

Is the Arab Initiative still viable?

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Above the Fray: Amid the turmoil in the region, the Arab Peace Initiative should be advanced as a valuable asset for Israel and her neighbors.



Photo by: Avi Katz

In 1973, Foreign Minister Abba Eban famously stated that “Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.” Nowadays, however, this phrase is more aptly applied to Israel.

Successive governments, and especially the current one, seem to believe that by deliberately scuttling opportunities to achieve peace, the country can somehow further improve its position by maintaining the status quo and compelling the Palestinians to eventually settle for less.

It is debatable who is to blame for the numerous failures of prior negotiation efforts. But it is clear that Israel is missing a historic opportunity now to capitalize on the contents of the Arab Peace Initiative, which offers full normalized relations with the entire Arab world in exchange for the return of the

territories captured in 1967 and a negotiated two-state solution. Especially today, amid the turmoil in the region, the initiative should be advanced as a valuable asset to transform Israel's relations with its Palestinian neighbors, and the broader Middle East.

Israel entered into serious negotiations with the Palestinians and the Syrians in 2000 and in 2008. By all accounts, significant progress was made in these negotiations, strongly suggesting that both sides were on the verge of signing an agreement. Each side blames the other for the eventual failure of these negotiations. The "Palestine Papers" published by Al Jazeera showed the distance the Palestinians were willing to walk to strike a deal. Confirming this account, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said of the negotiations he had with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas that they were closer "than ever in the past, to complete an agreement on principles that would have led to the end of the conflict between us and the Palestinians."

But the government has refused to reveal the extent of that progress and demonstrate to the international community how far Israel was willing to go. For Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to place the blame squarely on the Palestinians' shoulders is neither accurate nor fair. Every element of the negotiations between Israel and its counterparts, the Palestinians and the Syrians, was based on the provisions of the Arab Peace Initiative. Every peace negotiation in the future, like it or not, will also have to be based on this plan, because it offers the only viable framework for a comprehensive peace.

For the first time, the Arab states put forth an initiative that has the potential to introduce a revolutionary change in Arab- Israeli relations. The plan, first introduced in 2002 and reaffirmed in 2007, represents a historic repudiation of the infamous "three no's" of the Arab League's Khartoum Conference in 1967: "no to recognition, no to negotiations, no to peace."

However objectionable some of the language is to the Israelis, the initiative provided several common and central denominators – security, normalization and peace – that could translate to tangible moves toward a permanent agreement.

Contrary to many Israelis' criticism, the Arab Peace Initiative was not presented to Israel on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. But even if it were, Israelis should have focused on the positive elements. It could express its reservations, but also its desires to enter into negotiations as long as the talks could lead to a two-state solution living side-by-side in peace and security. Here, Israel should have focused – and still could – on the basic principles that the initiative puts forward that are not only acceptable to the Jewish state, but represent historic assets for advancing peace. These principles include Arab acceptance of the notion of a comprehensive peace that recognizes the existence of the State of Israel and its legitimate security concerns.

However, by essentially ignoring the plan entirely, Israel has in essence posited that it is interested in neither peace nor normalization with the Arab world, which has continuously portrayed Israel as an obstructionist to peace. As such, Israel has provided its detractors both the opportunity and the rationale to delegitimize it while substantially increasing international sympathy toward the Palestinians.

A growing number of countries are blaming Israel for the growing regional instability that undermines the strategic national interest of Israel's closest friends, including the US.

This is the basis upon which Meir Dagan, the recently departed head of the Mossad, created fireworks when he told an audience at Tel Aviv University that "we must adopt the Saudi initiative [Arab Peace Initiative].

We have no other way, and not because [the Palestinians] are my top priority, but because I am concerned about Israel's wellbeing and I want to do what I can to ensure Israel's existence. If we don't make proposals and if we don't take the initiative, we will eventually find ourselves in a corner."

Needless to say, no one should expect Israel to please the international community at its national security expense. But then, the Arab Peace Initiative provided the basis for a solution that most Israelis could not even dream possible. In my conversation with top Arab officials, no Arab state expected Israel to simply accept the plan at face value, nor did they present it with so much baggage because they wanted Israel to reject it. The Saudis have had and continue to have a vested interest in peace with Israel, knowing full well that the country is here to stay. Moreover, the Saudis' arch-enemy is Tehran, not Jerusalem, and nothing will change the nature of these relationships because of the inherent rivalry between Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia.

In fact, Saudi Arabia views Israel as its partner in its battle against Iran, and thus feels a greater urgency to advance the peace initiative than ever before. As the "Arab Spring" has unleashed a torrent of democratic uprisings throughout the broader Middle East, the undemocratic Saudi Arabia must show that it can still play a leadership role in the region, and particularly in relation to Tehran.

Besides Dagan's recent comments, nearly 70 former senior Israeli defense and intelligence officials, policymakers and academics have vocalized support for the plan through an effort titled "Israel Peace Initiative." This effort recognizes the initiative "as a historic effort made by the Arab states to reach a breakthrough and achieve progress on a regional basis," and affirms a shared sentiment that "a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties."

But it is high time the government, or the largest opposition party, Kadima, stated this in an official capacity and fought for it on every political front. The international community should encourage it to do so. The nations of the Quartet advanced the Road Map, but did not officially embrace the Arab Peace Initiative, even though every provision in the road map is consistent with it. Moreover, in his recent speech about the Arab Spring and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, President Barack Obama articulated a position in total conformity with the Arab plan, yet, regrettably, failed to officially embrace it. And so, a promising initiative that has languished for nearly 10 years is in jeopardy of continuing to collect dust on the shelf.

Some analysts argue that with the turmoil in the region creating unprecedented uncertainty now is not the time to pursue the Arab initiative. I disagree entirely. The breakdown of the current order calls for a

major breakthrough. Now is the time to resolve this so the nations of the Middle East can address the demands of their people protesting in the streets, rather than utilizing the Arab-Israeli conflict as a diversion from domestic ills, as the ousted despots of the region did for decades. Furthermore, with crisis comes opportunity. A continuation of the status quo will only deepen the entrenchment among Israelis, as well as the disenchantment, suspicion and concern of Palestinians. There is no better time than now, and no better basis from which to start than the Arab Peace Initiative.

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