

Eleven Years to the Arab Peace Initiative: Time for an Israeli Regional Strategy

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The Arab-Israeli conflict is, or must be, a high priority on the agenda of the new Israeli government. As such, the government must engage in a smart and ongoing process that includes negotiations for a permanent settlement, interim agreements, regional dialogue, and constructive unilateral steps that will lead to a reality of two states for two peoples. In such a process, which would be overseen by the United States and/or the Quartet, there would be a clear advantage to relying on existing official international frameworks: the Clinton parameters, the Roadmap, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Much has been written about the initiative since it was launched.¹ This article focuses on significant trends related to the initiative and considerations for and against an announcement by Israel that it is prepared to open a multilateral channel and use the initiative as a basis for negotiations. We contend that Israel should recognize the Arab Peace Initiative as a regional-international platform for multilateral dialogue with the Arab world and a basis for engagement with any of the Arab League member states, provided that this is in parallel with progress in the negotiations toward a political settlement with the Palestinians. Mere recognition of the initiative as a single, isolated step does nothing. In combination with negotiations for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, however, it is a sound, realistic way to ensure Israel's national interests, first and foremost, outlining the borders of Israel as the secure, democratic state of the Jewish people.

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From both political and security perspectives, the status quo in the Arab-Israeli conflict is dangerous for Israel. The changes that have taken place in recent years in the nature of the armed conflict and the threats to the home front, as well as the military capabilities of the hostile non-state organizations, all require an ongoing assessment of the balance of qualitative and military supremacy in the region. Negotiations with the Palestinians and a comprehensive regional political process could help remove several of the most problematic actors from the circle of threats to Israel.

Israel's continued procrastination and avoidance of the initiative will limit even further the practical possibility of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with an agreement on the basis of a two-state solution. It is precisely because of the developments in the region that Israel ought now to signal that it is prepared to engage in regional negotiations with the turbulent Arab world. Recognizing the initiative and launching a dialogue could make a contribution in several areas. First, it could contribute to improved stability in the Middle East by strengthening the standing of the United States in the region. Second, if the discourse based on the initiative is accompanied by progress on the Israeli-Palestinian channel, the danger of a bi-national state will be reduced. Third, it will help strengthen Israel and the moderate Western-Sunni axis against Iran and its proxies.

By recognizing the initiative Israel stands to benefit at the bilateral and multilateral negotiating tables. While this of course is not guaranteed, the likelihood that Israel and third parties such as the United States will receive some benefits will increase with progress toward an agreement with the Palestinians.

A Brief Historical Overview

The roots of the Arab Peace Initiative date back to Saudi King Fahd's peace initiative in 1981. The Fahd initiative demanded an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, dismantling of settlements, freedom of worship for all religions, the Palestinians' right to determine their destiny, compensation for those refugees who did not wish to return to Israel, United Nations monitoring of the territories for a number of months, establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, and international guarantees for implementation of the plan.

This version expired on the day that the Saudi initiative was adopted at the Arab League summit in Beirut in March 2002, at the initiative of Abdullah, who was later crowned Saudi king. With the determined intervention of Jordan through then-Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher, the following principles were affirmed:

- a. A full Israeli withdrawal from the territories conquered in 1967.
- b. A sovereign, independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.
- c. A just and agreed-upon solution to the refugee problem that does not compel the Arab countries hosting them to absorb them. In other documents published by the Arab League summit meeting in 2002, the demand for the “right of return” of the Palestinian refugees was emphasized.
- d. In exchange, Arab League members will consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, guarantee security for all countries in the region, and establish normal relations with Israel.

