

From Three No's to Three Yes's

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After the 1967 war the Arab world adopted the famous "Three No's". At a summit that took place at Khartoum in Sudan, the heads of the Arab states decided that the diplomatic efforts to regain the conquered territories would be based on three principles: No (direct) negotiations with Israel, no recognition of this country, and no peace agreement with it. Since then, the Foreign Ministry and other agents of the collective memory, have started a propaganda (or *Hasbara* according to Israel) campaign to reveal the "true face" behind the Arab position of refusal.

In March 2002, thirty five years later, the Arab summit conference in Beirut replaced the "three no's" with "three yes's": Yes to direct diplomatic negotiations with Israel, yes to recognition of the state of Israel and yes to establishing "normal relations" after signing a peace agreement with the country. All of this was offered in exchange for Israel withdrawing from the territories occupied in 1967, establishing a Palestinian state in the area of the West bank, the Gaza strip and Jerusalem, and offering a just solution to the problem of the Palestinian refugees, "which [both sides] will agree on according to UN resolution 194".⁵⁴ It is important to emphasize that the Arab peace plan was also accepted at the Islamic Summit which took place that month in Senegal (including Iran led by Khatami). However, unlike the 1967 resolutions at Khartoum, this time there was no publicity campaign to instill the change in the Arab stance among the Israeli public. Therefore, the Israeli position on the stance reflects a combination of ignorance, half-truths and one-sided interpretations which leads to – intentionally or unintentionally – apathy on the part of the decision makers and society as whole to a significant Arab step.

What is the reason behind the Israeli apathy, and how can this change be absorbed by the public? These are the two main questions which were raised at a discussion conducted by a British think tank, the Oxford Research Group, which included Israeli, Arab and Western representatives. On the Arab side,

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⁵⁴ Regarding the wording of the peace agreement and some articles that deal with the different aspects of it see: Kobi Michael, ed., *Yozmat Haliga Ha'aravit Ha'omnam Hizdamnut Historit? Reka, Mashma'uyot Vekivuneit Pe'ula Efshariyim* (Was the Arab League Initiative Really a Historic Opportunity? Background, Meanings, and Possible Courses of Action) (Jerusalem: Jerusalem institute for Israel Studies, 2007, in Hebrew). Unfortunately, the Hebrew wording in paragraph 1b does not match the English version.

Turkī al-Fayṣal, the former head of Saudi intelligence, Nabīl al-Fahmī, until recently the Egyptian ambassador to the US, Hishām Yūsef, the office director of the secretary-general of the League of Arab States, 'Amr Musa, and Jibrīl Rajūb from the Palestinian Authority stood out in particular. At the same time it seems as though recently there was a diplomatic awakening: Shimon Peres, president of the state of Israel, is particularly active in promoting the plan. This is seen in his talks with the president of Egypt, Husnī Mubārak, and the diplomatic contacts he recently made in England and other places. In addition, large ads have been advertised in Israeli and Palestinian newspapers, which list the main points of the peace plan.⁵⁵

The renewed discussion of the Arab Peace plan is not coincidental; it is a result of three developments. The first was the end of President George W. Bush's terms and the election of a new president – democrat Barack Obama – who is not committed to his predecessor's policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute. When the new president entered the White House it was an opportunity to place the Arab Peace plan on his diplomatic agenda as a possible basis for future negotiations.⁵⁶ The second was the reinforcement of the estimate that the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track was at a dead end. This is both because of the complexity of the issues discussed and fundamental differences of opinion between the *Fatah* in the West Bank and the *Hamas* in the Gaza strip regarding the policy to adopt in negotiations with Israel. Finally, there is the perception that in the interim period until the elections in Israel it will be possible to establish a diplomatic foundation which can aid the new government, even if it is a right wing government.

However, beyond these pragmatic considerations, lies the basic assumption lying at the heart of the support of the Arab peace plan: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just a bilateral one – it is interwoven with other regional disputes. Bilateral quarrels can be solved, apparently, through negotiations and dialogue with the two sides involved in the conflict. But, it is rare for disputes to be merely bilateral; in fact, many of these quarrels involve other factors, which are active in parallel scenes of conflict. These affect the bilateral dispute in various ways and are also affected by it. Based on the research of Louis Kriesberg, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov coined the term "interlocking conflicts" which are defined as the "simultaneous existence of different conflicts which on the one hand, affect the development of the conflict, and on the other hand, affect the dynamics of the interactions

⁵⁵ See for example a large ad of the council for peace and security labeled: "Yozmat Hashalom Ha'aravit: Mahapach Begishat Medinot Arav" (The Arab Peace Initiative: a reversal in the Attitude of the Arab States), *Ha'aretz*, November 25, 2008. A few days earlier an advertisement detailing the main points of the plan, funded, according to certain reports, by the PLO was published, *Ibid*, November 20, 2008.

⁵⁶ See the headline: "Peres: Obama ' Mitrashem Me'od' Mehayozma Ha'Saudit" (Peres: Obama is 'Very Impressed' by the Saudi Initiative'), *Ha'aretz*, November 19, 2008

between the other conflicts".⁵⁷ This assumption on the existence of interlocking conflicts has far reaching consequences regarding the possibilities of a solution for any specific bilateral conflict. This means that any attempt to solve this dispute has to take into account – and perhaps even solve – other regional quarrels, which influence the current conflict which is being dealt with. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is part of a larger set of interlocking conflicts then Israel has to find a way to create a dialogue with the other regional players to solve the issues on the bilateral Palestinian track. In other words, Israel needs to "involve the Arabs" in the dispute with the Palestinians. This involvement is not derived from the view that the Palestinians are "rebellious children" who need their big responsible "dad" to get involved, but rather a structural result of the inter-Arab system.

