

The Arab Peace Initiative: This Time, Israel Is Missing an Historic Opportunity

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Fulfilling a 60-year old Israeli dream and an American unwavering strategy, the 22-member League of Arab states are now in consensus on a potentially groundbreaking Arab Peace Initiative (API), which pledges their collective and full recognition of the Jewish state and full-fledged permanent peace in return for withdrawing the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) to 1967 lines, the establishment of an independent Palestine with eastern Jerusalem as its capital, and “an agreed, just solution” to the Palestinian refugee issue in accordance with United Nations Resolution 194, but both Washington and Tel Aviv are not forthcoming.

The API was a dramatic reversal of decades-long policy as well as a peace offensive. It was approved in Beirut in 2002 by the Arab leaders who reiterated their commitment thereto at their following annual summits. A meeting of their foreign ministers in Cairo earlier this month recommended to their upcoming summit in Riyadh on March 28-29 a renewal of their peace offer as a “strategic option.”

The historic potentials of the API were acknowledged by the international Quartet of Middle East mediators, comprising the U.S. , the U.N., the E.U. and Russia . In 2003 the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1515 cited the API as one of the terms of reference for making peace between Arabs and Israelis.

Arab leaders seemed recently to follow up on their initiative for the first time with a diplomatic offensive that started ahead of their Riyadh summit and is expected to resume thereafter. Their diplomatic campaign was spearheaded by Jordan ’s King Abdullah II’s visit to Washington DC and highlighted by his impressive and eloquent message to the U.S. Congress on March 7.

The API was for five years archived into oblivion on the shelves of the Arab League, rejected by Israel and ignored by the US , who in 2006 swiftly vetoed an Arab League move to revive peace making on its basis by entrusting the mission to the U.N. Security Council. A change of heart following the negative fallout of the Israeli war on Lebanon last summer moved Washington to perceive in the strategic Arab option a tactical tool “to recast the (regional) political landscape from the traditional one of Arabs versus Israelis ... into a Sunni vs. Shia alignment,” (1) thus opening a window of opportunity for Arab leaders to follow up on it.

Seeking to break through Israel’s rejection of their daring offer, the U.S.-allied Arab leaders have turned to Washington appealing for intervention and warning their offer could be the last chance to make peace otherwise the ideologies of hate and terror would plunge the Middle East into a wider conflict.

“Today, I must speak; I cannot be silent,” the Jordanian monarch repeated to U.S.

lawmakers: "Sixty years of Palestinian dispossession, forty years under occupation, a stop-and-go peace process, all this has left a bitter legacy of disappointment and despair ... It is time to create a new and different legacy."

Indicating that thirteen years on since late King Hussein, his father, and Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, were in Washington pursuing the cause of peace, the "work is still not completed," the "ongoing crisis" has failed eleven American presidents and thirty American congresses, and incumbent President George W. Bush's "vision" of a two-state solution risks to remain merely a vision for ever, unless the U.S. rises up to the "challenge," plays "an historic role," and uses its "unrivalled" potentials and "unprecedented power" to seize on the "indeed historic, moment of opportunity," made possible by the API.

"The wellspring of regional division, the source of resentment and frustration far beyond is the denial of justice and peace in Palestine," the king said. "We can wait no longer," Abdullah II warned: "The status quo is also pulling the region and the world towards greater danger ... the cycle of crises is spinning faster, and with greater potential for destruction ... Any further erosion in the situation would be serious for the future of moderation and coexistence, in the region and beyond" and "we are all at risk of being victims of further violence resulting from ideologies of terror and hatred." (2)

The Jordanian monarch's message was also that of his Arab counterparts. He met with the Saudi Arabian and Egyptian leaders, King Abdullah and President Hosni Mubarak, ahead of his U.S. visit. What is more important in their warning message is that it is delivered by U.S.-allied friends, whose support is essential to bring other U.S. regional concerns to a successful conclusion. These leaders are now in the regional driving seat.

Their leading role as well as the U.S. paramount position in the region could be compromised by ignoring their warnings and the rare opportunity their initiative offers. Dealing adversely or passively with their peaceful alternative to violent resistance to the Israeli occupation is too risky. Especially the Saudi Arabian leader, King Abdullah, the original author of the API, has invested a lot of his personal weight and his Kingdom's assets to win over Arab consensus on the initiative. He also succeeded in securing Hamas' indirect subscription to it. Riyadh also won over Iran's support, according to the Saudi official news agency, or at least watered down the Iranian opposition.

Abdullah II's appeal seems to have fallen on deaf ears on the Capitol Hill; so far it has created no official forthcoming reaction, thus providing the necessary inaction for Israel to act intransigently and demand practically the upcoming Riyadh summit adopt an Israeli version of the API.

