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# Putting the Arab Peace Initiative Into Action

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The fact that more than five years after its publication, the Arab Peace Initiative continues to be a topic of conversation is a testament to its strength. Its recent resurgence presents an opportunity for Arabs, Israelis and Americans alike to breathe new life into the shaky and uncertain Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Yet, like many good ideas, the Initiative will fail or succeed on the skill, energy and determination of those who manage it. Arabs must do more to market it and turn it into a concrete diplomatic and political tool. Israel should grasp the strategic potential it holds to advance its regional and security interests. And a new U.S. administration, as it formulates its approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict – and to the region as a whole – will be well-advised to take a deeper look into how to take advantage of this tool, how to integrate it within its own process design, and how to get the Arab world – or at least, initially, like-minded allies in the region – more engaged in the peace process.

There is little doubt that the Initiative is a significant document. It provides symbolic incentives in the form of Arab and Islamic normalization with Israel, concrete security guarantees, as well as obvious political incentives (the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit a Gulf capital will go down in history.)

If nothing else, it represents a major departure in the Arab nations' articulation of their understanding and definition of the conflict with Israel. It posits the conflict not as an existential one—as was defined in previous Arab League decisions, most notably the "three no's" of the Khartoum summit—that can only be resolved by the destruction of Israel. Instead, it defines it as an issue that is related to the Israeli occupation: once that ends, hostility to and conflict with Israel end with it.

## **Mistakes and misunderstandings**

With the benefit of hindsight, the timing of the Initiative was unfortunate. Coming as it did at the height of violence that marked the beginning of the Intifada, it was overshadowed by reports of terrorist attacks and military incursions. In this context, neither Palestinians nor Israelis were in the mood to entertain peace initiatives as each braced for military confrontation.

The main authors and supporters of the Initiative – Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt – had

exhausted their energy and diplomatic capital in neutralizing spoilers and ensuring that the Initiative was adopted in an acceptable format. They did not have the energy to organize an effective marketing campaign in Israel and the West.

For their part, Israeli officials either dismissed the Initiative or offered myriad reservations. Some might have been based on ideological considerations, but others were clearly based on misunderstandings of the nature of the Initiative.

The biggest substantive misunderstanding that persists in Israel until today revolves around the relation between the substance of the Initiative and the content of any final peace deal between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In particular, Israeli politicians – even those supportive of the Initiative – continue to voice concern about the mention of the 1967 borders as well as the reference to UN General Assembly Resolution 194.

These concerns, while understandable in such a delicate negotiation process, miss the Initiative's point. The Initiative does not aim to dictate the terms of a peace deal. Indeed, even the formulation of the thorny refugee issue – the Initiative talks about a solution “to be agreed upon” – was deliberately fashioned to indicate that the terms of the agreement are for bi-lateral negotiations. Rather than attempting to constrain bilateral negotiations, the Initiative promises a basket of rewards to facilitate the conclusion of bilateral Arab-Israeli peace agreements.

Even with this substantive misunderstanding cleared up, however, the Initiative still raises a couple of important concerns. First are the overly general and vague promises it makes. It talks about normalization and security guarantees, but does not elaborate on the exact nature of these measures. The second concern relates to its "all-or-nothing" nature. As it stands today, the Initiative will only kick in once peace deals are signed. The horizon it offers is too vague and too distant to be of much use in the turbulent day-to-day management of the peace process.

### **Where to go from here?**

For the Initiative to live up to its potential, some steps are still needed. Arab leaders need to explain the Initiative, not only to the general public, but also to policy makers in Israel. The recent advertisements placed by the Palestinian Authority are a good first step to familiarize the general public with the existence and contours of the Initiative. This effort must be sustained and its tools diversified to go beyond name recognition into generating buy-in from the Israeli public. Such an effort can be especially effective as political debate in Israel intensifies in the build up to the February elections. Arab countries must contribute to such a campaign to give it more credibility.

On the policy and process levels, it must be turned from an idea into a plan. Serious policy work aimed at turning the Initiative from a vague goodwill gesture into a politically beneficial tool that is an integral part of the peace process will require governments to outline practical and operational steps.

First, the all-or-nothing approach must be replaced by a gradual, reciprocal process—a roadmap of sorts. Certain degrees of normalization must be linked to benchmarks of progress whether in the negotiations themselves or in the conditions on the ground. Such an approach was hinted at recently – too vaguely and too quietly – by the Arab League when it promised some reciprocity were Israel to institute a settlement freeze. What triggers such reciprocity,

and what concrete steps the Arab world will take in response must be spelled out. Such an approach would create real cumulative incentives for progress, keep the Initiative relevant for the duration of the process, and guarantee a more active and supportive Arab role in the peace process.

The meaning of "normalization" is fairly straightforward, with measures ranging from economic and consular to full diplomatic relations all the way up to the much-coveted photo opportunity between an Israel prime minister and a gathering of Arab leaders.

More important, perhaps, is defining the "security guarantees" that the Initiative promises. Such definition is important not only because of the deep and overriding concern Israel has for security, but also because of how such security guarantees fit within the new strategic map in the Middle East. These guarantees will inevitably focus to a large part on how to handle the long-term issue of Iran, which – whether with or without nuclear capabilities – will continue to be a matter of concern in the region. While such discussions cannot proceed directly until significant progress in the peace process is achieved, a third party – particularly the United States – can start an early process of exploration. Such a process can help the parties gain better understanding of, and comfort with, each others' strategic direction, and will help the United States as it seeks to establish a new security architecture to deal with a new Middle East.

With so many challenges and obstacles in the path of forging Arab-Israeli peace it would be a mistake to fail to avail ourselves of such a potent tool as the Arab Peace Initiative. Yet, for it to be a truly effective tool, all the parties must bring the skill, energy and determination to make it succeed.

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