



The Saudi Peace Proposal: Seeking a change to the status quo

A discussion of the opportunities and challenges presented by the Saudi Peace Plan



Under Saudi Arabia's leadership, Arab nations relaunched their blueprint for peace with Israel at the conclusion of a March 28-29, 2007 summit in Riyadh. The Saudi (a.k.a. Arab or Riyadh) proposal, unchanged from the original 2002 Beirut plan¹, directly addresses the formidable final-status issues, and has the backing of all members of the Arab League² except Libya.³

What are the terms and implications of the Saudi peace initiative?

"The Arab peace initiative has been widely misunderstood, and occasionally even deliberately misconstrued," declares Henry Siegman, former senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and past executive head of the American Jewish Congress.⁴ According to Siegman, the Saudi-inspired proposal simply reaffirms what Israel had previously agreed to in the 2003 Quartet⁵ road map: 1) full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights; 2) the location of a capital of a Palestinian state in East Jerusalem; and 3) a resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem.

The Saudi proposal is presented as a starting point for talks. It is not a step-by-step plan. It does not introduce any preconditions. Israel has only to agree in principle with the proposed framework. Then negotiations can begin, leaving the parties themselves to work out the specifics of an agreement that promises Israel normalized, peaceful relations with the 21 Arab signatories attending the Riyadh Summit.

Israel's acceptance of the Arab League peace initiative would not preclude it from protecting its interests in negotiations with the Palestinians. For example, by mutual consent, minor territorial adjustments on both sides of the pre-1967 border could be made to allow Israel to retain established settlements (as discussed at Camp David II.) This would entail no more than about 2 percent of Palestine in exchange for comparable territory on Israel's side of the border. Accordingly, as per the 1967 borders, Israelis would get 78 percent of the land, the Palestinians 22 percent.⁶ Moreover, the location of the capital of Palestine in East Jerusalem could accommodate Israeli sovereignty over the Western Wall, the Old City and Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem.

Regarding the question of resettlement of Palestinian refugees, the Saudi proposal intentionally avoids specifying a specific resolution, although the initiative does cite UN General Assembly Resolution 194. (In accordance with international law (e.g. Article 13(2) of the UDHR, Article 12(4) of the ICCPR), Resolution 194 calls on Israel to allow Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, or be otherwise compensated.) Palestinians also insist that Israel acknowledge a measure of moral responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem in the war of 1948. Israeli historians have established that such responsibility does exist.

Siegman concludes: "There are no grounds for Israel's rejection of the Arab initiative."

Why revive this peace initiative now?

Just before the release of the 2002 Beirut peace initiative, Israel assassinated a Fatah leader in the West Bank, prompting reprisal Palestinian suicide bombings. The timing couldn't have been worse: the Beirut proposal was dead on arrival.⁷

Fast forward five years. How ironical that a series of crises, embarrassing misadventures, and emerging power shifts in the Middle East may finally tempt the antagonists to return to the negotiating table. Five years ago it would have been impossible to foresee Israel's military impotence in Lebanon American incapacity on full display in Iraq; the

rising influence of Iran, Syria and Islamist movements in the Arab world; the unprecedented humanitarian and political breakdown for the Palestinians; and the surprising emergence of the Saudi Arabian leader, King Abdullah, as a diplomatic leader in the region.

The Riyadh peace initiative may be the political life preserver that some are desperately seeking, each for different reasons. A renewed peace effort may be more palatable to somewhat humbled Israeli and US administrations, if not as a real possibility, then at the very least, as a distraction from their recent military blunders and current domestic scandals.⁸ As well, Washington may see the Riyadh initiative as a potential new "axis of moderation" that would deny Iran the opportunity to stir up regional alliances with Syria and Hezbollah against the US and Israel, effectually reframing the political landscape from one of Arabs versus Israelis to a Sunni versus Shiia alignment.⁹ Increasingly alarmed by the failures of the Bush administration, by the rising influence of Iran and Islamist movements, and by fighting between political factions in Palestine, the Saudi leaders must certainly have realized that a bold diplomatic intervention was in their own strategic interests.¹⁰ To those Arab regimes most closely allied with the US, contributing to the relief and possible salvation of the Palestinians is calculated to be seen as strategic to their own domestic political survival. Thus, the cleverly crafted win-win Riyadh plan could help Arab regimes both domestically and diplomatically: if Israel accepts, Arabs will be seen as the peace-seekers; if Israel rejects the offer, it is they who will be seen as the enemies of peace.¹¹

"If we all know what [a political settlement] looks like, then why haven't we been able to get there?"

