

Arab Leaders: Peace Making Could Not Be Unilateral, Divisible

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Flanked by international and regional non-Arab dignitaries representing the UN, EU, OIC, NAM and the leaders of Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan as well as the foreign minister of Iran, the leaders of the 22-member League of Arab States on Wednesday re-launched in Riyadh their five-year old Arab Peace Initiative, determined to reactivate it with mechanisms and a follow-up diplomatic campaign that will again take it to the United Nations Security Council despite a U.S. veto, which aborted a similar move in the bud last year.

Confidently, seriously, unwaveringly and collectively Arab leaders are again binding themselves and their countries to their “strategic option” of peace with Israel, offering their Initiative as a realistic, pragmatic, affordable and workable platform that could make a comprehensive regional peace within the reach of the living generations, but unfortunately they are reciprocated by a non-committal Israel and United States who instead are dealing tactically and evasively with an historic opportunity that if missed would plunge the Middle East into an open-ended conflict, to the detriment of all parties involved.

According to the Israeli daily Haaretz on March 18, The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department consider the Arab initiative a forthcoming but non-binding (to them of course) Arab position that accordingly could only be encouraged and not dismissed out of hand to negotiate further Arab concessions.

The 24-member board of trustees of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), co-chaired by former European Commissioner for External Relations, Lord Chris Patten, and former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, warned in a statement ahead of the Riyadh summit that the opportunity is not “open-ended” and the status quo cannot be maintained indefinitely.

“If the current chance for a breakthrough is not grasped over the next few months — with the government of Israel and the U.S. having the most critical role in this respect — there is a real possibility that support for a two-state solution among Palestinians and in the wider Arab world would disappear, with all the renewed tensions this is bound to generate,” their statement warned.

Nine facts should be brought to the attention of the peace-loving world community to understand the counterproductive tactical passive Israeli and U.S. engagement and the credibility of the old-new Arab endeavour:

First, shockingly both allies are rejecting or demanding amendments to the Arab plan, but have no concrete alternative plans of their own to offer except Bush’s “vision” and Israel’s unilateral long-term and transitional plans for the Palestinian - Israeli track of the sixty-year

old conflict, but nothing for settling the collective Arab - Israeli conflict.

"We expect an offer by Israel," Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, said. Ironically when Israel occupied Palestinian and Arab lands in June 1967, late Israeli minister of defence, Moshe Dayan, announced the Israelis were waiting for a phone call from any Arab leader. Forty years later, in defiance of U.N. resolutions, the Israeli army is still occupying and colonizing the lands and oppressing the people, but nonetheless the call is coming collectively by twenty-two Arab leaders.

Second, Israel rejected publicly then undermined the Arab initiative of 2002 in the same year by reoccupying the Palestinian self-ruled areas and Washington the next year steered the Quartet of the U.S., UN, EU and Russia to come up with their own initiative, the "Road Map," which was nonetheless accepted by the Arab states and the PLO, but Israel attached 14 undeclared conditions to her acceptance thereof, which were backed by Bush's letter of guarantees to Ariel Sharon on April 14, 2004, a backing that bought the plan to its demise and the peace process to its current dead end and made it possible for the Arab leaders to consider reactivating the initiative their summit meeting in Beirut approved in 2002. However the U.S. as recently as last year vetoed a similar Arab move to have the UN Security Council adopt their initiative.

Third, revitalizing the Arab initiative comes only after the failure of the Quartet, Israel and the U.S. to deliver on their four year old "Road Map" and the 15-year old Madrid Conference process of 1991, which has proved futile and declared "dead" by the Arab League chief, six years after declaring its death by the comatose former Israeli premier Ariel Sharon.

Fourth, the comprehensive and collective Arab approach to solving the conflict with Israel is building on the dead end the bilateral and step-by-step approaches reached. It is worth noting that the most enthusiastic advocates of the comprehensive approach are Jordan and Egypt, who only with Mauritania were the three members of the Arab League to sign bilateral peace treaties with Israel, because they are the most threatened by the absence of a comprehensive peace and by persistence of the status quo.

