



The Saudi Initiative: A Starting Point for an Israeli-Saudi Dialogue?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recently revived Saudi initiative is premised on terms permanently unacceptable to Israel. Nevertheless, given current realities, Israel should not reject the initiative out of hand. Israel should take advantage of the initiative in order to transform it into a real opening for direct yet secret negotiations with Saudi Arabia.

The "Saudi initiative," recently revived and pushed to the forefront of Middle East headlines, is not new. It was first raised in March 2002 by the (then) Heir apparent, today King Abdullah b. Abd al-Aziz, of Saudi Arabia. Shortly thereafter, the Arab League adopted the plan as its pan-Arab initiative for peace in the Middle East.

The plan re-proposed today is similar to the original version; it supposedly offers Israel security and normalization in exchange for full withdrawal from "all occupied Arab territories" including the Golan Heights, the western Slopes of the Hermon mountain range (claimed by Hezbollah as the "Shaba farmlands"), the creation of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and the "return" of Palestinian refugees.

Simply put, these are terms that Israel cannot accept. Given the current regional and internal Israeli political circumstances, however, Israel should not reject the initiative outright. Israel should take advantage of the tentative and problematic initiative in order to transform it into a real opening for direct negotiations with its Arab neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia.

Political Dynamics

Any serious consideration of the Saudi plan must take into account the political dynamics behind the initiative, both in Israel and in Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli leadership is in trouble. The incumbent Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, failed to receive a 3 per cent margin in public approval ratings. He is hungry for a breakthrough in foreign and security relations in the hopes to improve his image. A new process of public peace diplomacy could provide him with the needed momentum.

The Saudi regime, on the other hand, is more self-confident after brokering a shaky ceasefire and a new division of power among the Palestinian factions. For the Saudi royal family, it is once again time to resort to the Saudi traditional *modus operandi*: work in secret behind the scenes and announce your success only after it is reached.

This clash of interests between public and secret diplomacies has resulted in the first Israeli mistake concerning the initiative: Israel should not have approached Washington about changes in the scheme. It should have sought and pursued direct and secret talks outside the Middle East (and away from the media) with authorized representatives of the Saudi Kingdom. In such negotiations, Israel could emphasize its common interests with the Saudis while raising its objection to some of the elements of the plan.

Shared Interests

It is self-evident that Saudi Arabia is motivated by its desire to counteract the potential Iranian nuclear threat. Any new weapon in the Persian Gulf constitutes a major challenge to this pro-American regime which controls about a quarter of the world's proven oil reserves. Israel also shares this concern about Tehran's ambitions. For all intensive purposes, Israel is the lynchpin holding the current Middle East together. Moreover, Israel is still the strongest country among the pro-US countries of the region. Their existence depends to a large degree on the continued existence of a strong Israel.

Dealing with Iran is not the only issue on which Israel and Saudi Arabia have shared interests. Both are trying to avoid the emergence of a radical Shi'ite regime in the wake of the future withdrawal of the coalition forces in Iraq. Creating such a regime not only would enhance Iranian interests in the region but would destabilize the current status-quo among all Middle Eastern countries. The first potential victims of such a new regime would be the smaller countries of the lower Gulf; Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. These countries comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council – a body under strong Saudi influence and a stabilizing pro-US player in that area. Israel stands to lose dramatically if these regimes are hurt in any way since most of them engage in open relations with the Jewish state.

Israeli-Saudi concerns are not limited to the Iranian and Iraqi arenas. Both are dissatisfied with recent Egyptian diplomacy. The failure of the Egyptian efforts to bridge the differences between the Palestinian factions (as opposed to the Saudi success in that field which brought about the creation of the new Palestinian government) has revived Saudi claims for a leadership position among the moderate Arab countries.

Self-assured, quiet and realistic Saudi diplomacy is precisely what Israel needs, especially at a time when Egypt seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Egypt's ability to be a broker in Israel-Arab relations has deteriorated significantly in Israeli eyes. Egypt continues to allow large

quantities of arms to be smuggled from Sinai into Gaza. Just this month, Egypt revived old and dubious allegations about the alleged killing of Egyptian POW's by Israeli troops during the 1967 war. In this atmosphere, Saudi Arabia has gained even more traction as a quiet and reliable partner for Israel.

The Israeli-Saudi meeting of interests does not necessarily mean that Israel should accept the Saudi initiative. It is no accident that Riyadh floated its initiative again at a time of great flux in the Israeli political system and in the aftermath of a war that dangerously eroded Israeli deterrence. Moreover, the "right" of return would gut the very essence of a Jewish and Zionist state by flooding it with refugees. Arab insistence on the "right" of return within the initiative raises significant questions about the sincerity and intentions of its proponents.

And thus, the initiative as it stands now cannot serve as a basis for peace negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. However, it can and must serve as a starting point for a confidential Israeli-Saudi dialogue on ways to advance their common interests in this volatile region.

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