Israel is one area of U.S. politics directly shaped by theology: conservative Christians believe that God's covenant with Israel extends to the current state of Israel, and so anything less than unconditional support for Israel—as defined by Israel's right wing—is viewed as apostasy. Bush is not likely to offend conservative Christians on this score, at least not before he secures a second term as president.

The best thing one can say about the peace plan at this point is that it is better than no plan at all. It identifies an international vision of a way out of the impasse, and therefore it gives a new flicker of hope. The forces of peace have little choice but to work at the plan and hope that in doing so, they are laying the groundwork for a miraculous breakthrough.