

Arabs vs. the Abdullah Plan

by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

The 2002 Arab peace initiative, commonly referred to as the “Abdullah plan” after its chief author, then-Saudi crown prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, constitutes the most significant and explicit collective Arab declaration in favor of a peaceful, mutually agreed-on resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict ever made. By adopting the plan at the March 2002 League of Arab States’s Beirut summit and reaffirming it in Riyadh in 2007, the collective Arab position towards the conflict has been modified in the direction of a more explicit recognition of Israel. Notwithstanding the ambiguities of the declaration, especially on the issue of Palestinian refugees, a shift is discernable. From complete rejection (the “Three Nos” of the 1967 Khartoum summit) to qualified acceptance (the 1982 Fez summit) to the current expressed willingness to declare an end to the conflict and establish normal relations with Israel, the Arab states have moved to an officially proclaimed acceptance of the reality of a Jewish state in the region. Attaining a proper understanding of the initiative, however, requires an examination of the larger contexts in which it was forged.

ARAB DECISION-MAKING

To understand the underlying inter-Arab context of the initiative, one should begin by taking note of an enduring feature of collective Arab decision-making: seeking consensual resolutions, which necessitate finding the lowest common denominator. The need for consensus is even embodied in the Arab League’s founding charter of 1945: Article VII states that decisions taken by the league that are made on the basis of a simply majority vote are binding only on those states that voted for them.¹ In other

words, the sovereign rights of individual member states are privileged over the Arab collective. In order for resolutions to carry real weight then, they must have the approval of most, if not all members, and certainly that of pivotal countries.

From the league’s inception, Egypt actively sought and usually attained the role of first among equal Arab states. The post-June 1967 Arab system was generally led by a loose coalition of states, centering on the so-called Egyptian-Saudi-Syrian triangle.² One peak of cooperation among these three states was the October 1973 Yom Kippur war. Another was the 1991 Kuwait war and the postwar Madrid conference promoting Arab-Israeli peace.³ This did not

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman is the Marcia Israel Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. A Hebrew-language version of this article will appear in a volume on the Arab peace initiative, edited by Ephraim Lavie and published by Tel Aviv University.

1 “Pact of the League of Arab States,” Cairo, Mar. 22, 1945.

2 Avraham Sela, *The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 97-340.

3 Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), pp. 68, 73-5, 77-81.

mean, of course, that the three countries were like-minded on most issues: For example, Syria's strategic ties with post-1979 Iran and its actions in Lebanon continue to be sources of tension with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Moreover, after the 1991 Gulf war the collective leadership of the Arab system did not build on their cooperative efforts in restoring Kuwait's independence and containing Saddam Hussein. Individually and

Syria, together with Lebanon, would pose the largest obstacle to fashioning an Arab consensus behind an effective initiative.

collectively, Arab states increasingly appeared both to themselves and the outside world as being adrift, weaker than their non-Arab Middle East neighbors (Turkey, Iran, and Israel), and lacking a common vision and the means to advance Arab interests, however defined.⁴ The much-heralded Dam-

ascus declaration of March 1991 issued by Egypt, Syria, and the six Gulf Cooperation Council states was an effort to translate their wartime alliance against Saddam Hussein into a durable regional security and economic cooperation structure. However, within months, it became clear that it would not take root, as the Gulf states withdrew their support for the stationing of Egyptian and Syrian forces in the Persian Gulf.⁵ In the Arab-Israeli sphere, the expressed desire for a "just and comprehensive solution"⁶ was not translated into mutual solidarity and support during peace negotiations. Indeed, the absence of Arab backing for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the July 2000 Camp David talks was striking and may have contributed to their failure, setting the stage

for the second Palestinian *intifada* just two and a half months later.

Responding to the steady images of Palestinian victims streaming across Arab satellite television networks, Arab states convened an emergency summit in Cairo in October 2000. The result was that a number of states—Morocco, Tunisia, Oman, and Qatar—shut down most, if not all, of their low-level diplomatic or commercial links with Israel. Despite these steps, their accompanying harsh condemnations of Israeli "war crimes," their calls for international intervention and sanctions (repeated at the March 2001 Amman Arab summit), and periodic entreaties to Washington by Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian leaders, no changes on the ground occurred, reinforcing the image of Arab governments as enfeebled in the eyes of their own populations.