Fifth, reactivating the Arab initiative is in itself an indirect declaration of disillusionment with the U.S. sponsorship of the unproductive peace processes that have ruled out involvement by the world community, prevented the implementation of international legitimacy resolutions and for sixty years proved a failed alternative to UN engagement.

Sixth, the Arab Peace Initiative is also building on the international legitimacy of more than 70 resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly and the Security Council during the past 59 years, which were rendered inapplicable by the opposition thereto of Israel and the U.S. who managed to veto thirty more.

Seventh, the new found confidence of the Arab leaders stems from the forgoing facts, the Arab and Palestinian consensus on the initiative, which is backed by the Turkish-led Organization of Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement as well as by the world community, all which also neutralized the Iranian and other opposition to the initiative. "We deal with world powers with understanding but on equal footing," the Saudi Arabian monarch, King Abdullah, said on Monday, confirming the new confidence.

Eighth, the seriousness of Arab leaders stems from the fact that they are the most to loose from the deadlocked no-war-no-peace status quo and that is why a veteran moderate Arab

state like Saudi Arabia is staking her leading Arab and regional role and risking a political rift with her historic U.S. ally.

Ninth, although the two sides are not on a collision course, obviously the Arab Peace Initiative is drifting apart the U.S. and its most trusted Arab friends; however hanging on to her strategic alliance with Israel is alienating more normally friendly moderate and liberal Arabs at a time Washington is decisively in need for their support on other regional involvements.

Under the pressures of the latest Israeli war on Lebanon, the U.S.-led war on Iraq, the brewing U.S. crisis with Iran and the 59-year old U.S.-backed Israeli war on the Palestinian people, the Arab League governments found a diplomatic opening to re-launch their initiative to try on their own this time containing the ensuing possible internal threats and regional turbulence.

Possible Diplomatic Leverage

In view of the absence of an Arab military option due to Israel's overwhelming superiority, a diplomatic option due to the U.S. identification with the Israeli policies, ruling out the people's war though it proved effective wherever the Arab regular forces were absent in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Iraq and the Jordan Valley in 1969, Arab leaders found an opening to balance the U.S.-Israeli alliance by the diplomatic counterweight of a long forthcoming world community as their only remaining option, availing themselves of the U.S. critical need for their support in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and vis-à-vis Iran.

Were the U.S. -Israeli allies to continue passively and tactically evading commitment to the Arab initiative as the only concrete peace offer in the town, the Arab leaders still could prod the alliance to be more forthcoming by highlighting the fact that the cool bilateral peace treaties with Jordan, Egypt and Mauritania are increasingly besieged by popular opposition, proved un-conducive to regional security and stability, let alone being a collateral for the security and peaceful development of their signatory states, and threatened by escalating violence and extremism emanating from their inability to develop into vehicles for a just and lasting regional reconciliation and co-existence as envisioned by their signatories and sponsors. Increasingly also those treaties are threatened by the absence of a comprehensive deal, now made possible by the Arab initiative.

To counterbalance the U.S.-Israeli evasive engagement, Arab leaders could give muscle to their peace offensive, which so far has proved effective enough for the U.S. and Israel not to dismiss it out of hand and not to play down the world consensus on its seriousness and credibility; they could suggest trading those bilateral treaties for their collective initiative as a possible diplomatic leverage to prod both allies to ponder choosing between an all-comprising peace and a comprehensive no peace.

All mainstream Israeli leaders have on record judged those treaties as "strategic assets;" U.S. military, political and financial guarantees for sustaining them is proof enough they are "strategic assets" to the United States too. To secure these assets both allies should be made aware the treaties have to be of similar strategic value for the Arab signatories as well, otherwise why sustaining them!

