

THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE

It has been a long way from Khartoum in 1967 to Beirut in 2002, when the Arab Initiative was first proposed by Saudi Arabia and immediately endorsed by the Arab League.

Israel's decisive victory over the Arab states in the "SIX DAY WAR" of 1967 initially raised hopes that at last it would be possible to reach a definitive settlement of the 19-year old Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead it soon became apparent that the conflict had merely been complicated by the occupation of further Arab territory, the displacement of still more refugees and the aggravation of the sense of grievance felt by the Palestinians and now shared more widely than ever in the rest of the Arab world. After the UN Security Council had passed Resolution No. 237 (14 June 1967), calling on Israel to facilitate the return of the new refugees, who had fled,- and were still fleeing, - from the areas occupied by Israel during the war, the UN Assembly failed to produce an agreed resolution on the basis for a settlement.

The deadlock became total when an Arab summit conference, held in Khartoum between 29 August and 3 September 1967, confirmed earlier decisions:

- not to negotiate directly with Israel,
- not to accord her recognition and
- not to sign a peace treaty

The Israeli Government, for its part, announced its refusal to undertake any but direct negotiations; if no such negotiations developed, Israeli forces would maintain their occupation of the Arab territories conquered during the war. During the fall the UN Security Council considered a number of draft resolutions which failed to gain approval.

Finally , on 22 November 1967, the Council unanimously adopted Resolution 242 which was to be the basis of all subsequent peace initiatives during the next five years and which remains an important element in attempts to resolve the Palestinian question. It emphasized the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, which satisfied the demand of the Arabs and their supporter, the USSR, for an Israeli withdrawal. At the same time, by being less than categorical about the extent of that withdrawal, it became acceptable to the Israelis and its supporter, the USA. All the subsequent arguments which developed centred around the question of whether the Israelis, in return for a definitive peace treaty, would have the right to retain parts of the Arab territories occupied during the war.

The Arab summit conference in Fez, September 1982, adopted a peace plan, similar to the Fahd Plan, which had been proposed by Saudi Arabia before in 1981. The Fahd Plan included not only the Arab demands on behalf of the Palestinians, as approved by the UN General Assmbly, but also an implied *de facto* recognition of Israel.

At the Beirut Arab League Summit in 2002, 22 states unanimously adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, proposed by Saudi Arabia. It offered a formula for ending not only the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also the wider, lingering Arab-Israeli conflict, and to achieve a collective peace, security for all and normal relations with Israel.

According to Marwan Muasher, - Jordan's former foreign minister and first ambassador to Israel, - the initiative was "the embodiment of the moderate camp in the Arab world and of its leap of faith in addressing both Arab and Israeli needs.

Unfortunately, the Arab Peace Initiative was not related to seriously by the two players whose support and endorsement were crucial for its implementation:

Neither Israel nor the United States responded with more than lip service. Arab states are also to be blamed for failing to explain the initiative to the Israeli public, our principal audience”. ---

The Arab Initiative calls for Israel’s full withdrawal from the Arab territories it has occupied since June 1967 and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. It offers a collective peace, security guarantees for all states in the region, including Israel. And an agreed upon solution to the refugee problem. In other words the Arab proposal is meant to serve as a basis for comprehensive negotiations over Territory, refugees and mutual acceptance between Israel and the Arabs.

Today, seven years after its adoption, the Arab Initiative still holds. King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia though has recently hinted it may not remain on the table eternally. Critics state that the Arab countries have not undertaken the effort necessary to transform a “general idea into a detailed, workable agreement”.¹

¹ Marina Ottaway, „Sharing the Burden in the Middle East“, p. 3, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C. - December 2008