In 2002, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon objected to the initiative, which was publicized at the time of the terrorist attack at the Park Hotel and Operation Defensive Shield that followed. Sharon had already claimed that the initiative annulled UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and thus the need for negotiations, and that it was tantamount to “all or nothing.”² In 2006, reports surfaced of secret contacts between then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Saudi King Abdullah,³ and later reports stated that in 2007, Olmert refused an invitation to address the Arab League in Hebrew.⁴ In 2007, then-Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres spoke about this issue,⁵ as did Benjamin Netanyahu; Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman commented on the subject in 2009. Peres⁶ and Olmert⁷ demanded changes in advance. In 2007, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman⁸ joined the attempt to put out unofficial feelers on the possibility of changes, and former US National Security Advisors Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski did so as well in 2008.⁹ Arab sources such as Jordan’s King Abdullah¹⁰ and the official website of the Palestinian Authority,¹¹ as well as European Union officials,¹² rejected the negative arguments made in Israel.

The “Against” in Israel

In the public debate in Israel, two sets of arguments arose against recognizing the initiative. The first consisted of principled objections, for

example: the initiative was an exercise in public relations connected to the involvement of Saudi subjects in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Therefore, it was not a genuine offer, and in fact, it had already failed. Alternatively, some identified it as part of the “phases plan,” and since it was fundamentally opposed to Islamic faith and ideology, was necessarily only temporary.

It was also argued that the initiative is a diktat that makes what the Arabs give conditional on Israel’s surrendering in advance to Palestinian and Syrian positions, rather than an invitation to negotiations with the Arab League as a whole. Even the few benefits that the initiative offers involve unjustified Israeli concessions, including on the refugee issue, worded so that it is nothing more than a cover for demanding the right of return and accepting the Arab position on the issue of Jerusalem. Israeli public opinion will not accept the demand to withdraw to the 1967 lines on all fronts. Finally, claim the critics, Israel’s experience shows that concessions have only come to hurt Israel.

The second set includes circumstantial arguments, such as: a strong Israel must not change the favorable status quo by recognizing the initiative, which fundamentally fails to provide security. Arab leaders

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cannot stand behind their promises regarding the initiative. The Palestinian issue, which is at the heart of the initiative, is not now on the Arab agenda or the global agenda, and even if it were, the split between Hamas and Fatah does not present Israel with a responsible, legitimate, and stable leadership. The Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian world is in a state of instability that does not allow Israel to take risks. Historically, the negotiations with the Palestinians have reached an impasse not because of Israel but because of the Palestinians,

and the Arab states have not worked hard enough to convince Israelis of the genuine nature of the initiative, for example, by having their leaders pay a visit to Israel.

Trends

Over the years, more Palestinians than Israelis have expressed support for the Arab Peace Initiative.¹³ In 2008, the figures were 67 percent and 39 percent, respectively.¹⁴ The figure for Palestinians was similar in 2009,¹⁵

and in 2012 it rose to nearly 75 percent among the Palestinian¹⁶ and 50 percent among the Israeli publics. Similarly, in spite of the political and religious upheavals rocking the Middle East, the Arab League has ratified the initiative almost every year in the past decade. At its summit meeting in Doha in March 2013, the Arab initiative was mentioned as one of the anchors of Arab League policy.¹⁷ However, there is no guarantee that this will continue to be the case in the future.

Over the years, the conditions set by the Arab League states have softened. The main changes are as follows:

- a. Refugees: from insistence on the right of return to wording that makes negotiations possible. Some interpret this as meaning Israeli veto rights. In contrast, at the summit meeting in Baghdad in 2012, a demand on the right of return returned in paragraph 12 of the Declaration of Baghdad, along with a repetition of the need for agreement among the sides on the issue. This demand, problematic from Israel's point of view, is not stated explicitly in the summit meeting's decisions.¹⁸
- b. The Arab commitments: normalization, peace, and an end to the conflict.
- c. The Arab demand for sovereignty over Jerusalem: from "Jerusalem" to "East Jerusalem."