Criticism of the six decade-old U.S. inaction strategy of crisis management was recently eloquently questioned: "Is a comprehensive Middle East peace in America's strategic interests? Put simply, what excuse would the US have for remaining in the region playing policeman if all in the garden were lovely?" (3)

This strategy has all along played into Israeli hands, backed up all Israeli expansionist wars justified by Tel Aviv as pre-emptive, preventive and defensive, but in the end boiled down to being simply aggressive military conquests with two major aims: to grab more Palestinian land for the ongoing colonial Jewish settlement and to maintain Arab land under Israeli occupation as a bargaining chip to blackmail and dictate further Arab concessions. This is

the strategy that has been fuelling anti-Americanism among hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims because literary it has turned the United States into a partner to the Israeli 40-year old occupation.

The latest Israeli par excellence exploitation of this strategy was recently illustrated vis-à-vis the API.

Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, went this month to Brussels then to Washington to reconfirm Israel's rejection of the Arab offer, citing two non-starters: First the stipulated "agreed upon, just" solution of the Palestinian refugees problem on the basis of the UN resolution 194, which is "contrary to the principle of two states," and Second what she described as the Arab "dream" of withdrawing the IOF to their pre-1967 lines. Identifying these two points as "red line" she told AIPAC nonetheless the Saudi plan has "positive elements," but the "original" Saudi plan, not the one adopted by the Arab League!

Livni was drawing on President Bush's letter of guarantees to the comatose former Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, on April 14, 2004, which was condemned by Arab Palestinians as a "second Balfour Declaration" because it pledged U.S. rejection of the Palestinian Right of Return and Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 borders as "unrealistic." Both strategic allies are now blackmailing Arabs to surrender further territorial and political "concessions" accordingly.

The simple interpretation of Livni's objections: Israel is gearing up, backed by the U.S. , towards dividing the occupied Palestinian West Bank between the Jewish settlers whose colonies would be annexed to Israel and the Palestinians who will be left with 42 percent of the West Bank area to test-create a borderless transitional state as a long-term arrangement. Palestinian and Arab consensus condemn this arrangement as a non-starter, which will inevitably pre-empt any viable Palestinian state as envisioned by Bush's two-state "vision."

Obviously Israel is seeking an Israeli version of the API, but "unilaterally giving Israel what it wants is not a solution. It would be wrong for the Arab summit unilaterally to change the 2002 peace plan to meet the Israeli objections," wrote Rami Khouri, the editor of Lebanon 's The Daily Star, summing up a widely held official Arab rejection.

Even U.S.-allied Jordan and Egypt who signed peace treaties with Israel on a bilateral basis are urging a comprehensive approach now and recalling international legitimacy as the proper framework: During his meetings in the U.S. , King Abdullah II "underlined the need to solve the Palestinian issue in accordance with the Arab peace initiative and international legitimacy resolutions." (4)

Changing the API would break up Arab consensus on it, which is its most effective asset that makes the collective peace offer credible and an historic turnabout opportunity.

Arab League Secretary-General, Amr Moussa, warned on record: "Arab peace initiative expressed an Arab consensus and will not be redrafted as demanded by some foreign powers. Watering down" the plan would be "a strategic mistake" that could lead to new bloodshed. "The Arab initiative is not open for review." Similarly GCC secretary-general, Abd Al-Rahman Al-'Atiya, said the Gulf countries were opposed to changes to the API. Syria warned she "absolutely rejected for some hostile fingers to toy, directly or through brokers, with the agenda of the (upcoming) summit so that its decisions would come in harmony with

the Israeli and American interests.”

The Arab diplomatic campaign however has had weight enough to corner Israel into defensive tactics. The Israeli maneuvering between the “original” and the “adopted” API is one tactic; another was Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s statement on Sunday — hours ahead of a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Jerusalem — that Israel “was ready to take seriously” the Arab plan, hoping the upcoming Arab summit would bolster its “positive elements.” Abbas reportedly spent three quarters of their two-hour meeting trying to convince Olmert of the official API.

The wide political spectrum components of Israel’s incumbent cabinet of Olmert will go down into history as the government that has let its people down by manoeuvring to blackmail Arabs into an unattainable better deal than the best deal Israel has ever had and could ever have to realize its sixty-year old dream of being recognized and accepted as an integral part of the Arab and Muslim Middle East. Israeli peaceniks seem too marginal to have any say among the main stream decision-makers where the species of Avigdor Lieberman hold the upper hand on strategic issues.

Israeli leaders used to mock Arab leaders as the masters of missing opportunities. This time, Israel is the party who seems determined to miss a real historic opportunity.

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Notes

- (1) Frida Ghitis, <http://worldpoliticswatch.com> , Oct 10, 2006.
- (2) The Age Online, Oct. 10, 2006. (2) Jordan ’s King Abdullah II, Speech to U.S. Congress, March 7, 2007.
- (3) Linda S. Heard, onlinejournal.com, March 7, 2007.
- (4) (Petra , March 10, 2007.

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