Then came the World Trade Center bombings of September 11, 2001. With most of its perpetrators having originated in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi image in the United States—and that of Arabs and Muslims in general—sank to an unprecedented low. With Washington now re-prioritizing its foreign policy to strike back at radical Islamic terrorists, longtime allied Arab governments were now viewed in Washington through a new, more critical lens. Not only were they blamed for not doing their share in advancing the peace process and in ending the latest round of Palestinian-Israeli violence, they were also deemed to having been insufficiently attentive, at best, to the dangerous Islamist currents spawned in their midst.

GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE

It was against this background that the idea of a new Arab diplomatic initiative began to percolate. It appeared to be a strategic approach that would bolster the tarnished Arab image in the West, place the onus on Israel for the continued violence, and, if possible, restart the diplomatic process on terms more favorable to Arab interests. The Arab initiative was initially introduced to the world by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in February 2002.⁷

4 Paul Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints," in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 67-165.

5 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Joseph Kostiner, "The Damascus Declaration: An Arab Attempt at Regional Security," in Efraim Inbar, ed. *Security Regimes: Israel and Its Neighbors* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 107-25.

6 *The New York Times*, Mar. 12, 1991.

Friedman announced a proposal by Saudi Arabia's crown prince Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz to convene a summit conference with all twenty-two Arab League members that would advocate a "full [Israeli] withdrawal from all the occupied territories, in accord with U.N. resolutions, including in Jerusalem, for full normalization of relations." According to Jordanian foreign minister Marwan al-Muasher, the idea had actually been first floated in private some months earlier: Jordan's King Abdullah II had written a letter to U.S. president George W. Bush on September 8, 2001, declaring that the incremental approach

to peacemaking had hit a dead end and proposing a comprehensive peace involving security guarantees for Israel from all Arab states. In doing so, Abdullah II was reviving an approach that had been put forward in 1998 by his father, the late King Hussein. The following day, Muasher met with Egypt's and Saudi Arabia's ambassadors to the United States to coordinate positions, ahead of the Jordanian king's scheduled meeting with Bush on September 20, at which he intended to push his idea. However, the 9/11 attacks altered the entire content of the meeting, which was pushed back to September 28.⁸

The Jordanian leadership felt from the very

Saudi Arabia's crown prince Abdullah (left) is greeted on his arrival at Beirut International airport by Lebanese president Emile Lahoud before the Arab summit, March 26, 2002. A joint statement released by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and President Lahoud at an earlier meeting opposed Abdullah's use of the phrase "normalization" of relations with Israel. The two allies also insisted on including language guaranteeing the right of return by Palestinian refugees.

beginning that theirs could only be a supporting role and that a collective Arab approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking had to be led by Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Thus Saudi crown prince Abdullah's decision in February 2002 to take the lead was welcomed by the Jordanians, who viewed Riyadh's Islamic credentials as giving the initiative greater credibility in the Arab and Muslim worlds.⁹ Egypt, by contrast, was notably lukewarm to the Saudi initiative and played a much smaller role in fashioning the contents of the proposal. However, it would be the third member of the Arab "triangle," Syria, whose stance, together with that of its client, Lebanon, would pose the largest obstacle to fashioning an Arab consensus behind an effective initiative. In the months leading up to the 2002 Beirut summit, the bulk of inter-Arab diplomatic maneuvering would be focused on dealing with Syrian demands and

7 Thomas L. Friedman, "An Intriguing Signal from the Saudi Crown Prince," *The New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2002.

8 Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 110-3.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

objections. The entire episode, from the initial Saudi initiative, through the Syrian and Lebanese efforts to modify it and the eventual arrival at a consensus resolution, would be strongly reminiscent of the 1981 Fahd initiative and the twelfth Arab summit held in Fez in 1982, which resulted in resolutions offering qualified acceptance of Israel.¹⁰

SYRIA AND LEBANON ENTER THE FRAY

From their inception in 1964 up until the October 2000 Cairo gathering, Arab summit conferences had been sporadic, ad hoc affairs. Despite

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the usual inter-Arab rivalries and tensions, Arab leaders managed to maintain a commitment to annual meetings from 2000 forward. Abu Dhabi had previously been designated the host city for the March 2002 summit but due to the illness of United Arab Emirates' president Sheikh Zayid

bin Sultan al-Nuhayyan, the baton was passed to Lebanon.¹¹ As a rule, host countries of Arab summit conferences possess considerable capacity to shape the atmosphere and dynamics of the gathering, and the move to Beirut had a large impact on the atmosphere surrounding the summit.

