

The Arab Peace Initiative is Back on the Table; Netanyahu Is Not Budging

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Efforts by the Trump Administration to restart the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process have lent a new lease on life to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. While the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority may be willing to tinker again with this initiative on its margins, they are unlikely to alter the document in any major way as it remains the minimum the Arabs will accept in return for peace with, and recognition of, Israel. But this initiative is unlikely to gain traction with the Netanyahu government, which is strongly opposed to Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines and to any compromise over Jerusalem.

As for the United States, the Trump team seems to be hoping that its cultivation of close relations with Sunni Arab governments will pay dividends by persuading these regimes to back something much less expansive than the parameters of the initiative. As it stands now, Israel prefers direct peace with the Arab countries over territorial compromises with the Palestinians. But changing the Arab states' position is unlikely to happen, especially as new bouts of violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank refocus Arab attention negatively on Israel.

The Initiative Remains the Standard Position

In 2002, then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud surprised many in the region and the outside world by proposing a peace initiative with Israel at the Arab Summit meeting in Beirut, Lebanon. Accepted by the 22 members of the Arab League and subsequently dubbed the Arab Peace Initiative, it called for

full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines; a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem based on UN resolution 194; acceptance by Israel of a Palestinian state comprising Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem as its capital; acceptance by the Arab states of the end to the conflict with recognition of Israel and the establishment of normal relations with it; and support by the international community for such an agreement.

After many decades of conflict, this initiative was presented as a potential breakthrough to appeal to Israeli yearning for Arab recognition. It also reflected the Arab conviction that the Palestinians were not going to get back the whole of Palestine. However, the initiative was paralyzed by Israeli rejection and was overshadowed during that year, 2002, by the ongoing and violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Soon after it was adopted, a Hamas suicide bomber killed 29 Israeli civilians in the town of Netanya, and the international community focused on that incident instead of the peace initiative.

Nonetheless, after the violence subsided, the George W. Bush Administration offered positive words about the initiative, but according to Bush's secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, the focus of the administration at the time was Afghanistan and, later, the conflict with Iraq.

To keep the initiative alive, the Arab states reaffirmed their commitment to it several times at summit meetings since 2002. The only tweak

to the initiative was offered by Qatar in 2013—with the support of the so-called Arab Quartet of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—stating that minor land swaps could be accepted by the Arab side, meaning that some small parts of the West Bank could remain with Israel in return for the latter's ceding some Palestinian populated areas of Israeli territory acquired in 1948, presumably land just north of the West Bank, to the Palestinian state.

Israel—then led by later Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—never formally accepted the initiative, even as the basis of negotiations, although some Israeli leaders from the ideological center and left saw it as a positive development.

The Obama Administration's Use of the Initiative

According to 2017 media reports that were not denied by US officials, the Obama Administration, in its last year in office, attempted to use the initiative in a last ditch effort to forge a peace deal. In late February 2016, then Secretary of State John Kerry convened a secret meeting in the Jordanian port city of Aqaba which was attended by Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Kerry reportedly tried to “sweeten” the Arab Peace Initiative for Israel by proposing that the Arabs 1) recognize Israel as a Jewish state (a key Netanyahu demand); 2) recognize Jerusalem as a shared capital for both Israelis and Palestinians; and 3) soften language on the right of return for Palestinian refugees. In

return, Israel would be required to significantly pull out of occupied land.

Reportedly, both the Jordanian monarch and the Egyptian president reacted positively to the proposal, probably because they are leaders of the only two Arab states that have diplomatic relations with Israel and have always felt vulnerable about these ties. If more Arab states were to recognize Israel, especially as part of a comprehensive deal, then Jordanian and Egyptian ties would not be so contentious at home and in the region. However, Netanyahu opposed the deal, reportedly because he was concerned about holding his right-wing coalition together, but this was likely an excuse since he, himself, has always been opposed to making any significant land concessions to the Palestinians. The most he agreed to was face-to-face talks with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, which was effectively a rebuke to Kerry.

