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*The Arab Peace Initiative – A Historic
Opportunity?*



**Background, Meanings, and Possible
Avenues of Exploration**



Editor: **Kobi Michael**

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Preface

At the Riyadh Summit of March 2007, the Arab League affirmed the initiative originally published at the Beirut Summit of March 2002. This resolution is a potentially momentous one for the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts; should the Arab Peace Initiative be adopted by all parties as a basis for negotiations, it may represent a positive turning point.



Those in favor of the Initiative regard it as a major breakthrough, one that presents Israel with a unique, and perhaps one-time opportunity to break out of the current impasse on the Palestinian and Syrian fronts. It also offers Israel the possibility of recognition [as a state and] as a legitimate political entity by the Arab countries of the Middle East – a strategic goal that Israel has been trying to achieve since its founding. Others see the Arab Peace Initiative as an ambiguous document, one that makes the “compensation” desired by Israel (normalization and recognition as a legitimate entity by the Arab countries) conditional on Israel’s acceptance of its stipulations as a final outcome even before the negotiations have begun – a potential trap in which Israel would bear sole responsibility.

On June 4, 2007 the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies held a conference dedicated to elucidating the background to the Arab Peace Initiative, its textual, historical and political meanings and, in particular, its ramifications for the major players in the region. In light of the Initiative’s importance, we sought to determine whether it represents a true historic opportunity and to determine, should this indeed prove to be the case, what measures might be taken to ensure that the opportunity is not missed. The many positive reactions generated by the conference led to our decision to publish this book, which contains seven brief essays penned by the conference participants.

Since the conference ended, Hamas has wrested both military and political control of the Gaza Strip, and the Palestinian arena has changed dramatically with its division into two separate entities: a Hamas-controlled Gaza and a West Bank under the rule of the national-secular stream. This political splitting of the Palestinian Authority places the moderate Arab world in an embarrassing position, one that is perhaps unprecedented. The moderates are torn between the desire to suppress this political success of Hamas as a branch of the Muslim



Brotherhood – out of concern that it will inspire sister movements to seek the overthrow of moderate governments elsewhere – and the desire to heal the rift within the Palestinian Authority through mediation between the rival factions and humanitarian aid to the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip. These developments have, to some degree, drawn the region's and the world's attention away from the Arab Peace Initiative. Nevertheless, the Initiative is still a worthwhile topic for in-depth study and analysis, inasmuch as it introduces a new paradigm and represents a possibly unique opportunity of emerging from the current impasse.



Summary

The opening essay focuses on the effort to define what a "historic opportunity" actually is, and to understand why such opportunities are easily missed. Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov concludes that the Arab Peace Initiative meets the criteria for a historic opportunity, but that it will most likely be missed – despite the fact that it offers a reasonable alternative to the present state of conflict. The reason for this is that neither the various parties to the conflict, nor the environmental conditions in which it is unfolding, are ripe for such an initiative. On the other hand, the author notes, in the absence of the necessary “ripeness” the initiative will not necessarily, or ultimately, be recognized as a missed opportunity. Bar-Siman-Tov’s final assessment is that, due to the current inauspicious conditions and the split in the Palestinian Authority, the most that can be done is to manage the conflict in a way that keeps damage to a minimum, assuming that the parties are interested in doing so – and the Arab Peace Initiative may in fact be employed for this purpose, which the author regards as more realistic under the present circumstances.

In the second essay Yitzhak Reiter examines the Arab Peace Initiative’s background and meanings, and evaluates its seriousness with regard to Israel. In Reiter’s view, the Arab League’s decision does indeed constitute a historic turning point whose importance cannot be overstated. The author goes on to discuss the Initiative’s core issues, the considerations of the region’s main actors regarding its provisions, and their overall attitude toward it. Reiter’s main conclusion is that the Arab League countries went a long way toward addressing Israel’s minimum needs, particularly on the refugee issue. In his opinion, the Initiative constitutes a declaration on the part of the Arab League countries that they are choosing a strategy of peace and normal relations with Israel, within the 1949 ceasefire lines.