Syria's response was a two-week "silent protest" after which it began working in tandem with Lebanon to modify the content of the Saudi initiative.¹² Predictably, their criticism stemmed

from Abdullah's explicit use in the Friedman article of the phrase "normalization" of relations with Israel, an old bugaboo in the Arab political lexicon.¹³ Syria steadfastly opposed using such a term, insisting instead on the less obligating "normal" or "normal peaceful" relations in any official communiqués.¹⁴ Damascus also insisted on including specific language referring to U.N. General Assembly resolution 194 of December 11, 1948,¹⁵ which Arab states interpret as guaranteeing the right of return by Palestinian refugees. The joint statement released by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese president Emile Lahoud following their meeting on March 3 implicitly reiterated this point as they insisted that a solution to the conflict had to be based on all U.N. resolutions.¹⁶

In the meantime, the Jordanian monarchy, historically ahead of the collective Arab curve regarding open support of Arab-Israeli peace, was approaching the initiative from a different, more conciliatory direction. Foreign Minister Muasher thought it best that the initiative be a "simple and powerful explanation" of the Arabs' position and published in English for all the world to see. It should include an end-of-conflict clause, a commitment to full normalization, and reference to a solution to the refugee issue in a way that did not refer to the "right of return" or resolution 194; he believed that to include the so-called right of return would kill the initiative as Israel would conclude that the continued Arab insistence on the return of all refugees to Israel would indicate a lack of seriousness about making peace.¹⁷

Saudi crown prince Abdullah, however, preferred a text in Arabic and was willing to be more accommodating to the Syrian-Lebanese posi-

10 Daniel Dishon and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "Inter-Arab Relations," in Colin Legum, Haim Shaked, and Daniel Dishon, eds., *Middle East Contemporary Survey, 1981-82* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), pp. 221-9, 253-8; Elie Podeh, "From Fahd to 'Abdallah: The Origins of the Saudi Peace Initiatives and Their Impact on the Arab System and Israel," Gitelson Peace Publication, no. 24, The Harry S. Truman Center, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2003.

11 *Al-Ahram* (Cairo), Jan. 10-16, 2002.

12 *An-Nahar* (Beirut), Mar. 6, 2002.

13 Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), pp. 252-312.

14 Ross, *The Missing Peace*, pp. 111-2; Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Syrian-Israeli Negotiations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 106, 151-2, 154-5, 212-3, 219.

15 "Palestine Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator," U.N. General Assembly resolution 194, art. 11.

16 "The Arab Peace Initiative," Jordanian Embassy, Washington, D.C., accessed Apr. 23, 2010.

17 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, pp. 120-1.

tion, in line with Saudi Arabia's own traditional preference for attaining the widest possible Arab consensus on major issues.¹⁸ Hence, Abdullah reassured Assad at their March 5 meeting in Jeddah that the text to be tendered at the summit would take Syrian concerns into account. Assad, in turn, indicated that he would not oppose it.¹⁹ To bolster their base of support, the Saudis also obtained an endorsement of the initiative by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers at their March 10 meeting in Riyadh.²⁰

Two weeks later, though, on the eve of the summit, the exact text of the initiative had still to be finalized and continued to be the subject of heated disagreement between the Jordanians on one side and the Syrians and Lebanese on the other. The latter two were "loading [the initiative] with details that might kill it," such as changing the Arab commitment from "full peace" to "normal peaceful relations."²¹ Moreover, the overall atmosphere was anything but propitious for an Arab peace initiative. Violence was spiking in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, creating widespread anger in the Arab media and on the street.²² Playing to the crowd, Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah delivered a fiery speech, demanding that the Arab states arm the Palestinians instead of talking of peace with Israel.²³ Syrian officials from President Bashar al-Assad on down seemed more interested in playing up the Arab commitment to resistance and holding

PLO chairman Yasser Arafat (right) meets Jordanian foreign minister Marwan Muasher in his office, April 18, 2002, in the West Bank city of Ramallah. Arafat decided not to attend the March 2002 Beirut summit as Israel would not guarantee he would be allowed to return to the West Bank if he were to leave his besieged headquarters in Ramallah. Instead, he addressed the summit via videoconferencing.

