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Timing could not be worse for peace mission
By Lawrence J. Haas

No issue of public policy is hidden in more layers of mythology than the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For decades, conventional wisdom has held that the path to peace runs through Jerusalem, that Arab hostility toward the Jewish state is rooted in sympathy with the Palestinian cause, and that Israeli concessions to the Palestinians will lead to not just Israeli-Palestinian peace but also to reduced tensions across the region.

A myth dies hard, especially when so many nations have grown accustomed to it or, in the case of Arab states, exploit it by diverting attention from the problems within their sclerotic societies. But this myth is not just wrong; it's dangerous to U.S. national security.

President Bush's pledge to seek an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement by year-end is guaranteed to fail because the effort lacks:

- Strong national leaders on both sides who can cut a deal.
- Populations that trust each other enough to enforce it.
- Neighboring states that will support it.

Meanwhile, Bush's push to surmount the insurmountable will undercut his anti-terror message and his commitment to promoting freedom and democracy as an antidote to terror. It also will distract him from the more urgent global challenges that stretch from Iraq and Iran to Russia and China.

On the Israeli side, a hugely unpopular Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is tarnished by allegations of corruption and a widespread feeling that he mismanaged Israel's recent war with Hezbollah. He could not sell a peace agreement to an Israeli population that is overwhelmingly skeptical that the two parties could reach a just settlement in the first place.

On the Palestinian side, President Mahmoud Abbas may want a deal, but he has done nothing to prepare the Palestinian people for the compromises it will entail, starting with hopes for a "right of return" to Israel for all Palestinian refugees and their descendants from the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

Israel cannot support an influx of Palestinians that is large enough to threaten Israel's Jewish majority and, in the process, its historic role as a safe haven for Jews.

Nor can Abbas impose his will on Hamas, the terrorist group that controls the Palestinian parliament, runs the Gaza Strip, and has launched thousands of rockets from Gaza to Israel's

southern town of Sderot. Hamas remains dedicated to Israel's destruction, leaving the two sides in a perpetual state of war. No deal between Olmert and Abbas can change that.

That Bush, mulling his legacy as he completes his tenure, has caught the Middle East peace-making bug is hardly surprising. President Clinton, too, tried to fashion a deal in his closing days in office. Unfortunately, the downside of Bush's effort to U.S. national security is much greater.

By pushing Israel and the Palestinians to make peace, Bush has upended the building blocks of his anti-terror vision, sending a dangerously mixed signal to terrorists the world over.

Gone is Bush's demand that the Palestinian people build the foundations of a free nation - for example, a free press, an independent civil society, and the rule of law - before the United States risks its enormous but fragile prestige on a peace-making effort. Gone, more important, is the demand that the Palestinian people and its government first renounce terrorism.

So, having signaled the world that his previous promise not to reward terror is not rock-solid, Bush will now focus on a dispute that has bedeviled his predecessors for half a century.

That means less time to protect his Iraq mission against the inevitable pre-election pushes in Congress to de-fund the troops in Iraq, to ensure that Iran does not develop or obtain nuclear weaponry, and to effectively confront the hostile activities of a rising China and a resurgent Russia.

Lawrence J. Haas is vice president of the Committee on the Present Danger. Readers may write to him at the Committee on the Present Danger, 1146 19th Street NW, Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20036.