So asked Condoleezza Rice on her recent shuttle tours of the Middle East. To answer her rhetorical question: "We haven't gotten there because there are elements on all sides of the conflict who don't want to get there."¹²

Israel

Leftist Israeli pundit Uri Avnery asserts that for Israel, every initiative to resolve the conflict passes through three states: denial, misrepresentation, liquidation.¹³ Instead of having its eyes on the prize – comprehensive peace with its Arab neighbours – Israel erects smokescreens to preclude even the start of negotiations. After initially rejecting the Saudi overture outright, the wily Mr. Olmert called for peace talks, but only with "moderate" Arab states.¹⁴ This *offer* was perceived by the Arab states as a manipulative attempt to realize the initiative's offer to normalize relations while side-stepping the initiative's demands. When that tactic failed, Olmert cited the presence of Hamas in the Palestinian government as a justification for absence from the negotiating table. The subsequent maneuver was to link negotiations to the return of the Israeli soldier seized by Hamas in June, 2006. Setting conditions for talks is a frequent Israeli stratagem for escaping talks altogether.

The Palestinian refugee problem has historically been a difficult sticking point. Seizing on this issue, Olmert was clearly playing to his rightist constituency when he stated that a refugee return is "out of the question."¹⁵ More intransigent than many other Israeli politicians on this point, he absolutely refused to "accept any kind of responsibility for [Israel's] creation of this problem."¹⁶ Either Mr. Olmert's recollection of the precedents set at recent past peace negotiations is faulty or he is now renegeing on the promises of his predecessors.¹⁷

It is important to understand, however, that peace negotiations for Israel are first and foremost about real estate.¹⁸ Confident of continued US backing, the Israeli right-wing is loathe to give up its plans of annexing its illegal colonies, proceeding with the construction of its Wall, or surrendering an inch of the illegally annexed East Jerusalem.¹⁹ Ultimately, many analysts believe that Israel's emphasis on the issue of the resettlement of Palestinian refugees is intended to distract from its deeper reluctance to consider territorial concessions.

US

Given the circumstances of its intervention in Iraq, the Bush administration has lost much of the moral authority it may once have had in the Middle East. Preoccupied with the war in Iraq and the war of words with Iran and Syria, the Saudi initiative has not been a high priority. Some analysts suggest the US sees the Saudi peace proposal primarily as a vehicle to further its own agenda: to distract attention from the economic embargo against the Palestinians despite the new unity government; to try to bolster Olmert's tenuous hold on power; and to seek support from friendly Arab governments to counter Iran and Syria's emerging power and influence in the region.²⁰ Some

analysts have also questioned whether the US would be comfortable with a stable, peaceful Middle East, as it would be difficult for it to justify a military presence in the region: “What excuse would the US have for remaining in the region playing policeman if all in the garden were lovely?”²¹ Not wishing to be sidelined by the Saudi initiative, Bush’s own recent 11th-hour benchmark-based approach is fated to be an exercise with offers too-little, too-late.^{22 23}

Hamas/Fatah Unity Government

Under a February 8, 2007 agreement, a Palestinian government of national Unity was formed by Hamas and Fatah.²⁴ However, the government’s failure to *explicitly* endorse two of the three basic peace principles set down by the Middle East Quartet -- namely recognition of Israel, and renunciation of violent resistance -- would likely become an issue if Israel were to engage with the Saudi Plan.²⁵ Hamas has, however, recognized an Israel based on 1967 borders implicitly in a number of ways, beginning even years before its ascendance to government in 2006. Officially, Hamas has adopted a policy of “ambiguity” -- a promise to go along with the Saudi initiative while maintaining its position of not *explicitly* recognizing Israel.²⁶

Given their historic enmity, the shaky agreement between Fatah and Hamas may not survive very long, especially given the ongoing skirmishes between the armed wings of each faction. The worst case scenario -- a breakdown of the alliance followed by the outbreak of civil war in Palestine -- would be catastrophic for the entire region.²⁷ It wouldn’t take much to spark an inferno. A top-ranked member of Hamas said he expects a new intifada (uprising) -- “What does the world expect from the Palestinian people if the current conditions continue, if the economic siege continues, even after we formed the national unity government?”²⁸ While the West would like for Hamas to disappear, few would suggest that a civil war in Palestine -- exacerbated by international sanctions -- is in anyone’s interest. Indeed, it would simply become another locus of instability in a volatile region.

Of course, the debate on the Saudi Plan is not merely philosophical, as frequent violence on both sides continues to maim and claim innocent lives. In early May, Israel made an unprovoked attack, resulting in the deaths of nine Palestinians, including an innocent 17-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy. And Hamas’ rocket attacks out of Gaza continue, prompting Israel to respond with highly excessive force (e.g. helicopter gunships in some cases) in civilian areas. Many observers can relate to the recent headline caption in *Haaretz* which read: “What cease-fire?”²⁹

Thus, while expectations are low, the bi-weekly *discussion* meetings that Condoleezza Rice was able to set up (partly as a result of discussions on the Saudi initiative) between PA President Abbas and struggling Israeli Prime Minister Olmert should be encouraged.