Israel accountable for its repression of the Palestinian *intifada* than in highlighting prospective gestures towards Jerusalem. Palestinian Authority president and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat's participation was in serious doubt as Israel refused to guarantee his safe return to the West Bank if he were to leave his besieged headquarters in Ramallah.²⁴ The growing U.S. pressure on Iraq was also a matter of considerable concern to Arab leaders while Libyan leader Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi was the subject of threats by Lebanese Shi'a who accused him of being behind the disappearance in Libya of their revered Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1978.²⁵

THE BEIRUT SUMMIT

With the Arab summit grabbing the spotlight for all the wrong reasons as far as Egypt

18 Ibid.

19 *An-Nahar*, Mar. 7, 2002.

20 *The Qatar Morning Post* (Doha), Mar. 10, 2002.

21 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, p. 123.

22 Reuters, Mar. 24, 2002; "News from aljazeeraah.info," Mar. 2002; Abu Dhabi TV, Mar. 31, 2002; Palestine TV, Mar. 31, 2002; MBC.net, Arabic entertainment network, Mar. 31, 2002.

23 *The New York Times*, Mar. 25, 2002.

24 *The New York Times*, Apr. 25, 2004.

25 *Al-Ahram*, Jan. 10-16, 2002.



Palestinian suicide bomber Abdel-Basset Odeh from the West Bank town of Tulkarm carried out the March 28, 2002 Passover attack in Netanya, which killed 30 people and injured 140. The attack left Israeli public opinion extremely skeptical of the Abdullah plan or any purported Arab-initiated peace plan. In response to the bombings, Israel launched its most extensive military operation in the West Bank since June 1967.

and Jordan were concerned, and its participants unwilling to expose themselves to the militant and uncertain atmosphere surrounding the Beirut gathering, Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah II chose to stay away, sending lower level representatives in their stead; the majority of other Arab leaders did so as well. To be sure, some of the absentees, such as Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, the United Arab Emirates' Sheikh Zayid, and Amir Sheikh Sabah of Kuwait, may have had health issues while Arafat, Saddam Hussein, and Qadhafi each had their own reasons for not attending. But the absence of both Mubarak and Abdullah II, the leaders of the two Arab countries that had concluded peace treaties with Israel, was telling. Adding to the chaotic, even circus-like atmosphere of the gathering, was

Arafat's humiliation by the Lebanese authorities, who cut off the live video feed of his summit speech being delivered from his besieged Ramallah headquarters.²⁶ The irony of Mubarak's and Abdullah's absences from a summit conference, ostensibly engaged in cobbling together an Arab peace initiative towards Israel, was striking. More important still was the fact that resolutions passed by an Arab summit conference in the absence of so many important heads of state, particularly on such a central issue as this one, could not possibly possess the full political and moral force that its proponents intended.

Well aware of these limitations, Saudi's Abdullah projected as much gravitas in favor of the initiative as he could muster: In his speech to the conference on its first day, March 27, he directly addressed the Israeli people, emphasizing that if their government "abandons the policy of force and oppression and embraces true peace, we will not hesitate to accept the right of the Israeli people to live in security with the people of the region."²⁷ However, when it came to the wording of the proposal itself, Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faysal concluded that it was better to have Syria subscribing to a consensual resolution, even if it was a watered down version of what the Saudis had originally tendered, than to engage in a confrontation with Damascus. Hence, he acceded to Syria's insistence on excluding reference to "normalization" of relations with Israel and that an agreed on, just solution to the refugee problem be based on U.N. resolution 194.²⁸

The last and most difficult sticking point was Lebanese president Lahoud's insistence on an explicit, forceful rejection of all forms of Palestinian "patriation," i.e., allowing Palestinians to remain permanently in Lebanon, either as naturalized citizens or permanent residents.²⁹ At the

26 CNN.com, Mar. 28, 2002.

27 Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Arab Peace Initiative: A Primer and Future Prospects," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009, p. 13.

28 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, p. 123.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 126-8.

