

Peace Process Initiatives: A New Form of Middle East Proliferation

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Brief Analysis

With Yasir Arafat in South Africa and Benjamin Netanyahu poised to take his summer vacation, Israeli spokesman David Bar Illan recently predicted "not much progress [in the peace process] the next couple of weeks." Recent days have, in fact, witnessed significant, though not yet successful, backroom maneuvering inside the fractious Israeli cabinet and between Likud and Labor, all with an eye toward finding a way to close the deal on a "second redeployment." However, just as nature abhors a vacuum, Middle Easterners abhor an absence of diplomatic motion when the main event -- bilateral Israeli-Palestinian talks -- is moving too slowly. The result is a flurry of ideas to break the apparent impasse. Arafat has been encouraging other Arabs, Europeans, Russians -- anyone who will listen -- to help push Israel into acceptance of the U.S. plan for a 13 percent redeployment, including a call just this week for economic sanctions against Israel like those imposed on apartheid-era South Africa. Many countries have lent Arafat a welcome ear, supporting his suggestions or offering their own ideas to pressure Israel into moving ahead.

The Egyptian-French Initiative: This idea, initially raised during President Mubarak's visit to France last May and strongly endorsed in public comments by French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine, proposes an international conference of all countries that support the peace process but that are not directly party to the negotiations. According to this plan, the supporting countries would formulate their ideas about the cause of, and solution to, the current impasse, and then, in a second stage, invite the principals -- Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Lebanon -- for a subsequent round of talks. In devising this plan, Mubarak and his French hosts cited their "identical" positions on the peace process, their desire to "maintain and confirm all existing principles and accords," and the need to prevent a descent into Arab-Israeli violence.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa claims to have secured widespread international backing for the conference, including full Arab support. (In fact, the reaction of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, during his recent visit to Paris, was lukewarm at best.) When asked about the U.S. reaction, Moussa consistently replies that U.S. officials have shown great interest in the idea and have not expressed any objection or reservations on this matter. Actually, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk recently testified that Washington was "not interested" in the idea "at the moment," since the U.S. package plan remains the focus of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Clearly, Washington evinces a lack of enthusiasm, if not outright derision, for this initiative. Moussa denies that there is any tension between the U.S. approach and the Egyptian-French idea. Instead, he argues that the two ideas are complementary, with the U.S. plan focusing on further redeployments and the Egyptian-French initiative addressing the peace process as a whole. Discussions of the initiative always imply that if Israel accepts the U.S. proposal, the idea of a new international conference would be moot.

The French-Egyptian plan is a convoluted attempt to solve a diplomatic problem with none of the central actors at the bargaining table. In this regard, it is not just a retreat from Madrid and Oslo, both of which championed direct negotiations, but a 180-degree move in the opposite direction. Israel, of course, would reject the idea and there is

little chance the United States would participate in a Middle East peace conference with neither Israel nor the Palestinians present. What is worrisome about this plan is not the likelihood that it would ever come to pass -- chances are highly unlikely -- but the fact that it has earned such favorable attention in parts of Europe and the Middle East. This means that five years after Oslo, the urge to re-internationalize the Arab-Israeli negotiations is not dead after all.

The Jerusalem Committee: The Committee, an organ of the Organization of Islamic Conference, held its seventeenth meeting on July 29 and 30 in Casablanca, amidst unrealistically high expectations for decisive action. Attendees included Arafat and foreign ministers from the fifteen member countries, only four of which are Arab. The primary impetus for the meeting was the recently-announced Israeli plan to extend Jerusalem's municipal reach. Host and committee chair King Hassan criticized Israel for its recent extension plans and other aspects of its Jerusalem policy, calling them an attempt at "the Judaization of al-Quds [Jerusalem] by obliterating its cultural characteristics and altering its political status."

On a practical level, the effective goal was to enact decisions made at the previous Jerusalem Committee meeting in March 1997. In particular, the idea of a Muslim-sponsored fund to provide financing for "resistance operations in holy Jerusalem" had been decided upon at the last meeting but not implemented. At the July meeting, the Committee approved a director and trustees committee for the fund, authorized them to begin operations, and called upon member-states to make contributions. The director general of the Fund, Mahmud Ma'ruf, has stated that it will avoid overtly political issues by focusing on quality of life improvements for Palestinians in Jerusalem, but the bottom-line purpose of the fund is undeniably political.

The final statement issued at the end of the meeting indicates that the agenda went beyond the issue of Jerusalem to wider questions of Arab-Israeli relations. It calls on various international parties (the United States, the EU, the UN, and the Vatican) to lean on Israel. The statement thanks parties for actions it deems constructive, such as the EU decision to challenge Israel on trade issues. It rebukes the U.S. House of Representatives for recommending the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the transfer of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. It also calls on all parties giving aid to Israel to assure that their money is not used for settlement activity. The Committee asks members to "reconsider" their ties with Israel, suggesting specifically the closing of diplomatic missions and offices. Despite the hopes of many Arab observers, this wording falls far short of a binding resolution; indeed, the Jerusalem Committee lacks the authority to issue anything stronger than recommendations.

Arab Summitry: The first group from which Arafat sought action was the Arab League, which he asked to hold a summit on the Palestinian problem. Nearly all Arab governments agreed in principle. The last Arab summit was held in June 1996, in the wake of Netanyahu's electoral victory. Arafat has argued that another summit is needed now in order to present a unified stance in forcing Israel to enact further redeployments. So far, however, inter-Arab disagreement has stymied all plans for a summit. Arafat's goal of a united Arab push to force Israel into peace process concessions stands in direct contradiction to the aims of other states that wanted a summit to declare the peace process dead and agree on an alternative course of action. One rare area of agreement was the need to avoid a summit that would simply highlight inter-Arab disagreements. At this point, the idea of an Arab summit seems to be relegated to the back burner.

When it became unavoidably clear that a full Arab summit was unlikely in the near future, Mubarak hosted Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein for a mini-summit on July 5. This was touted as an opportunity for the states who have peace agreements with Israel to coordinate their positions for a future Arab summit. The three leaders issued a statement denouncing Israel's decision to enlarge Jerusalem, which Israel immediately rejected as meddling in internal affairs.

Conclusions: This spurt of diplomatic initiatives to reactivate the peace process clearly signals frustration with the

pace of progress. But they don't offer solutions. As problematic as the continuing stalemate is, none of these alternative initiatives has a better chance at achieving progress than the continued effort at an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, inspired by -- if not mirroring -- the set of U.S. proposals. And pursuing some of these other ideas may in fact undermine the chances of Israeli-Palestinian progress.

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