

# **RIYADH NEEDS TO ADD “SECURITY ANNEX” TO ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE**

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**Publication Date on RIEAS ([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)): 6th September 2015**

In March 2002, one of the bloodiest months of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud presented the Arab Peace Initiative. The Arab League summit that convened in Beirut that month adopted it as an official resolution. Representatives at the March 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh reaffirmed the initiative.

The core of the proposal is a commitment by the 22 Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel if it agrees to withdraw from the territories occupied in the 1967 war, to a just solution of the Palestinian refugee issue and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

The initiative states that the Council of Arab States “calls upon the government of Israel and all Israelis to accept this initiative in order to safeguard the prospects for peace and stop the further shedding of blood, enabling the Arab countries and Israel to live in peace and good neighborliness and provide future generations with security, stability and prosperity.”

Just two years ago, the authors of the initiative modified it, acknowledging their agreement on land swaps. The amendment was made to the paragraph about final borders between Israel and Palestine, indicating that that they would not strictly follow the 1967 borders as stated in the original document.

Unfortunately, the Arab Peace Initiative was never properly marketed to the Israeli people. Very few Israelis really know what the initiative is all about, including its commitment to a mutually agreed upon solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. This lack of knowledge has allowed Israeli governments since

2002 to ignore the proposal, never seriously addressing it even once. President Shimon Peres did, however, refer to the initiative in his 2008 speech to the UN General Assembly.

Of course, momentous changes have transformed the region since March 2002. Longtime leaders have been toppled, so some of the governments that participated in the 2002 summit no longer exist, having taken new forms. Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip and four isolated settlements in the northern West Bank in 2005. Hamas brutally took over Gaza in 2007.

Despite these and many other significant regional events, the Arab Peace Initiative is still on the table, but the situation in the Middle East following the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in July obligates the Saudi leadership to update its original initiative to fit the new regional reality. Most of the countries in the region now face a new Iran. It is richer, more aggressive, self-confident and by and large enjoys the acquiescence of the West to its political and military adventures.

Standing up against a reinvigorated Iran requires a strong regional alliance, and Israel will have to be a member of this new coalition, making a unique and substantial contribution to it. At the same time, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot remain unresolved. The status quo is unsustainable. The situation whereby the Palestinian people have no sovereignty and no state of their own lacks international legitimacy. That said, the Israeli people need to be convinced that a Palestinian state alongside Israel will give them more security, not less.

The Saudis should, therefore, add a “security annex” to their original peace proposal, adding an essential dimension to its basic concept — that is, the establishment of a framework for defense cooperation between Israel and the Arab states of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Such cooperation would include, among other elements, a joint center for counter-terrorism warfare coordination, unified efforts against the Islamic State and other extremist Islamist organizations, joint and coordinated action against Iranian regional subversion, a naval surveillance center for intercepting illegal arms shipments and smuggling to Iran’s proxies and joint anti-ballistic missile defense based around Israeli systems.

Security cooperation would also include a joint space program, a joint project for solving Jordan's energy and water problems and a political-economic plan for the reconstruction and development of the Gaza Strip, disarming terrorist movements and restoring the Palestinian Authority there.

All this is premised, however, on an initial Israeli-Palestinian agreement based on the principle of “two states for two peoples” and the start of serious negotiations for ending the occupation and detailing a permanent status agreement. These measures would make the Middle East a safer place and constitute the most appropriate response to the Iranian expansionism spearheaded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The Israeli people would welcome an “Arab security initiative.” A survey conducted in February 2014 showed that after learning the details of the Arab Peace Initiative, 76% of respondents supported it.

The challenge to the new Saudi leadership is to bravely adjust the bold initiative of its predecessors to the perilous reality of today and to market it properly, not only to the international community, but also to the Israeli people. Then the Israeli people could opt for this alternative to the existing situation of precarious stalemate, an alternative that would guarantee peace and security.