Palestinian-Israeli negotiations at Taba in January 2001, discussions on resolving the refugee issue had centered on a package of five options, including settlement of the refugees and their descendants in their current country of residence.³⁰ The final approved formula of the Abdullah plan, reached during heated side meetings at the Beirut summit, included a separate clause in the text rejecting any patriation “which conflicts with the special circumstances of the Arab host countries”³¹ (i.e., Jordan, and not just Lebanon). Just prior to the closing session of the summit, the Libyan and Iraqi representatives tried to register their reservations to the overall initiative, but Crown Prince Abdullah overruled them, insisting on an up or down vote, which resulted in unanimous approval.³²

As far as the Saudis were concerned, the March summit had been successful: Inter-Arab differences had been sufficiently damped down, enabling the adoption of an all-Arab declaration in favor of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Under the terms of the plan, the Arab countries would consider the conflict with Israel to be ended, security would be provided for all states in the region, and normal relations would be established with Jerusalem.³³ The Arab states’ image in the West could only improve as they could show to the United States and the rest of the international community that they had done their part to advance Arab-Israeli peace and could now insist that Israel be pressured to take similar far-reaching measures.

The meaning and value of the initiative was immediately the subject of further controversy. A final statement elaborating on the broad range of issues discussed and decisions taken by Arab leaders was issued alongside the declaration. The text of this statement, which, unlike that of the declaration was never officially translated

into English, contained no reference to the Abdullah plan as such, nor did it include specific language regarding the end of the conflict and the establishment of normal relations with Israel.³⁴ Instead, it reiterated the 1996 Cairo summit’s declaration that the Arab states viewed a “just and comprehensive peace” as a “strategic choice” and called on Israel to fulfill its obligations to that end in line with U.N. resolutions and the Madrid principles. Most of the final statement’s section on the Palestinian issue consisted of a detailed, harsh condemnation of Israel’s “destructive war” against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and included an insistence on realizing all of the Palestinian people’s “inalienable rights,” including the “right of return.” Moreover, Israel was named as the party bearing “complete legal responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem and their expulsion,” and the statement emphasized the complete refusal by Arab leaders to resettle the refugees outside of their perceived ancestral homes.³⁵ Israeli scholar Joshua Teitelbaum notes that the words *diyarihim* (their homes) were chosen because they are the precise Arabic translation of article 11 of U.N. General Assembly resolution 194 which speaks of enabling refugees “to return to their homes.” Clearly, this was a far cry from a realistic or “agreed-on” understanding of resolution 194 to which Jerusalem could accede.

Meanwhile, if the inter-Arab wrangling over the initiative and the poor reception it received from both Arab commentators and the Arab street³⁶ were not enough to seriously limit its

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30 Informal draft, Amb. Miguel Moratinos, EU special representative to the Middle East peace process, Feb. 14, 2002.

31 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, pp. 130-3.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

33 *Ibid.*, append. 4, p. 282; “Beirut Declaration on Saudi Peace Initiative,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, Mar. 28, 2002.

34 Final statement, League of Arab States website, accessed, Apr. 23, 2010; *An-Nahar*, Mar. 29, 2002; *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), Mar. 29, 2002.

35 Teitelbaum, “The Arab Peace Initiative,” p. 34, fn. 32.

36 *Mideast Mirror* (London), Mar. 28, 2002; Gamal Mattar, “This Way and That,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Apr. 4-10, 2002; *The New York Times*, Apr. 3, 2002.

A RENEWED PUSH FOR THE PLAN

Despite its poor reception and even worse timing, the Abdullah plan was not dead. Even before the Beirut summit had convened, the U.N. Security Council passed resolution 1397 on March 12, 2002, which endorsed a two-state solution, called for an immediate end to violence in the area, and included mention of Crown Prince Abdullah's "contribution."³⁸ Other explicitly favorable references would soon follow. When the United States and other members of the so-called Quartet—Russia, the European Union, and the U.N. Secretary-General—struggled during 2002-03 to revive the moribund peace process, their efforts eventually produced the "road map for peace."³⁹ Muasher said that, behind the scenes, "the moderate core of the Arab world, represented by Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, in a rare display of collective action, adopted proactive, serious, coordinated policies vis-à-vis the conflict."⁴⁰ These governments saw some value in engaging with the Quartet's efforts to break the deadlock and were rewarded by the inclusion of the Abdullah plan in the wording of the road map as one of the foundations upon which a permanent Arab-Israeli peace was to be built, along with "the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace, UNSCRs [U.N. Security Council resolutions] 242, 338, and 1397, and agreements previously reached by the parties."⁴¹