Diverging from the statements of several Arab politicians,¹⁹ we believe that the initiative is not a diktat but an invitation to negotiations on the basis of several principles.²⁰ In the announcement of the 2013 Doha summit, the Arab League issued a call to return to the negotiating table and did not make the peace process conditional on acceptance of the initiative as a diktat.²¹ In earlier stages, in 2005, official and unofficial discussions were held in Algeria among the Arab League states as to the possibility that Israel would make changes to the wording of the initiative. This possibility was rejected, and the rejection was reiterated in comments by Arab statesmen such as Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in 2009.²² However, on the eve of the 2007 summit meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal declared that Arab leaders must be prepared to make changes in the initiative.²³ There were reports of such attempts again two years later,²⁴ and during preparation of this article, a report was published to the effect that an Arab League delegation would go to the United States with a new version of the peace plan that does not rule out the possibility of changes.²⁵

Arab Positions on the Initiative

The Arab Peace Initiative is an Arab interest, and therefore it can be assumed that the threats to remove it from the Middle East political agenda are empty. On the other hand, it is possible that public opinion, which is growing stronger in Arab states, identifies the interest as promoting only the regimes, and that it will call for the initiative to be annulled.

At this time, there are three main Arab positions concerning the initiative: a demand to remove it from the agenda, an ultimatum to Israel, and support for maintaining the initiative for a limited time.

The Demand to Withdraw or Reconsider the Initiative

There are three threats to the continued viability of the initiative. One comprises specific positions that oppose it. Kuwait is seeking to withdraw from the initiative because of the Turkish flotilla event,²⁶ as is Qatar,²⁷ and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb of al-Azhar University in Cairo called last year for an emergency meeting of Islamic states in Mecca in order to withdraw from the Arab Peace Initiative completely, which “was received very badly” by Israel.²⁸

In April 2012, former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ahmad Qurei (Abu Alaa) called for the Arab initiative to be reexamined on its

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tenth anniversary,²⁹ and Hamas, whose position was presented by Dr. Salah al-Bardawil, stated that reviving the peace initiative meant that the Arabs were avoiding resisting the occupation.³⁰ Marwan Muasher, one of the people behind the Arab initiative and the man who as Jordanian foreign minister made the final polishes, spoke in November 2011 of pressures from the Arab general public, which objects to continuation of the status quo on the Palestinian problem. Recently, Muasher stated that if the initiative failed, this would spell

the end of the two-state solution.

The second threat is inherent in the trend toward a decline in the number of Arab states that are partners in the initiative, and the third threat is the aging of the engineer of the initiative, Saudi King Abdullah.³¹

An Ultimatum to Israel

Some Arabs have stressed that the initiative will not be on the table forever. Even Marwan Muasher has stated,³² along with other Arab figures such as Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani, chairman of the Arab League Follow-Up Committee (2012), that it must not be assumed that the initiative will be viable forever. Although such warnings have been heard in the past, the situation today may be fundamentally different, especially because autocratic rulers in the Arab world no longer have a monopoly on decision making, and the “Arab street” and the public play a role.

Support

At the same time, various Arab statesmen have supported the initiative publicly and maintained that it is still a viable option. In 2007, it was even claimed that Iran supported it, though not publicly or officially.³³ Iraqi President Nuri al-Maliki expressed support for the initiative in June 2009,³⁴ as did the Jordanian foreign minister.³⁵ In Doha in 2010, Mahmoud Abbas stated that he opposed withdrawing from the initiative.³⁶ Munib al-Masri, an influential Palestinian businessman, held a similar opinion,³⁷ and even Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir agreed.³⁸ At the summit meeting in Baghdad in 2012, Islamist Tunisia joined in, and this year, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Jordan’s King Abdullah called upon the government of Israel to accept the initiative. Among his reasons was the fear that it would be easier for Israel to create facts on the ground if the Palestinian issue were no longer on the world’s agenda.³⁹

Possible Ramifications

The Palestinian Authority and Hamas

It can be assumed that the Palestinian Authority’s interest in the Arab initiative has increased in light of the internal struggle between Fatah and Hamas, especially when Khaled Mashal hinted that he was prepared to reach an agreement and recognize Israel.⁴⁰ Beyond the political consequences of Israel’s recognizing the initiative while advancing political negotiations, there could be political advantages for the Palestinian Authority, such as release of Palestinian prisoners from Fatah – a recurring issue that recently sparked renewed unrest in the West Bank.⁴¹

The Hamas response to the initiative has not been uniform. In 2006, Mashal and Mahmoud al-Zahar expressed lukewarm support for it, and when Hamas rejected the initiative, Arab states pressured the organization to accept it. Given that there have been changes in statements by some of Hamas's leaders who now favor reaching some kind of agreement with Israel, Israeli recognition of the initiative could encourage this trend.