The precarious regional situation, the snowballing threat of violence and extremism, Arabs standing to loose most of the deadlocked status quo, disillusionment with sixty years of

U.S.-sponsored conflict management, absence of other alternatives, all are reason enough for Arab peace advocates to ponder such an option to bolster their initiative and prod their peace protagonists to be more forthcoming. Peace making in the end could not be but a two way effort.

Tactical U.S. - Israeli Approach

The Arab initiative was endorsed unchanged by the Arab League summit meeting in the Saudi capital Riyadh on March 28-29 amid mainly Israeli demands for amendments thereto and a flurry of diplomatic activity unprecedented in recent years aimed at amending it, despite a denial by the visiting US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

A parade of dignitaries flooded the region. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was preceded by the EU's special envoy Marc Otte, UN envoy, Alvaro de Soto, Belgian Foreign Minister, Karel De Gucht, and Norwegian state secretary, Raymond Johansen. Rice followed. German Chancellor and current EU President, Andrea Merkel, and US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, as is Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, were all expected to join. "I believe this is a moment of gathering dynamism," Ki-moon said in Israel days ahead of the Arab summit.

However, Ki-moon's optimism has yet to be vindicated. Only partially the diplomatic boycott of the Palestinian government was breached, but the economic siege and the financial strangling of the Palestinian Authority remained intact. "Norway announced immediate lifting of embargo and decided to deal with all members of the government and to restore ties," Palestinian Information Minister Mustafa al-Barghouti told the Palestine radio, adding: "France, Spain, Italy and Sweden are following."

With the exception of Norway's Johansen, all visiting dignitaries were representatives of three quarters of the international Quartet of Middle East mediators, whose failure to realise their 2003 Road Map has created the current impasse and whose Road Map plan was floated originally to thwart the 2002 Arab plan. All of them came with one message, which the Quartet affirmed on Thursday night, March 22: The Arab summit has to make the Palestinian government meet its three conditions and "the commitment of the new government in this regard will be measured not only on the basis of its composition and platform, but also its actions."

The Quartet was referring to the Palestinian unity government recently formed on the basis of the Saudi hosted, mediated and sponsored Mecca Accord, which made it possible to form a ruling coalition of the rival movements of Fatah and Hamas as a pre-requisite for both convening the Arab summit and endorsing the Arab Peace Initiative.

Rice came to the region ahead of the Arab summit planning tactically to bypass the Arab diplomatic offensive by suggesting two parallel tracks that were rejected by both Israel and the Arabs: A Palestinian - Israeli negotiations over the final status issues, which was rejected out of hand by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and a meeting of the international Quartet with the Arab quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Jordan plus Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

She floated the idea of "adding an element of active diplomacy" and suggested Arab governments take steps toward conciliation with Israel before an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is complete, and after a meeting with Ki-moon test ballooned the idea of the Quartet + Quartet plus two, as a confidence building down payment to Israel; she was

helped by Olmert, who said he “wouldn’t hesitate” to look at an invitation to such a summit “in a very positive manner.”

Bringing Arab heavyweights like Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to unilaterally normalize relations with Israel beforehand would be indeed a breakthrough, but it would also be a death blow to Arab consensus that could undermine not only the Arab initiative but all peace prospects for the foreseeable future. Egyptian Foreign Minister, Ahmad Abul Gheit, on record refused such a prospect.

Points of Conflict Unresolved

The Palestinian unity government is one of four major obstacles Israel is citing for her rejection of the Arab initiative because this government include Hamas, which is condemned also by the U.S. as a “terrorist” organization. The other three are: The reference in the initiative to the Palestinian Right of Return on the basis of UN resolution 194, full withdrawal of the Israeli occupying forces to June 4, 1967 lines, including eastern Jerusalem , which is the third obstacle. Israel accordingly is demanding corresponding amendments, which is a sure recipe to undermine Arab and Palestinian consensus on the initiative, which is its main asset, as well as any other negotiable initiative as had been the case since 1948.