There matters would essentially stand for the remainder of the decade. The road map had established the goal of a final peace by the end of 2005, but neither the Palestinians nor the



In November 2008, the Palestinian Authority took out full-page Hebrew-language ads in four major Israeli newspapers, presenting the text of the Abdullah plan, proclaiming that its adoption would result in diplomatic ties and normal relations with the entire Arab and Muslim world.

value, events on the ground seemed to render it permanently crippled. A string of Palestinian suicide bombings, the most serious one at a Passover holiday celebration at an Israeli hotel on the night of the first day of the Beirut summit,³⁷ left Israeli public opinion extremely skeptical of any purported Arab-initiated peace plan. In response to the bombings, Israel launched its most extensive military operation in the West Bank since June 1967. For all intents and purposes, the Abdullah plan appeared stillborn, having been first diluted and then overtaken by events.

37 "Passover suicide bombing at Park Hotel in Netanya – 27 Mar 2002," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed Apr. 23, 2010.

38 Teitelbaum, "The Arab Peace Initiative," p. 34, fn. 36.
 39 "A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," U.N. News Center, New York, June 24, 2002.
 40 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, p. 176.
 41 "A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution."

Israelis fulfilled many of the initial obligations that were required by the plan in order to reestablish diplomatic momentum. These disregarded commitments centered on combating terror and ending incitement on the Palestinian side, and dismantling outposts erected since March 2001 and freezing settlement activity on the Israeli side. In preparation for the 2005 Algiers Arab summit conference, Jordan attempted to exploit Syria's weakened status in Lebanon by lobbying for a tweaking of the language of the Arab initiative. It sought to modify the plan so as to hold out the prospect of earlier normalization with Israel as well as change the wording that rejected Palestinian patriation in Arab countries. However, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were unwilling to go along, and Jordan's efforts came to naught.⁴²

At the same time, Iran's projection of power into the region reached new heights, highlighted by its tightening alliance with Syria,⁴³ its considerable influence in post-Saddam, Shi'i-dominated Iraq,⁴⁴ the growing power of its proxies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Palestinian Hamas, and even its good relations with the GCC gadfly, Qatar.⁴⁵ Essentially, Tehran was now an integral, if not formal actor in the Arab system.

Annual inter-Arab summit conferences, meanwhile, continued to reinforce the image of the Arab states as a weak and even irrelevant grouping. The 2003 Sharm el-Sheikh Arab summit utterly failed to prevent the U.S. invasion of member state Iraq and the overthrow of its regime. The 2008 Damascus summit and the 2009 Doha summit—which, like the 2002 Beirut meeting, were marked by Egyptian president Mubarak's conspicuous absence—served mainly to highlight inter-Arab divisions and the

absence of a common course of action.⁴⁶ The core Sunni Arab countries of the region—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan—sought to push back against Tehran wherever possible in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf states.⁴⁷

As part of its strategy against Iran and its regional allies, the Sunni Arab camp periodically sought to focus renewed attention on the need to restore momentum to Arab-Israeli diplomacy, in order to prove that their approach could achieve more gains than Iran's encouragement of "resistance." The Abdullah plan, they warned, would not be on the table forever.⁴⁸ At the 2007 Arab summit in Riyadh,

Arab leaders explicitly reiterated their commitment to the initiative as articulated at the Beirut summit. The initiative also became part of the political tool-kit of Mahmud Abbas's truncated Palestinian Authority. On November 20, 2008, the PA took out full-page Hebrew-language ads in four

major Israeli newspapers, presenting the text of the initiative, proclaiming that its adoption would result in diplomatic ties and normal relations with the entire Arab and Muslim world.⁴⁹ The ads and accompanying billboards on Israeli roadways were framed by pictures of the flags of the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, including Iran. They constituted an unprecedented attempt to persuade a highly skeptical

The Abdullah plan remains a marker for the shaky parameters of acceptable, collective Arab action.

42 *Al-Ahram*, Mar. 10-16, 2005; Ali E. Hillal Dessouki and Karen Abul Kheir, "Foreign Policy as a Strategic National Asset: The Case of Jordan," in Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, eds., *The Foreign Policy of Arab States* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), p. 265.

43 *The Washington Post*, Feb. 26, 2010.