A diplomatic Israeli-overall Arab move, which is based on the Arab peace plan, has a number of advantages. First, such a move harnesses Saudi Arabia and its symbolic influence among the Arab States and Islam to the conflict. Until now Saudi Arabia has only displayed a reluctant leadership. On the one hand, the country initiates diplomatic moves and mediates the main disputes in the Arab world (such as Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine), but on the other hand, it does not apply its full weight to take it away all the way to the end.⁵⁸ The peace plan is an opportunity to involve the kingdom in a more binding way with the peace process. Second, promoting the Arab plan opens a combined multi-channel move where progress on a particular bilateral track can have a positive effect on the progress of other bilateral tracks, such as the Palestinian or the Lebanese. Third it allows the involvement of the Arab States in regional issues, such as the question of Jerusalem and the refugees. These two issues are inherently more than just Palestinian: Jerusalem involves Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and other Islamic elements, while the refugees are important to all the Arab states who host Palestinian refugees in their territories, particularly in states where their citizenship status remains unresolved. Fourth, it allows for regimes suffering from legitimacy issues, such as the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon and

⁵⁷ Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "Interlocking Conflicts in the Middle East: Structural Dimensions", in: Hans-Jorg Albrecht, Jan-Michael Simon, Hassan Rezaei, Holger-C. Rohne and Ernesto Kiza, eds., *Conflicts and Conflict Resolution in Middle Eastern Societies - Between Tradition and Modernity* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2006), p. 215; Louis Kriesberg, "Interlocking Conflicts in the Middle East", *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, Vol. 3 (1980), pp. 99-118.

⁵⁸ In this context see: Elie Podeh, *From Fahd to 'Abdallah: The Origins of the Saudi Peace Initiatives and Their Impact on the Arab System and Israel*, Gitelson Peace Publications 24 (Jerusalem: The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, July 2003); Yosef Kostiner, *Hashalom Hashuli – Yahaso shel Hamifrats Haparsi/Aravi el Yisrael ve'el Tahalikh Hashalom* (The Marginal Peace – The Attitude of the Persian/Arab Gulf states' towards Israel and the Peace Process) (TA: The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2008, in Hebrew), pp. 65-74.

maybe even Syria to benefit from overall Arab legitimacy, which will allow them to better handle opposition factors, for example, *Hamas* in the Palestinian arena and *Hizballah* in the Lebanese one. Finally the start of an overall-regional move will shift the balance of power in favor of factions striving for achieving stability and a new Israeli-Arab diplomatic order in their struggle against the radical elements led by Iran.

There are many in the Arab world who have expressed disappointment – rightfully so – in the lukewarm Israeli response, especially after the plan was formulated in an attempt to take Israeli sensibilities into account. Thus, for example it was determined that the solution for the refugee problem needs to be "agreed", while the question of the settlements – a stumbling stone in every negotiation – is not mentioned at all. The fact that Israel so far has not taken up the gauntlet weakens the moderate voices in the Arab world and strengthens those who claim that Israel only understands force (an ironic opposite of the traditional Israeli stance on Arabs). Although, there have been some changes in Israel's stance since the plan was released in 2002, such as the positive statements issued in the past by Peres, Olmert, Livni, Shitrit and others, still the Israeli government never issued an official declaration that agrees with, supports or even recognizes the Arab peace plan. Such a statement could be the opening shot for a regional diplomatic move, supported by the US and the EU, which would lead to the simultaneous opening of channels of communication with Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians. I have suggested in the past that a regional committee initiated by or in cooperation with the Arab league should be assembled. The committee would help advance the negotiations on these channels. This would lead to the fulfillment of the multi-bilateral approach, which combines the bilateral approach with the multilateral one.⁵⁹

A sober and balanced analysis of the Arab initiative reveals that it expresses an important change in the Arab approach towards Israel. The suspicion Israel holds towards this change can perhaps be understood; however, it is misplaced.⁶⁰ Whoever views the end of the Israeli-Arab dispute as a strategic goal, which will aid Israel economically, demographically and add to its security should promote the initiative so that it can become an effective tool in advancing the diplomatic dialogue. During the long years of

⁵⁹ For a detailed explanation of this approach and its advantages, see: Eli Podeh, "Arba'a Arutsim Bo Zemanit" (Four channels, simultaneously), *Ha'aretz*, June 16, 2007; "Bizechut Hagisha Harav-du-Tsedadit" (Thanks to the Multi-Bilateral approach) in Michael, *Yozmat Haliga Ha'aravit* (The Arab League initiative), pp. 75-80; Elie Podeh, "Bush's International Farewell Party," *Bitterlemons*, Ed. 31, August 20, 2007, in: <http://www.bitterlemons.org/previous/bl200807ed31.html#isr2>; See also the final draft of the report: http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers.api.php

⁶⁰ For a typical example of mistrust and suspicion see Amos Carmel, "Hayozma Hatroyanit" (The Trojan initiative), *Yediot Acharonot*, 25.11.2008.

Sharqiyya

conflict there were more than a few historical misses in achieving a diplomatic arrangement: some were Israel's fault and some were the Arab States' and the Palestinians'. It has been more than six years since the Arab peace plan was first announced, it may also end up becoming another historical miss, but the responsibility for missing it this time will be Israel's alone.

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