According to Reiter, the text of the Arab Peace Initiative should not be regarded as a final statement, but rather as a starting-point for diplomatic negotiations. In his estimation, the Initiative’s wording leaves room for negotiation, and it should therefore not be dismissed as a “take it or leave it” proposition requiring Israel to

withdraw to its 1967 borders. Reiter concludes that Israel and the moderate Arab states currently share an interest in creating geopolitical stability in the Middle East and in contending with the terrorism of al-Qaeda and the nuclearization of Iran – a situation in which Israel stands to reap additional benefits. The Arab Peace Initiative gives Israel a pan-Arab umbrella for negotiations and for peace, and provides it with an opportunity to reach a historic formal rapprochement with the 22 nation-strong Arab world and its population of 300 million.

In light of the Arab Peace Initiative's potential benefit to Israel, Reiter calls upon the Israeli government to officially announce its support for the Initiative, with clarifications regarding its own position. By signing on to the Initiative, Israel would, in Reiter's view, be giving impetus to a process that, however many years it takes to complete, would promote a high degree of regional stability from a security point of view, as well as the necessary conditions for economic prosperity. Moreover, the split in the Palestinian Authority gives Israel some breathing space in which to conduct Initiative-based negotiations with Abu Mazen, and to have the agreement implemented first on the West Bank. Reiter concludes by noting that the new conditions that have arisen in the Palestinian Authority make the Arab Peace Initiative a suitable framework for achieving an interim arrangement, one that would provide stability until such time as the overall regional conditions become ripe for a permanent agreement.

In the book's third article, Ilai Alon places the fine print of the Arab Peace Initiative under a microscope. He takes a methodical and comparative approach to the document's textual meanings, placing them within the context of previous Arab diplomatic texts and the Qu'ran. Alon employs textual analysis in an attempt to determine what the Initiative means from Israel's point of view. He attributes the importance of textual analysis to the historical circumstances that the document itself addresses, and thus, according to him, the textual analysis also has to take these circumstances into account. Alon notes that the public discussion generated by the Arab Peace Initiative has up to now been based mainly on strategic, historical and ideological analyses that address the actual text of the Initiative in only a general way, and which have in some cases been biased.

In his article Alon analyzes the document's structure, the literal and cultural meanings of some of the terms that feature in it, the word "justice" which has many

different meanings in the Arabic language and in Islamic culture, and the import of the strategic choice that the Arab League is emphasizing in its declaration.

Although his analysis raises doubts regarding the unequivocal nature of the Arab Peace Initiative's declared message, Alon concludes that the risk should be taken and that the proposal extended by the Arab countries should be responded to in a step-by-step manner: the basic principle that is expressed in its first paragraph should be affirmed and employed as the basis for a negotiation process.

The fourth paper focuses on the idea of a "multi-bilateral channel" to be developed under the auspices of the Arab League. According to Eli Podeh, the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict teaches that a diplomatic arrangement between Israel and her neighbors has to come about through bilateral negotiations. Podeh notes that history has not shown multilateral measures (such as the various international peace conferences), or unilateral measures (such as Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip), in a flattering light. At the same time he warns of the obfuscation that can result from reliance on historical analogies. In Podeh's view, conceptual obfuscation of this kind draws attention away from the potential usefulness of other approaches that may at first glance appear futile, at least in terms of prior historical and political experience.

Podeh regards the Arab Peace Initiative as a key factor in the effort to restart the stalled peace process and to counter the radical forces in the region. The Initiative reflects, in the author's view, an attempt on the part of the moderate Arab states – led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan – to create a different regional agenda, with American encouragement.

Podeh proposes that a "multi-bilateral" approach be adopted, one that combines features of the bilateral and multi-lateral approaches while offering many of the advantages of the former. He suggests that four parallel bilateral tracks be created – an Israeli-Syrian track, an Israeli-Lebanese track, an Israeli-Palestinian track, and an Israeli-Arab track – and he point out that, despite Israel's unfavorable past experience with diplomatic processes conducted simultaneously along several different channels, the method nevertheless offers certain advantages. Firstly, the connection between the various bilateral channels would allay each of the Arab parties' suspicions regarding the motives of the other Arab parties.

Secondly, this approach enables several obstacles on the bilateral plane to be surmounted. Thirdly, due to the interaction between the various Arab states and the issues at hand, progress on one track would be likely to affect negotiations on other tracks in a positive way. Podeh concludes that the real problems are not rooted in specific issues and solutions, but rather in the ability and desire of the various parties to enter into a complex process entailing compromise and concessions. His proposed mechanism would provide those interested in making the arduous ascent toward peace with a sturdy ladder on which to climb. Podeh regards the present period, characterized by a divided Palestinian Authority, as a fortuitous one for the adoption of this mechanism, and he views the mechanism's implementation as the most worthwhile opportunity currently available for overcoming the present deadlock.