The International Community

US Secretary of State John Kerry reportedly intends to place the Arab initiative on the negotiations agenda between Israel and the Palestinians.⁴² It has been reported that he is aiming for a coalition of states, including Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf states that will support restarting the peace process, inter alia on the basis of the initiative, and that he is seeking to persuade Arab League states to take steps to normalize relations with Israel.⁴³

During President Obama's first term, Special Middle East Envoy George Mitchell stated in closed forums immediately after his appointment that the Arab initiative would be one of the pillars of US policy in the region. A similarly positive attitude was expressed in 2009 in their previous positions by Kerry himself and by current Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel.

Other international players have supported the initiative from the outset and have not changed their positions (the Quartet in April 2003; the UN secretary general in 2007). The European Union has reiterated its support for the initiative (Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov).⁴⁴ In November 2012, foreign ministers of Arab League states and the EU published a joint declaration, and in December 2012, EU foreign ministers issued a statement of support for the initiative. In March, Russia reiterated its support for the plan, and even China expressed support for the peace process on the basis of various plans, including the Arab initiative.⁴⁵

The US withdrawal from Iraq and the expected withdrawal from Afghanistan next year are interpreted as a victory for the extremists in the Muslim world, both Sunni and Shiite. Progressing to an agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian track, together with encouraging dialogue between Israel and the members of the Arab League on the basis of the Arab Peace

Initiative, could mitigate this perception and strengthen the position of the United States.

The Arab World

Polls conducted on the Arab street indicate that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict occupies a minimal amount of public attention. Domestic issues – social, and in particular, economic – take precedence.⁴⁶ Perhaps it is precisely such a situation that would allow an agreement to be reached with the Palestinians, Syria, and Lebanon at a lower cost than under other circumstances.

Furthermore, in addition to the nuclear issue, Israel shares an interest with most Arab states on the subject of Iranian activity in the region.⁴⁷ These states are challenged religiously and politically by Iranian Shiite aggression in Iraq (which is controlled by Shiites); in Lebanon, where Hizbollah, with military and economic autonomy, is a partner of the state leadership; in Saudi Arabia, where the Shiite minority in the oil regions of the eastern part of the kingdom constitutes a domestic threat; and in Yemen, where early this year, an Iranian ship that was attempting to deliver arms to the Shiite rebels was intercepted.⁴⁸ Finally, recognizing the initiative as a comprehensive regional political framework has a chance of minimizing the damage from Hizbollah and other such organizations.

Policy Recommendations

The advantages Israel could gain from conducting a multilateral channel for dialogue while recognizing the Arab Peace Initiative as a leading platform for tangible progress toward a political agreement with the Palestinians would be manifested on several levels. Israel's international standing could improve if it is positioned as a key influential player that has the ability to provide a weighty political benefit and bolster the image of the United States, which would help the US rehabilitate its standing in the Middle East and the Islamic and Arab worlds. A dialogue with leaders of Arab League member states, which has never wielded much influence, could bring the political discussion in the region back from the religious, where it has inclined since the onset of the Arab Spring, to the political. Another possible consequence is assistance in strengthening the Sunnis in their struggle against the Shiites and the weakening of the Palestinian card in the Iranian⁴⁹ and Hizbollah arsenal.

