

MEMMO

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The Arab Initiative: Offer for Peace or Ultimatum?

The Arab League's decision last week at a summit in Riyadh to reaffirm the 2002 Arab peace initiative could serve as the basis for dialogue between the Arabs and Israel if it is used as an opening to negotiations rather than as an ultimatum. However, the current positions of the Arab League—including support for violence and the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees—are not conducive to a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Israel is committed to exploring peace with the Palestinians and Arab states, but the Arabs have rejected negotiations and threatened Israel with continued violence if it does not unconditionally accept the Arab plan.

The Riyadh statement is formulated as an ultimatum to Israel rather than an invitation for peace negotiations.

- While the Arab initiative includes positive elements, including a reference to a “peaceful settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict based on ... the land for peace formula,” it is presented as a “take it or leave it” plan rather than an offer to open negotiations.
- The Riyadh statement declares comprehensive peace only as “a strategic option” and fails to rule out other options, such as continued violence. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal warned Israel that if it fails to accept the plan in its current format, it will be putting its future “in the hands of the lords of war.”
- This should be contrasted with the approach taken by the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, who urged, “Let us have no war. ... Let us agree upon security” when he traveled to Jerusalem to offer peace talks in 1977.
- If the Arab League truly seeks peaceful relations with Israel, it must be willing to sit down and negotiate with Israel as Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians have.
- At Syria's insistence, the Arab League at its Beirut summit in 2002 toughened the positions and removed the most positive elements of a proposed Saudi peace initiative, which pledged to make peace as Israel worked to withdraw from further territory. The current plan—which mirrors the toughened positions—asserts that “peace will not be realized” until Israel's full implementation of Arab demands.

The current positions of the Arab League make a peaceful settlement with Israel impossible.

- As reported by the Saudi Press Agency, the Arab League stressed the “right” of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel—a proposition that the United States and Israel regard as a prescription for the destruction of the Jewish state. This represents a major retreat from Saudi King Abdullah's 2002 peace initiative, which said a just and agreed upon solution to the refugee issue must be found.

- The plan requires a complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Both President Clinton and President Bush have made clear that the United States will not expect Israel to give up Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem or major settlement blocks in a final peace settlement.
- The summit's participants failed to condemn Palestinian terrorism, which has killed more than 1,000 Israelis since 2000, drawing a line between terrorism and "legitimate resistance against the Israeli occupation."

Israel remains committed to pursuing peace with the Palestinians and Arab states.

- In response to the Arab League initiative, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called on the Arab states to join Israel at a conference to pursue peace negotiations. However, the Riyadh summit did not endorse dialogue with Israel.
- Olmert has agreed to meet on a biweekly basis with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss ongoing issues of concern and has agreed to discuss with the United States a "political horizon" for the Palestinians.
- While the Arab League is reiterating its hard-line position from five years ago, Israel has demonstrated its desire for peace, withdrawing from all of Gaza and parts of the West Bank, and committing to the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state living in peace beside Israel.

Basic Facts Summary

- The Riyadh statement, which has some positive elements, is unfortunately formulated as an ultimatum to Israel rather than an invitation for peace negotiations.
- The current positions of the Arab League on final borders and Palestinian refugees would make a peaceful settlement with Israel impossible.
- Israel remains committed to pursuing peace. Prime Minister Olmert has overlooked the rhetoric from Riyadh and offered to initiate dialogue with Arab states that desire peace.