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A Pebble in the Peace Pond

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WHEN MAHMUD ABBAS'S Palestinian Authority took out full-page Hebrew-language ads in four major Israeli newspapers in late November, bemused Israelis asked themselves why, and why now?

Encased by the flags of 57 Arab and Islamic states, the ads presented the text of the peace initiative adopted by the Arab League's 2002 Beirut summit conference, and proclaimed that its adoption would result in diplomatic ties and normal relations with the entire Arab and Muslim world.

They constituted an unprecedented attempt to persuade a highly skeptical Israeli public, numbed by years of violent confrontation, that its long-held belief that it had no partner for peace was unjustified. Implicitly, the ads also sent a similar "peace is doable" message to Abbas's divided Palestinian constituency, his Arab patrons and the incoming Obama Administration.

For each of its four target audiences, the timing of the ads was key: the Israelis are about to elect a new government; in the Palestinian arena, the Hamas-PA conflict is coming to a head; the Egyptians and Saudi Arabians are increasingly concerned by their inability to lead the Arab world in the face of the Iranian threat; and U.S. President-elect Barack Obama is expected to launch a vigorous drive for Middle East peace soon after his inauguration.

For Abbas and his supporters, the last two years have been extraordinarily difficult, marked by Hamas's victory in parliamentary elections and subsequent violent seizure of exclusive control of the Gaza Strip, undermining Abbas's authority and legitimacy as PA president, and limiting his realm to the West Bank. Indeed, the very future of the Palestinian Authority is now in doubt: Abbas's term is due to end on January 9, and Hamas is showing no inclination to agree to its extension.

Moreover, Hamas's entrenchment in Gaza is such that it has been able to rebuff Egypt's efforts to broker a reconciliation with Fatah and a parallel agreement with Israel. By highlighting the Arab peace initiative to the Israeli public, Abbas hoped to create a dynamic that, *inter alia*, would ultimately weaken Hamas.

First and foremost, the ads were meant to confirm to the Israeli public the seriousness of Abbas's year-long quiet negotiations with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and so impact upon the February 10 Israeli elections. Beyond that, a formal, positive Israeli response to the Arab Initiative would give Abbas something concrete to show to his own highly jaded public, and thus better enable him to compete with Hamas.

Abbas also needs wider Arab support, and here too his timing is propitious. Egyptian officials are perturbed by Hamas's recalcitrance, which reflects negatively on Egypt's regional leadership. Saudi Arabia, the original author of the Arab initiative, has



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taken a lower profile in Palestinian affairs since the Hamas-Fatah agreement, which it brokered in 2007, fell apart. Nonetheless, Riyadh, like Cairo, is interested in a renewal of the Arab-Israeli peace process. This would help check Iran's growing influence, not only in the Gulf but also in the Levant, and bolster the Saudi image in the West.

Ironically, as the Arab initiative becomes an increasingly legitimate component of international efforts

designed to advance the peace process, Egypt and Saudi Arabia find themselves with little in the way of leverage. This is epitomized by Syria's continued alliance with Iran and support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, placing it in a posture contrary to the Egyptian and Saudi-led pro-Western pragmatic camp. Putting the Arab Initiative firmly on the agenda now could also help Syria put its best foot forward, in the hope that the Obama Administration will make Arab-Israeli diplomacy a much higher priority than its predecessor did.

That hope is not unreasonable. Despite the obvious priority for Obama of other more pressing issues, his policies will likely be guided by a belief that the Bush Administrations excessively neglected the Arab-Israeli conflict to everyone's detriment. A special envoy is likely to be appointed to ensure a higher degree of American engagement in which the Arab Peace Plan could play a role.

Still, the plan as it stands has substantial limitations. Although the collective Arab position, embodied in the 2002 initiative, is light years from the August 1967 "Three Nos" of Khartoum, the plan is hardly a substitute for actual negotiations. And for all of its positive aspects, the proposed resolution of the refugee issue, the core of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is highly problematic for Israel. One may argue that there is very little daylight between achieving a "just solution... agreed on in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194," as the Plan proposes, and insisting on the Palestinians' "right of return," which, in the Palestinian view, is embodied in that very resolution.

Moreover, the Arab plan also forcefully rejects "all forms of patriation" (*tawtin*) of Palestinian refugees in Arab host countries, making the achievement of an agreed-on solution even more difficult to envisage. And, on this key issue, the text as published in the Hebrew press is somewhat misleading. *Tawtin* is translated in the ads as *izruach* ("naturalization;" *tajannus*, in Arabic), a significantly softer term than the more accurate "resettlement," and less reflective of both the content and the context of the Beirut summit resolutions – that Palestinian refugeehood cannot be dissolved in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan or even the West Bank and Gaza but only by ensuring the "right of return" to what is now Israel proper, as emphasized elsewhere in the summit's final statement.

While we should avoid excessive hairsplitting, it's unfortunate that those seeking to win the confidence of the Israeli public fudged the meaning of the text on such a crucial point. ●