Therefore, Israel should initiate secret talks with several heads of states in the Arab League to prepare an official statement on Israeli willingness to recognize the initiative as a basis for negotiations. Among the items on the agenda are agreement on a comprehensive multilateral framework for negotiations; agreement on substantive steps and formative measures by Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and by Arab states toward Israel; agreement on the identity of a third party that will act as a mediator concerning the details; mutual assistance regarding public opinion; and agreement on a policy toward non-state organizations and toward various publics. In the second stage, Israel, in coordination with heads of Arab League member states, should conduct secret talks with these organizations in order to clarify their positions in the event that Israel recognizes the initiative.

In the text of the initiative itself, the only condition mentioned concerns Arab “compensation” for Israel’s fulfillment of the Arab League’s conditions, and not for reaching a preliminary agreement with the Palestinians. This is a position expressed by Amr Moussa, among others, at the political-economic Ambrosetti Forum in September 2010.⁵⁰

When these phases are completed, non-governmental actors will launch a broad public relations campaign among the Israeli public while highlighting the increase in the number of supporters of the initiative. After this campaign, an official Israeli announcement can recognize the initiative as an opening for negotiations, and a proposal will be made concerning the time and place for such a dialogue. It may be advisable to include Turkey among the third party delegation, especially in light of the positions it has expressed in the past in favor of the initiative,⁵¹ and after the thaw in Israeli-Turkish diplomatic relations.

In the framework of a smart, stable, and ongoing process, which includes concomitant negotiations for a permanent settlement, interim agreements, regional dialogue, and constructive unilateral steps, it is appropriate for Israel to recognize the Arab Peace Initiative as a regional and international platform for dialogue with the Arab world and as a basis for negotiations with Arab League states. The risks in such a policy are smaller than the gains that can be expected from its success – first and foremost, shaping of the borders of Israel as the secure, democratic state of the Jewish people.

Notes

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Country	Subject	Order of importance	Percentage who agree	Source
Lebanon	Foreign intervention	1	23.6	Sami Atallah, "Lebanon Country Report," September 2012, <i>Arab Barometer II</i> , http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/countryreportlebanon2.pdf , p. 22.
	Palestinian issue	2	20.5	

Country	Subject	Order of importance	Percentage who agree	Source
Algeria	Corruption	1	22.4	http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/countyreportyAlgeriaII.pdf , p. 24.
	Palestine	4	12.4	
Egypt	Economy	1	37	http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/countyreportyegyptIII.pdf , p. 21.
	Palestine	5	4	
Jordan	Economy	1	46	http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/countyreportjordan2_0.pdf , p. 40.
	Palestine	2	21	
Saudi Arabia	Economy	1	49	http://www.arabbarometer.org/sites/default/files/countyreportysaudi2.pdf , p. 16.
	Palestine	3	12	

- 47 See the same opinion as expressed by Nizar Abdel-Kader, "Putting Opponents of the API on the Defensive," in *Bitterlemons Guide*, p. 33.
- 48 Julian E. Barnes and Adam Entous, "Panetta: Iranian Threat Spreads," *Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323926104578278231369164640.html>.
- 49 For example, "Jerusalem Day," which was established to mark the demand for the rights of the Islamic nation in Palestine.
- 50 Avi Issacharoff, "Restarting Direct Negotiations: With Amr Moussa Optimistic, the Right Begins to Worry," *Haaretz*, September 5, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1219953>.
- 51 Abdul Rahman Shaheen, "Turkey Sees Arab Peace Plan Key to Solving Woes," *Gulfnews.com*, February 4, 2009, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/turkey-sees-arab-peace-plan-key-to-solving-woes-1.50093>. Following the visit by the Turkish president Saudi Arabia in February 2009, pundits assessed: "Turkey sees the Arab peace initiative, mooted by King Abdullah and endorsed by the Arab world, as a means of extricating the Middle East region from its predicament, as well as a panacea for the woes of the region in order to restore its stability and consolidating the pillars of just peace enabling peaceful coexistence of all people in the region." Erdogan even attended a meeting of the monitoring committee of the Arab foreign ministers on the subject of the initiative, *al-Quds*, September 13, 2011.