Rice disappointedly ended her fourth Middle East shuttle in four months without announcing any dramatic breakthrough neither on Israeli-Palestinian track nor on the Arab – Israeli track. Olmert quashed her planned accelerated negotiations with President Mahmoud Abbas on the final status issues, which represent exactly the foregoing Israeli points of conflict with the Arab initiative; on the rock of these same obstacles the Oslo accords grinded into a halt when both sides had to begin the final status talks at the end of the interim self rule in July 1999; the failure to resolve them next year at the trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian summit in Camp David led to the second Palestinian anti-occupation uprising, which in turn led to the following five years of tit-for-tat violence that deadlocked the peace process and brought the Road Map to its demise.

At a March 27 news conference in Jerusalem Rice announced that Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will meet every two weeks, but will not tackle “core issues” like final borders, Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. She had her country’s carte blanche support for Israel to blame for Olmert’s resolve to disappoint her publicly. The United States has given Israel \$51.3 billion in military grants since 1949, most of it after 1974 – more than any other country in the post-1945 era. Israel has also received \$11.2 billion in loans for military equipment, plus \$31 billion in economic grants, not to mention loan guarantees or joint military projects. This open-treasury support has been all along the main leverage for Israeli territorial expansion, demographic cleansing, diplomatic inflexibility and obsession with the military-dictated peace pre-requisites.

Prior to her ongoing reoccupation of the Palestinian autonomy areas in 2002, Israel was in effective control of 85 percent of historic Palestine compared to the 55 percent it is entitled to under the UN resolution 181 (the partition plan); the 1948 war between more than 120.000 WWII-trained Israeli troops and the less than 50.000 combined forces from seven Arab states, then under British and French mandates, ended with the displacement of less than one million Palestinian refugees, whose national and private rights have been at the core of the Arab and Palestinian – Israeli conflict ever since, thus turning by the sword the Arab majority of the UN-sponsored state into a minority. More than 22 percent of Arab citizens of pre-1967 Israel , who mark the Land Day on March 31, have been systemically

dispossessed of their land to own now less than 3 percent of the area of the Hebrew state. In the Israeli occupied West Bank more than 62 colonial settlements, built on Palestinian publicly and privately-owned land since 1967, are now host to more than 450.000 Jewish settlers.

Dispossession and displacement of Arab Palestinians have at least to stop, let alone redressing the historic injustice, to make room for peace making. A Palestinian state on 22 percent of historic Palestine , within the pre-1967 armistice lines of 1948, is only part and not all of the solution. 73 Palestinian groups urged the two-day Arab summit in Riyadh to uphold the Right of Return. Hence the Arab summit's rejection of acquisition of land by force, reiteration of land for peace as the basis of the Arab initiative and refusal to heed the Israeli proposed amendments.

Changing the initiative is virtually impossible in the near future because the rules of the Arab League demand that all decisions be accepted unanimously, Amr Mousa said. "There will be no amendment to the Arab peace initiative," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal also reaffirmed on March 25, adding: "(It) is the best framework for a comprehensive and fair resolution of not only the Palestinian-Israeli problem but the entire Arab-Israeli conflict."

However, the Arab leaders meeting in Riyadh left the door open for Israeli engagement; they decided not to discard the Quartet's Road Map and approved it as one of the terms of reference for peace making in addition to their initiative. Another provision stipulated "reaching a just solution for the problem of Palestinian refugees to be agreed upon in accordance with the Arab peace initiative in implementation of the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations No. 194." Both provisions keep the door open for diplomacy.

For Israel, history for making peace starts in 1967, for Arabs in 1948, and here lies the conflict that has deadlocked the peace process and the efforts of the international community to resolve the Middle East chronic and yet intractable conflict, because the core issues that sparked six major Arab - Israeli wars and could ignite more military confrontations predate the 1967 war, where Israel is seeking to make history stops. Here is the chestnut of the Arab -Israeli conflict, which failed all previous peace efforts and could make or break future similar endeavours. The ball is in the Israeli court.

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