

MEMMO

July 10, 2009

Bold Steps by Arab States Needed to Meet Obama Challenge to Promote Peace

In his June 4 address to the Muslim world, President Obama urged Arab states to take significant steps to facilitate peace between Israel and the Palestinians and said the Arab-Israeli conflict “should no longer be used to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems.” Even as Israel has taken significant steps in recent weeks to advance the peace process, most Arab states remain on the sidelines. Much more can be done to respond to American and Israeli overtures. Arab states can heed the president’s call by reinvigorating the Arab Peace Initiative with tangible measures to end the six-decade long campaign to isolate and delegitimize Israel.

Obama’s outreach to the Arab world presents a real opportunity for the Arab states to show they are prepared to end the conflict with Israel.

- In his Cairo speech, the president said “Arab states must recognize that the Arab Peace Initiative was an important beginning but not the end of their responsibility” and they need to “help the Palestinian people develop the institutions that will sustain their state, to recognize Israel’s legitimacy, and to choose progress over a self-defeating focus on the past.”
- Arab leaders must understand that continuing their efforts to delegitimize Israel at the U.N. and other international fora, their political, economic and cultural boycott of Israel, and their state-run anti-Israel propaganda campaigns will scuttle the culture of peace the president is trying to foster.
- The Arab states should look toward history for examples of how to change the conflict. Before Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977, most Israelis were opposed to withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, which provided an enormous security buffer.
- After the transformative visit, Israelis backed Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s major decision to withdraw from the entire Sinai and remove settlements as part of the peace treaty with Egypt.
- The peace treaty between Israel and Jordan was similarly based on mutual respect and outreach and the genuine acceptance of Israel’s right to exist by King Hussein.



President Obama said the Arab states should take steps to normalize relations with Israel.

Israel is demonstrating that it is committed to advancing peace efforts with the Palestinians and Arab states.

- For the first time in his political career, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has explicitly accepted a two-state solution to the conflict: a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside the Jewish state of Israel.

- Netanyahu has called for the immediate resumption of peace negotiations with the Palestinians without preconditions and said he is ready to travel “to Damascus, to Riyadh, to Beirut, to any place” to meet with Arab leaders to discuss ways to end the conflict.
- Speaking recently at an interfaith conference in Kazakhstan, Israeli President Shimon Peres invited Saudi King Abdullah to come to Jerusalem and said he was prepared to travel to Riyadh to initiate discussions.
- Israel is also working with the United States and Palestinian Authority (PA) to enhance the capabilities and effectiveness of Palestinian security forces in the West Bank and has taken a series of steps to improve the day-to-day conditions for Palestinians throughout the West Bank.

There are a number of bold and immediate steps the Arab states can take to show a true commitment to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

- While the Arab states have proposed to establish normal relations with Israel as part of the Arab Peace Initiative, they have eschewed concrete steps until Israel fulfills all their demands. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned earlier this year that the Arab offer would not be good forever, and that Israel could face more violence if it did not accept the offer.
- As U.S. special Middle East envoy George Mitchell has said, the Arab states should take initial confidence-building measures such as granting overflight rights to Israeli civilian aircraft.
- While steps such as overflights are incremental, to make fundamental changes in the region Arab leaders should follow Sadat’s example by taking transformative actions, such as visiting Israel.
- The Arab states should move toward recognition of Israel and public meetings with Israeli officials to tackle the full range of issues now separating Israel and the Arab world.
- The Arab states should terminate the Arab League boycott of Israel, establish trade relations and cultural exchanges, and establish postal and telecommunications lines.
- The Arab states can go a long way in supporting peace efforts by opening their societies to Israelis, including inviting Israelis to participate in educational programs and sporting events.
- The Arab states should clamp down on all support for terrorist groups and end the routine anti-Israel and anti-Semitic incitement in their media and educational systems.

Unfortunately, the actions of many Arab states signal that they are not ready to back the peace process and normalize relations with Israel.

- Rather than take steps to normalize relations with Israel, the Arab states have used a number of conferences this year to condemn Israel as “racist,” defend the terrorism of Hamas and call for additional economic boycotts of the Jewish state.
- Qatar and Mauritania severed ties with Israel earlier this year. Qatar also provides millions of dollars to Hamas each month, which directly undercuts the PA and Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.
- Syrian President Bashar Assad has rejected overtures by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to resume peace negotiations without preconditions, while Syrian officials have threatened to take back the Golan Heights by force if Israel fails to return it.
- Arab states have failed to provide the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank with the financial support necessary to bolster the economy and the political backing that will be needed to reach an agreement with Israel. The Arab states have delivered only \$78 million to the Palestinians out of \$600 million in aid pledged in 2007.