Eyal Zisser, in the collection's fifth essay, identifies the Arab Peace Initiative as an opportunity for renewing negotiations between Israel and Syria, particularly in light of the problematic developments that have succeeded the Second Lebanon War – with the Syrian President declaring that he regards the military outcome as a major, even historic, victory for Hezbollah. Moreover, in a series of speeches and media interviews Assad has put a gun to Israel's head – that is, he has presented Israel with an ultimatum: to renew the peace process with Syria and sign a peace agreement that would include full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, or to risk the opening of a new front on the Golan, similar to the one faced by Israel with the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Bashar al-Assad's August 2006 speech appears to have ushered in a new era in Israeli-Syrian relations. The era's overall mood is one of anxiety over future conflict between the two countries, and against this background loud calls are being heard in Israel for serious consideration of the option for peace with Syria. However, numerous obstacles stand in the way of such an option. These obstacles lie primarily in the domestic weakness of the Syrian, Israeli and American leaderships. However, it is precisely the difficulty of advancing a Syrian-Israeli agreement, or of even establishing channels for dialogue between the two states, that underscores the advantage of the Arab Peace Initiative as a convenient framework for renewing Israeli-Syrian negotiations, and perhaps of achieving a peace agreement between the countries.

Despite fears that the Initiative would be used mainly to advance the Israeli-Palestinian track, at the expense of the Syrian track – as happened more than once in the past – Syria is a party to the Initiative. Although Syria is seeking a diplomatic arrangement with Israel and not necessarily the “warm” peace that Israel desires, hardly anyone would deny that it is in Israel’s interest to make peace with Syria. Peace between Israel and Syria would keep things quiet on Israel’s northern front, and in particular would deprive Iran of its gateway to the region, through which it funds the Palestinian terrorist organizations and Hezbollah. Special importance should be attached to this issue, in view of the fact that Iran is likely to achieve nuclear capability in the coming years.

In light of the difficulty faced by Israel in renewing direct negotiations with Syria – due both to the paucity of Syrian gestures to Israel and to the United States’ opposition to renewed negotiations between Damascus and Jerusalem – the potential embodied by the Arab Peace Initiative for such a renewal becomes clear. The Initiative provides a framework for comprehensive dialogue between Israel and the Arab world in which Syria figures as one partner, rather than as a major player. This would make it easier for both Israel and Syria to engage in dialogue and to avoid war. Radical Islam poses a threat to Syria as well, and the Syrians have already hinted that in the long term they would prefer to travel along the opposite side of the street, rather than aligning themselves with Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran. The Arab Peace Initiative, according to Zisser, could give Syria the incentive it needs to cross over to the other side.

In an article devoted to the Arab Peace Initiative and the Palestinian situation, Yochanan Tzoref takes an in-depth look at the split that occurred in the Palestinian Authority after Hamas’ takeover of the Gaza Strip, and of the Initiative’s potential role in healing the rift, rooted though it may be merely in Hamas’ obligation to adhere to the spirit of the Initiative.

The Palestinians were the main catalyst for formulating and ratifying the Arab Peace Initiative, having once again demonstrated their inability to agree on a solution that would satisfy both themselves and Israel. In the years that have passed since the Beirut Initiative of 2002, the conflict between Israel and the armed Palestinian resistance groups has intensified, internecine Palestinian fighting has increased, and the Palestinian Authority, and Palestinian society

itself, have disintegrated. The most urgent issue that arose after Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip and the consequent division of the Palestinian arena into two territorial units was that of the degree to which the Arab Peace Initiative would be able, once implemented, to generate consensus within Palestinian society regarding the establishment of the independent state proposed by the Initiative.

Abu Mazen and his supporters within Fatah and outside it have accepted the Initiative, and it is likely that they would be willing to advance even farther toward what the Initiative envisions. Hamas, for its part, was exceedingly cautious in expressing its support for the Initiative, and now that it is in control of Gaza it is seeking to renew its dialogue with Fatah and Abu Mazen, claiming that the takeover merely reflected its opposition to a particular faction within Fatah that wished to stage a reversal and prevent Hamas from fulfilling the mandate that it received from the Palestinian electorate in 2006.