The same media reports indicated that Washington did inform the Palestinian Authority, the Gulf Arab states, the Europeans, and the Russians of the Kerry proposals, suggesting that the US side wanted buy-in from these countries, or at least tacit support. But with the Palestinians reportedly concerned about the concessions being offered, perhaps over the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state—which would preclude the Palestinians' right or return—there was, apparently, no explicit support by the Gulf Arabs for these proposals.

Netanyahu Remains Opposed to the Initiative's Chief Points

In other venues, Netanyahu has made comments on the Arab Peace Initiative that correspond roughly to his private rejection of the proposal. In June 2016, he told the Likud ministers in his cabinet, in remarks that were reported in the Israeli press, that if the Arabs “bring the proposal from 2002 and define it as ‘take it or leave it’ – we’ll choose to leave it.” He added that only if the Arab League revises the proposal “according to the changes Israel demands, then we can talk.” He also told the ministers that while he liked the part of the initiative that calls for Arab recognition of and normalization of relations with Israel, he was strongly opposed to the other parts of the initiative, namely Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines and the return of Palestinian refugees.

Some commentators have noted that the initiative actually allows for flexibility on this last point, only referring to UN resolution 194 and not to its full implementation, but this nuance is meaningless for Netanyahu, who rejects even a token right of return for Palestinians. As for Jerusalem, Netanyahu is on record many times rejecting any compromise, stating explicitly that Jerusalem will remain “united” and under full Israeli control.

Trump, the Palestinians, and Resurrection of the Initiative

Since Donald Trump became US president and voiced optimism that he could clinch the “ultimate deal” – meaning the achievement of Israeli-Palestinian peace – the Palestinians have been keen to revive the Arab Peace Initiative

and to prevent any weakening of it. Palestinian officials pushed for and received reaffirmation of the initiative at the Arab Summit in late March 2017 in Jordan. Just prior to the summit, Abbas told the press that the Arab Peace Initiative was the only plan on the table and implied that he wanted a reaffirmation of it before going to Washington, as that would strengthen his hand when meeting Trump.

Although Trump’s initial meeting with Abbas in the White House reportedly went well, his subsequent meeting with Abbas in the West Bank was problematic, according to press reports that were denied by the Palestinian side. Netanyahu had allegedly shown Trump a video of “incitement” by Abbas that Trump then used to confront the Palestinian leader. Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who has been tasked to lead the administration’s efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, also had a tough meeting with Abbas in Ramallah, reportedly over the issue of Palestinian “social services” payments to families of those killed by Israelis. Abbas believed Trump and Kushner were merely carrying Israel’s bidding.

Although Trump later came to believe that Netanyahu attempted to obstruct his meeting with Abbas, he and his aides have not put any pressure on the Israeli leader to make concessions, except for an earlier, mild rebuke at the White House in February, when Trump called on Netanyahu to halt settlements for “a bit.” But Netanyahu has defied this request, as settlement building has gone forward, including the recent approval of 800 new units

in Jewish-populated parts of East Jerusalem and 114 units for Israeli Jews in Arab neighborhoods of the city. Netanyahu probably believes he can get away with such settlement building because Trump is distracted by other issues (such as the Russia probe). Add to that the fact that Trump's closest aides on the Israeli/Palestinian portfolio, Kushner and the new US ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, have been supportive of such settlements.

As for the Arab Peace Initiative, Trump has not made any public comments about it.

