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The Arab Peace Initiative under review

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The Arab League Ministerial Council that convened in Doha Sunday to review the Arab Peace Initiative and reevaluate the peace process concluded without any decisive action. Qatar's Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani maintained that the initiative would "not be on offer for ever." Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas objected saying, "It is not permissible to talk about sidelining the Arab Peace Initiative. It should stay." Abbas went on to warn that withdrawal of the initiative could lead to regional war. From press reports, there is no sign that the ministers undertook an in-depth evaluation of the initiative itself to better understand why it has not been successful, or to consider how to revitalize it.

The initiative, adopted by the League of Arab States in March 2002, was an historic opening that could have made a major contribution toward resolving the Israeli- Palestinian as well as the Israeli-Arab conflicts. When the initiative was put forward, Ariel Sharon was Prime Minister of Israel, and there was no likelihood that the architect of Israel's settlement policy would agree to the withdrawal to the 1967 lines called for by the Arab states. The primary audience for the initiative was not the Israeli government, but the Israeli people. The message to Israelis essentially was: In the context of a comprehensive peace, with your neighbors and the Palestinians, the entire Arab world will "consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended" and "establish normal relations with Israel."

If the initiative had said just that much and nothing more, it would have had a powerful effect on Israeli society and ultimately Israeli politics. Instead, the initiative went on to detail what was expected of Israel in a peace agreement. And when the initiative addressed the Palestinian refugee issue, it called for the "achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194."

This was the deal killer. To Israeli ears, to speak of Resolution 194, then and now, is to speak of the right of return of Palestinian refugees. It conjures up images of millions of Palestinians returning to Israel and turning Jewish-Israelis into a minority. This was not what the Arab states had intended, and it was pointed out that the initiative said the solution was "to be agreed upon" and that everyone knew that Israel would never agree to more than a very minimal return.

Such textual parsing however, made little impact. The image was that the Arab states were demanding a major return of refugees. The tragedy of the initiative is that while Palestinian and Arab leaders seeking to end the conflict understand that only a tiny minority of refugees will ever return to Israel, Palestinian and Arab politics prevents them from saying this openly. This in turn, prevents them from having an impact on the Israeli public and Israeli politics. President Abbas is correct that the initiative must not be withdrawn and should not be allowed to slip away. But how can it be preserved? How can it be revitalized?

The key is to push forward. Rather than speaking enigmatically about Resolution 194, what is needed today is a detailed proposal on refugees that both peoples can accept. While neither the Arab states nor the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) are likely to come forward with a transformative plan, it might be possible for a third party to do so, and for the Arab states and the PLO to say "Yes." Such a plan would have to include substantial financial compensation for the refugees as well as creative new ideas for addressing their needs, symbolic and material. Perhaps the Obama administration will do just that; more likely it will shy away, judging the probability of failure too high. The U.S. president has yet to decide, but it would be a mistake to rely on the Americans.

There is, however, another alternative, one recently proposed in the New York Times by Former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, Former EU High Commissioner Javier Solana, Nobel Prize winner Thomas C. Schelling, and me: The United Nations, if necessary, the U.N. General Assembly, should appoint a special peace commission, headed by a distinguished American, such as Bill Clinton. This commission would go to the region and directly engage, not the governments, but the two peoples. It would collect new ideas, hold hearings, and study public opinion. Its first mission would be to answer the fundamental question: Is there a way to address the core issues of the conflict, including Jerusalem and refugees, which the majorities of both populations would support?

If the commission concludes that there are solutions that could win majority support on both sides, it would proceed to formulate a draft treaty document. This would then be presented to the PLO and the Israeli government as the starting point for the resumption of bilateral negotiations. Assuming that the commission has identified a plan supported by both populations, if either government agrees to use the proposal as the point of reference, the other side will be under enormous pressure from its own public to follow suit.

Although the Arab states are not going to formulate a new peace plan, they could give new life to their offer of normal relations with Israel in exchange for a comprehensive peace, by asking the United Nations to fill in the details. This move could be headed by Egypt. When the Arab Peace Initiative was first issued, Israel rested content in the stability of the Mubarak regime and the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. In that context, though there was never a warm peace, much of what the API offered from Israel's most powerful neighbor was taken for granted. With the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and the election of President Mohamed Morsi, all that has changed. Today the future of Israeli-Egyptian relations is an open question. Imagine the impact if Egypt, governed by the Brotherhood, were to reset the diplomatic agenda by taking the lead in asking the United Nations to develop a peace plan, consistent with the API, that could be accepted by both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

It is now almost 20 years since the Oslo Accords were signed and standard bilateral negotiations have consistently failed. It is time to try a new approach, one that will harness the potential of the Arab Peace Initiative to a process that centers on the Israeli and Palestinian people, rather than their governments.

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