44 Kenneth Katzman, "Iran's Activities and Influence in Iraq," Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., June 4, 2009.

45 Press TV (Tehran), Feb. 24, 2010; Ariel Farrar-Wellman, "Qatar-Iran Foreign Relations," *AEI Iran-Tracker*, Feb. 23, 2010.

46 Amir Kulick, "The Damascus Summit—Only Division and Fragmentation?" *INSS Insight*, no. 52, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C., Apr. 3, 2008; Joseph Kostiner, "Regulating Arab Politics (Part I): The War of the Summits," *Tel Aviv Notes*, Moshe Dayan Center, Mar. 26, 2009; Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Joseph Kostiner, "Regulating Arab Politics (Part 2): The Doha Arab League Summit," *Tel Aviv Notes*, Moshe Dayan Center, Apr. 7, 2009.

47 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, "The Arab Perspective," in *Strengthening the Forces of Moderation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Role of the European Union after the Gaza War* (The Hague and Jerusalem: The Cingendael Institute and the Truman Institute, 2009), pp. 15-20.

48 *Ha'aretz* (Tel Aviv), Jan. 1, 2009.

49 *BBC News*, Nov. 20, 2008.

Israeli public, numbed by years of violent confrontation, that its long-held belief that it had no partner for peace was incorrect. Implicitly, the ads also addressed Abbas's divided Palestinian constituency, his Arab patrons, and the incoming Obama administration. One month later, however, this campaign was quickly forgotten, as Israel responded to barrages of Hamas rocket fire on Israeli cities and towns by undertaking a major military operation in Gaza.⁵⁰ The Saudi-Egyptian duo found themselves, once again, dealing with more immediate, pressing issues.

Early in 2009, Bashar al-Assad proclaimed the Abdullah plan "already dead."⁵¹ By the end of the year, hopes in the Arab world for a radical change in U.S. policies under Barack Obama had also given way to disappointment and skepticism.⁵²

50 *The New York Times*, Dec. 27, 2008.

51 Teitelbaum, "The Arab Peace Initiative," p. 28.

52 Jackson Diehl, "The Deflated Arab Hopes for Obama," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 30, 2009; Fouad Ajami, "The Arabs Have Stopped Applauding Obama," *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 29, 2009.

Indeed, the Arab initiative, if not dead, appeared moribund. The absence of a clear path forward on the Israeli-Palestinian—and Israeli-Syrian—track, reinforced by the profound divisions in the Arab system, the feebleness of the Arab summit conferences, and Iran's growing penetration of the region makes it easy to dismiss the value of the initiative. Moreover, the deep disagreements over the initiative, which had marked its birth, and the continuing differences over both its actual meaning and the way it should be employed by Arab negotiators promise to resurface in the event of a renewal of tangible Arab-Israeli diplomacy on final status issues. Nonetheless, nearly eight years after its adoption, the Abdullah plan, for all of its problems, has become a genuine reference point for the international community regarding Arab-Israeli peacemaking, alongside U.N. resolutions, and a marker determining the shaky parameters of acceptable, collective Arab action on the subject.



The Abaya Gets an Extreme Makeover

Top European fashion labels, including John Galliano and Blumarine, have sent models in couture abayas down the runway in an effort to lure wealthy Muslim women at The Saks Fifth Avenue Riyadh and Jeddah fashion show at the George V hotel in Paris.

Twenty models followed on foot, wearing abayas heavy with rhinestones or airy in gauzy fabrics.

"I realised that most of the Saudi clients are wearing designer brands, but they're covered by a black abaya," said Dania Tarhini, the show's organiser and a general manager of Saks Fifth Avenue in Saudi Arabia. "It is an obligation to wear the abaya there, but let them feel good about it."

The timing of the Paris show was propitious: Four days earlier, Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, struck a nerve in the Muslim world by declaring that full-body veils such as the burka are "not welcome" in France, saying they make women prisoners. A top Muslim group in Britain called Mr. Sarkozy "patronising and offensive." Lebanon's most influential Shia cleric called on Mr. Sarkozy to reconsider his comments.

"Everybody's waiting for a change in a good way," Ms Tarhini said. Some women in Saudi Arabia "don't want to feel obliged [to wear the abaya]. They want to wear it to look fashionable, as well."



Associated Press, June 26, 2009