An Israeli press report, citing a Palestinian source, claimed that during their West Bank meeting, Trump proposed to Abbas having the Arab states first recognize Israel and only then “a peace process in whose framework a solution to the Palestinian issue will be advanced.” This same report claimed that Trump told Abbas the moderate Arab leaders with whom he had met earlier in Riyadh had voiced support for a “new framework” that Trump was contemplating, and perhaps the sequence of Trump's proposal could work and lead to a Palestinian state. The veracity of this report cannot be confirmed, but if that is indeed the Trump game plan, it is likely to fail. The Arabs are unlikely to give away their main bargaining chip—normalization of relations with Israel—merely for the promise of a peace process. Nonetheless, given Trump's embrace of Netanyahu, Abbas is likely concerned enough that he might indeed lock on to this “outside-in” approach of normalization first and (hoped for) Israeli land withdrawal last.

If Trump and his advisors are counting on the Sunni Arab leaders to come on board with his sequential plan, starting with Arab recognition of Israel, he is mistaken. Although there is reportedly some behind-the-scenes cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel over strategic issues in the region—as is well known, both countries strongly opposed the Iran nuclear deal and remain opposed to Iranian activities in the region—the Saudis have always treated the Arab-Israeli conflict as a separate matter because of religious and nationalist sensitivities. Even the latest friendship between Kushner and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is unlikely to move the Saudis to adopt a position that would essentially be supportive of Netanyahu's stance, especially since the crown prince needs conservative allies in the kingdom if he hopes to become king soon. Still, given the historical ties between Riyadh and Washington and the recent warming of relations between the two, Abbas is probably concerned that the Trump team will be able to lean on the Saudis, the Emiratis, and others to pressure him to sign on to a weakened peace initiative that would curtail Palestinian aspirations.

The Pull of the Jerusalem Issue

Since May 23, much of the Arab world has been gripped by internal discord over the GCC crisis, whereby Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have imposed a boycott against Qatar and tried to isolate it, supposedly because of its relations with Iran and Islamist parties in the region as well as other issues, like its hosting of the Al Jazeera network. In this environment, one might expect that other concerns, like the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, would take a back seat. But as violence in Jerusalem has resurfaced since July 21 – this time over Israel’s temporary closure of the Al-Aqsa mosque and its desire (though since rescinded) to put metal detectors at the entrances to the mosque—the Arab world’s attention has refocused on the Palestinian issue, and the Arab League has declared condemnations of Israel.

The Haram al-Sharif, where the Al-Aqsa mosque is located, is considered the third holiest site in Islam. As in the past, any Israeli action at this site, whether justified or not, touches religious sensitivities and is bound to stoke anti-Israeli sentiments throughout the Arab region. Jerusalem has always been the most intractable issue in the peace process, and efforts by past US diplomats involved in this process have put the status of Jerusalem last on the agenda because it is so fraught with religious and nationalist symbolism and emotions. Except for its recent attempts to dampen tensions in the holy city and backtracking on its position to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Trump team seems to be bereft of ideas on how to solve it.

The Future of the Initiative

So, where does all this leave the Arab Peace Initiative? At the moment, it is in limbo. While the Palestinian Authority has received unanimous Arab support for keeping the

initiative’s provisions intact, it is unlikely to go anywhere as long as Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition partners remain in power. And Trump’s support of both Netanyahu and many leading Sunni Arab leaders is unlikely to break the logjam, especially as the latter are not going to buck public opinion and pressure the Palestinians to adopt a position more to the liking of the Netanyahu government.

At some point in the future, the initiative could potentially become the basis of meaningful and substantive negotiations. If the Israeli polity swings leftward and the Labor Party comes back to power, the parameters of the initiative could be the start of serious negotiations. The issues of Jerusalem and the 1967 lines would still be contentious, but at least they would be under discussion with the hope of a breakthrough. If such talks prove to be constructive, it is indeed possible that the Arab states, in general, would be willing to put normalization of relations with Israel on the table as part of a comprehensive deal. In this type of environment, the Palestinians could be persuaded to modify the most contentious of their demands—like the right of return—as long as there was an adequate compensation package for the refugees and perhaps a return of limited numbers of Palestinians to their old homes. But these are all optimistic scenarios, and the history of the conflict, unfortunately, does not inspire confidence that they would actually materialize any time soon.