Saudi Arabia

While few observers would dispute that Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah is making 2007 “the year of Saudi diplomacy in the Middle East,”³⁰ some give little hope to the renewed peace initiative. The Saudis are trying to persuade Washington of their importance and of their efforts to bring stability to the region, while simultaneously attempting to convince Arabs that they are distancing themselves from Washington.³¹ Of course, the Saudis have their own reasons for promoting stability: the current unrest in both Lebanon and Iraq could enable Iran to wield undue influence in these nations. The Saudis and the rest of the “Arab Quartet” (i.e. Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Jordan) are not anxious to see a shift in the balance of power in the Middle East.

What is the Canadian government’s involvement in and response to the Saudi peace initiative?

In addressing this question, it is instructive to compare Ottawa and Oslo’s involvement in and response to the Saudi peace initiative. Although small in size (est. pop. 4,628,000), Norway is disproportionately influential in Middle Eastern politics. Norway’s foreign minister was asked to give a speech at the March 2007 Arab League Summit meeting in Riyadh³² whereas Canada’s Foreign Minister was not even invited. The Norwegian government promptly posted to its website a transcript of its foreign minister’s address to the Summit delegates, in which he warmly applauded their “important and highly relevant political initiatives” and, as well, their contribution to the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government. In contrast, there are no references to the Saudi peace

initiative or the Unity Government on the Canadian government's website.³³ In his speech, Oslo's minister expressed his "solidarity with the people of the Arab world in their quest for freedom, opportunity and development", referring to his country "as a friend from the High North."³⁴ The Harper government's failure to extend the same gestures of solidarity and friendship from this continent's High North may be disappointing for many Canadians. The Norwegian minister expressed his government's support "to Palestinian leaders from *all* factions" in the National Unity Government, *encouraging* them to bridge any differences that may arise between them.³⁵

Canadian officials have offered no words of support or assistance to the coalition government, and refused to meet with the new Palestinian Minister of Information, Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, an independent minister who is known for his humanitarian rights activism who visited Ottawa in April. The Canadian government also continues to apply conditions to its relationship with the Palestinian Authority that it does not apply in its relationship with Israel. By comparison, Norway's minister pledged his country's readiness to work with the Unity government, to resume its economic cooperation and to encourage other nations to do the same. Norway boldly holds both Israel and Palestine equally to account for adhering to international law in a responsible pursuit of peace. Norway also reminded Hamas – as a political party – that it has expectations for it too. In sharp contrast, the Harper government establishes an "Israel Allies Caucus" calculated to mobilize support for Israel.³⁶

Norway is one of the few countries that has ignored the Israeli-American-European-led boycott of the Palestinian unity government. Oslo firmly believes that the sanctions directly undermine the Saudi peace initiative, incite radicals and silence moderates. Norway asserts that militant groups such as Hamas are more likely to evolve politically through humanitarian support and fair and balanced diplomatic urging than through heavy-handed confrontation and crippling injunctions.³⁷ Despite the urging of non-aligned organizations such as the United Church of Canada, the Harper government refuses to lift its boycott.³⁸

Are there any signs of hope for the Saudi proposal?

The road to Israeli-Palestinian peace is agonizingly long, slow and torturous. Nevertheless, there are signs of incremental progress towards a final status agreement. Compare, for example, "the three no's of Khartoum" pledged by eight Arab leaders at the conclusion of the Six Day War in 1967 -- no peace, no recognition, no negotiations -- with the three yes's of Riyadh -- yes peace, yes recognition, yes negotiations.³⁹ The Saudi initiative builds on earlier successes such as the 1979 peace with Egypt, the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan, and the 1993 Oslo Accords.⁴⁰ Similarly, Israel has been inching, in successive peace discussions, towards acceptance of moral responsibility for the plight of Palestinian refugees, resettlement inside or outside a future Palestinian state, and some form of compensation.⁴¹ By now Israelis and Palestinians are intimately familiar with the likely terms of a final-status agreement, having debated them at length in previous negotiations (e.g. Camp David II.)

There are also signs of hope from those outside the current political framework of Israel and Palestine. In anticipation of the Saudi peace initiative, more than 100 current and former politicians, and influential intellectual leaders on both sides of the conflict praised the proposal for "[providing] all interested and concerned parties with a comprehensive solution process in order to solve all the aspects of the Middle East conflict."⁴² Norway has demonstrated that all countries can play a vital role in the process by encouraging, assisting, prodding, and even admonishing the parties when they act illegally, irresponsibly or immorally.

Journalist Rami Khouri asks: "Why not adopt Norwegian pragmatism?" Why not, indeed. The world waits expectantly for another step forward on the Middle East path to peace.

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- ⁵ The US undertook the roadmap as a joint US and European initiative. Representatives from the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia formed a group known as the "The Quartet", <http://www.mideastweb.org/quartetrm3.htm> (accessed May 10, 2007).
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