From the point of view of Hamas, there has been no change in its position regarding the Arab Peace Initiative. The organization has merely demonstrated its strength within the Palestinian arena, and signaled to all those involved that it is a force to be reckoned with. Tzoref discusses the dialectic between the Arab Peace Initiative and the rupture that has occurred in the Palestinian Authority, emphasizing that, unless inter-Palestinian dialogue is renewed, resolution of the current crisis is unlikely; and if the crisis is not resolved, it will be impossible to return to the Arab Peace Initiative. Tzoref therefore concludes that Hamas' attitude toward the Initiative will continue to be relevant.

It appears that, as long as the Arab Peace Initiative remains unimplemented and until it becomes subject to negotiation and amendment, Hamas' attitude toward it will continue to be one of cautious and anxious acquiescence, despite the organization's declared position that its policy is compatible with the Initiative. This attitude is, essentially, an attempt on the part of Hamas to have its cake and eat it, too.

According to Tzoref, conditions on the ground have up to now played into Hamas' hands. Israel has yet to formulate a consistent policy regarding the Initiative, the US and the Quartet have not been pressuring it, and from an internal Palestinian perspective the ball is currently in Israel's court. This situation has propelled the Palestinians into a vortex of conflicts and clashes, and freed Hamas of having to take complicated decisions. What is needed, therefore, is for Israel




to place a new card on the regional/international negotiation table, one capable of changing the rules of internal Palestinian discourse and of obliging Hamas to deal morally and ideologically with the current reality.

The Arab Peace Initiative, in Tzoref's view, gives Israel the card that it needs. Israeli acceptance of the Saudi initiative, assuming that its reservations will be attended to, would trigger a transition in inter-Palestinian discourse, while forcing Hamas to prove its commitment to fulfilling the public will. In the absence of such a development, the Palestinian arena will continue to seethe with internal discord; its isolation will deepen and it will continue to harass the northern Negev in order to fuel its conflicts with domestic and external adversaries.

The collection concludes with an essay by Kobi Michael on the nature of the paradigm change represented by the Arab Peace Initiative, and on the Initiative's advantages and disadvantages from an Israeli standpoint. According to Michael, it is in Israel's interest that a Palestinian state arise alongside it, and that the external threats posed to the Jewish state (primarily by Iran and Syria-Lebanon) be alleviated via a network of peace treaties, non-aggression pacts and regional and peripheral alliances – a network that would facilitate the creation of a regional security regime which would significantly improve Israel's chances for survival. Under certain conditions, the author believes, the Arab Peace Initiative could serve as a platform to advance Israeli interests.

The key question regarding the Arab Peace Initiative from the standpoint of Israeli interests is whether the Initiative obliges the moderate Arab world to take responsibility on behalf of the Palestinians. If the answer is yes, then the Initiative, despite its risks, does indeed constitute an opportunity. In these conditions it could well turn out to offer a paradigm capable of relieving the current state of crisis and of addressing Israel's vital interests. Therefore, Israel can, and indeed should, declare its acceptance of the Initiative as a basis for starting negotiations, and call for a meeting with senior Arab League figures in order to clarify the various aspects of the Initiative and to mark out possible avenues of exploration.

Israel should make its acceptance of the Initiative conditional, even at the clarification stage, on Arab and international guarantees regarding the possible failure of the process. Benchmarks and conditions for further advancement



should be defined, and there should be a mechanism for careful monitoring and enforcement of the process. Michael envisions the creation of such a mechanism in the context of a “peace support operation” in which the moderate Arab countries would participate and which could be adapted to suit changing realities.

The Arab Peace Initiative provides for the establishment of a Palestinian state; in a situation of Hamas control of Gaza the Initiative could be used to revive the idea of establishing such a state in phases, with provisional borders – the concept that was at the heart of the Roadmap. An Arab declaration of commitment to taking responsibility on behalf of the Palestinians should they fail to meet their obligations would enable a consensual transition to a kind of protectorate or trusteeship, led by the Arab world with broad international backing. A trusteeship system would take responsibility for creating a Palestinian leadership and Palestinian governmental institutions, while ensuring a gradual transfer of powers until the requisite degree of stability is reached.

