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The Arab Peace Initiative and the Dynamic Regional Situation

Yoel Guzansky and Kobi Michael

In view of the deadlock in the political process with the Palestinians, as well as the increased security threats posed to Israel by the growing power of radical Islamic groups and the escalation of the conflicts in which they are involved, there is increasing support in Israel for a positive approach toward the Arab Peace Initiative as a basis for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. For their part, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, at least in rhetoric, along with elements in the international community, are trying to rejuvenate the initiative and present it to Israel as a suitable basis for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Arab League proposal originally demanded a complete Israeli withdrawal from all the territories conquered in 1967, including the Golan Heights, and a return to the June 4, 1967 borders (including the territory in southern Lebanon); the achievement of a just and agreed solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees, based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (while rejecting a settlement in which the refugees receive citizenship in their host countries); and the establishment of an independent sovereign Palestinian state in the territories occupied in June 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital. In exchange, Arab countries will declare an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, sign a peace agreement with Israel, and conduct “regular” relations with it (*alakat a’ade* – in Arabic, refraining from the use of the word “normal” – *tabiyya*).

Saudi Arabia itself has been rather passive over the years with respect to promotion of the initiative – suggesting that the initiative was actually a Saudi attempt to improve the kingdom’s image, following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The plan was raised and approved at the Arab League summit in Beirut on March 28, 2002 by then-Saudi Arabian Crown Prince (and later King) Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz. Under American pressure, the initiative was reaffirmed by the Arab League on March 28, 2007. In 2013, the Arab League countries (without changing the official wording of the initiative) announced they were willing in principle to accept land swaps in the framework of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, but refused to take additional confidence building measures toward Israel in the framework of an attempt to create a supportive regional atmosphere for the political process, claiming that “the ball is now in the Israeli court.”

An important question in this context is to what degree the initiative is a hard and fast diktat or a genuine basis for negotiations. The Arab League made relations with Israel contingent on implementation of the principles of the initiative – i.e., relations would be formed neither before nor during the implementation of the principles – and is unwilling, as of now, to conduct a dialogue with Israel for the purpose of formulating an amended version of the initiative. Following Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, Saudi Arabia indicated that for its part, the initiative was still on the table, and that changes to it could be made corresponding to the dynamic regional situation, including the idea of land swaps. At the same time, there is no evidence that the Arab League is willing to regard the initiative as a basis for a joint dialogue with Israel about changes in its principles.

According to foreign reports, Israel is already conducting ties and cooperation with several important Arab countries with which it has no peace treaties. Thus far, these countries have benefited from the advantages of ties with Israel without having to pay any price for it in Arab public opinion, which opposes ties with Israel, especially as long as no progress has been achieved in the political process with the Palestinians. An attempt to make the ties public without real progress in negotiations with the Palestinians is therefore liable to undermine them. Furthermore, even if the negotiations with the Palestinians are expedited, those countries will presumably prefer to accompany the process “from a distance.”

Similarly, to what extent various elements of normalization, such as allowing Israeli airlines to fly above the Arabian peninsula or opening commercial offices in Arab countries, will be considered by Israeli public opinion as sufficient evidence of willingness to progress toward relations remains an open question. The price of a settlement with the Palestinians and the potential risk it entails will be far greater for Israel than the price of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, responsible sovereign countries. The Palestinian state that emerges from an agreement will have to go a long way before its intentions and ability to behave according to international commitments and agreements are proven.

Moreover, certainly for Israel, the dynamic regional situation will remain a major issue on the agenda. Even if the regional parties reach agreements, it is not at all clear to what degree governments in the Arab world, given their current state, will be able to fulfill them. Many of them have been weakened in recent years, while others are liable to be weakened in the future, which will make it difficult for them to fulfill their part in any potential agreement with Israel.

Therefore, Israel would do well to announce that it regards the Arab initiative as a basis for negotiations, in which agreed principles for a regional agreement resting on a regional security regime are formulated, with the Palestinian issue being a layer or element in the

broad regional system – not an issue by itself. Israel should seek to make the agreed Arab initiative, after negotiations between the parties and necessary adjustments (such as dealing with the Golan Heights in the context of a crumbling Syria), into a kind of new systemic logic, which inter alia will require the Arab world to accept significant responsibility for the Palestinian issue. The agreed Arab initiative is likely to have positive strategic significance if it motivates the pragmatic Arab countries, led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, to make the Palestinian issue a “controlled” element in the new, emerging regional system. In other words, they will take upon themselves responsibility for preventing Palestinian violations or abandonment of the emerging settlement.

Some regard the current weakness of the Arab world as a propitious time and strategic opportunity to improve Israel’s regional status by promoting cooperation with several Arab countries sharing common interests and concerns with Israel regarding Iran, the Shiite axis, and state and non-state forces identified with radical Islam. Others believe that the weakness of the Arab countries, at a time when the regional order is crumbling, indicates that this is not the time to promote long term settlements, because states can be expected to have difficulty fulfilling agreements with Israel. Furthermore, at this stage, it is not at all clear to what extent the regional upheavals will affect the degree of flexibility that the Arab world is willing to show on the initiative.

Still, it remains in Israel’s interest to arrive at an agreed and coordinated version of the Arab initiative. This version stands to become the organizing logic of a more stable regional system that includes an agreed settlement of the Palestinian issue. Arab willingness to discuss the initiative and adapt it to the dynamic situation in the Middle East should make it easier for Israel to adopt significant confidence building measures regarding the Palestinian arena and to channel the international support in principle for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement toward a regional Arab-Israeli agreement. It appears that a multilateral approach, based on a revised and agreed form of the Arab initiative, is preferable to a focus on the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian channel, which seems like a lost cause under current circumstances.

