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The Arab Peace Initiative: Reversing the Direction

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Operation Protective Edge and the entrenchment of ISIS after it declared the territory under its control an Islamic state have changed the Middle East map of interests and alliances. For regional players other than Qatar and Turkey, Hamas represents the political and security threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. As to ISIS, its establishment of an “Islamic state” in the region under its control in northwest Iraq and northeast Syria, in effect erasing the border between the two countries, threatens other regimes and states in the area through murder, intimidation, and a sophisticated media strategy, which also serves as a tool to recruit volunteers from the region and elsewhere.

In the Middle East reality formed in the shadow of these developments, the foundation for strategic interests common to the area’s so-called pragmatic nations, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, has grown. These interests are also shared by Israel. Hamas, supported mainly by Turkey and Qatar (though it appears that Doha’s support will become more veiled given the risk that the United States will try to cancel Qatar’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup and Saudi Arabia’s harsher threats), has become a nuisance, even threat, to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. It appears that Israel too is reconsidering its moves vis-à-vis Hamas, the organization that until not long ago Israel viewed as the preferred governing entity in the Gaza Strip responsible for the welfare of the civilian population – on condition it was militarily weakened and deterred.

The outcome of Operation Protective Edge has changed the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip from a humanitarian necessity to a strategic imperative for Israel and the PA, as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Clearly the long awaited stability in the Gaza arena will not be attained without widespread reconstruction, and reconstruction in turn is meant to improve the chances of restarting the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. Reconstruction is similar in scope to state building, but Hamas – unless it becomes the local entity to lead the project with the region’s nations and the international community – will likely become the spoiler, because it has no intention of giving up its control of the area and disarming, as military force is both a critical component of its

strength in the Gaza Strip and a strategic asset in its struggle to control the greater Palestinian arena.

From Hamas' perspective, reconstruction of the Gaza Strip without its inclusion and input is liable to weaken its status and powerbase. In this reality, therefore, the PA will find it difficult to serve as the major axis in the complex reconstruction effort. Representatives of the international community will also be hard pressed to execute a reconstruction process by virtue of an international mandate or other arrangement. The outcome will then be limited humanitarian aid to Gaza residents rather than fundamental reconstruction, which will then accelerate the conditions for another outbreak of violence. In turn, the status of Mahmoud Abbas and the PA will continue to flounder, and their base of public support will continue to shrink (since Operation Protective Edge, Palestinian public opinion polls have shown growing support for Hamas and decreasing support for Fatah and Abbas). Furthermore, undermining the reconstruction process will be seen as a victory for the Hamas-Qatar-Turkey axis. Therefore, the essence of the interest shared by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, and the PA is weakening Hamas and neutralizing its negative influence on the Gaza Strip reconstruction project.

Concurrently, the pragmatic camp in the Middle East faces the threat of radical fundamentalist Islam in the form of ISIS. The nature of the organization, which has declared the establishment of a state and is working to institute it in practice, poses a real threat to the stability of Arab nations in the region and also represents the threat of showcase terrorist brutality to Western nations. ISIS's proven ability to recruit volunteers and repatriate them in their countries of origin after military and terrorist training, as well as other multiple arenas of the organization's activities and guerrilla operations in the so-called Islamic State and nearby areas, demands intelligence and operational cooperation to foil the threat.

The Arab Peace Initiative could emerge as a conceptual and operational basis for realizing two shared strategic interests: weakening Hamas and foiling the threat posed by ISIS. For that to happen, it is necessary to agree that it serve as the foundation for negotiations between Israel and the pragmatic Arab nations rather than a diktat that must be accepted without negotiations. It is also worth considering reversing the direction suggested by the initiative.

The essence of the initiative in its current formulation is recognition of the legitimacy of Israel's existence in the region and the forming of relations between Israel and the Arab states following the establishment of a Palestinian state (under the conditions defined by the initiative). Yet because the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of an agreement would be the result of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and because Mahmoud Abbas led the establishment of a reconciliation unity government also in charge of the Gaza Strip, the establishment of a Palestinian state must be made

conditional on the PA's effective control of the Gaza Strip based on Oslo Agreement principles. This is only possible as part of the Gaza Strip's comprehensive and basic reconstruction and the concurrent weakening of Hamas' military capabilities and infrastructures and the neutralization of Hamas's ability to challenge the PA. To improve the feasibility of fundamental reconstruction and to continue to weaken Hamas militarily and neutralize the Muslim Brotherhood, which also receives support from Qatar and Turkey, a regional coalition based on shared strategic interests must be formed.

Such a coalition can be formed on the basis of the seminal idea behind the Arab Peace Initiative and allow the laying of the foundation for a regional security regime based on intelligence and military cooperation. Its establishment and long-term cooperation ensuring the success of the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and improving chances for confronting jihadist organizations in the region could strengthen Israel's trust in security arrangements in the envelope of the future Palestinian state and allow greater leeway in its Israel's security demands, some of which are viewed by the Palestinians as hindering the breakthrough to a peace settlement. This regional coalition could remain relevant even after the establishment of the Palestinian state and continue to be the base for coordinated action against common challenges.

It would therefore be wise to consider changing the direction of the Arab initiative: establishing a coalition that includes Israel in order to improve the chances for an effective political process between Israel and the Palestinians. This, however, does not mean abandoning the political process with the Palestinians before such a coalition comes into existence. Israel must work to make incremental, cautious, and responsible progress toward the establishment of a functional, responsible Palestinian state that can assimilate into the region-in-the-making and in turn become another cornerstone of the region's security regime. A regional security regime based on cooperation between Israel and the nations of the pragmatic camp – even without full diplomatic relations at first, though with the pragmatic camp's recognition of Israel's regional importance, its contribution to regional development, and especially its right to be a legitimate part of the region – can be a formative step leading to a more secure and prosperous region representing a sounder and safer alternative to the chaos rampant in much of the Middle East.

