

The Arab Peace Plan And Israeli Elections

by Dean Andromidas

Israel will hold national elections as early as next February, and the Arab Peace Initiative, first put forward in 2002, promises to become a central issue. The Bush Administration has brought the peace process to a standstill and undermined every peace effort of the last eight years. With new elections in the United States, as dismal as the choices may be between Barak Obama and John McCain, and now new elections in Israel itself, one Israeli told *EIR*, “We have a new situation.”

Despite half a dozen summits to promote the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, the Bush Administration has done absolutely nothing to further the process. Vice President Dick Cheney and his cabal of neocons have fomented civil war among the Palestinians, between Fatah and Hamas. The most recent outrageous action by the Bush Administration was the Oct. 26 military strike against a target on Syrian territory. The attack undermined efforts by Israel and Syria, for the last several months, to negotiate a peace agreement through talks mediated by Turkey.

The Israeli elections will be held almost two years early because of the resignation of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who faces various criminal investigations. He was replaced as leader of the Kadima party by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who was subsequently given a mandate to form a new governing coalition by Israeli President Shimon Peres. However, she was unable to form a government after the religious-based Shas party refused to rejoin a coalition with Kadima and the Labor Party. Shas had demanded that Livni sign an agreement that she would not negotiate the status of Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem in her negotiations with the Palestinians. Livni refused, declaring she would not give into Shas “blackmail” for an agreement that would make peace with the Palestinians impossible.

Reviving the Arab Peace Initiative

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, in 2002, announced his Saudi Peace Initiative, offering full recognition and

exchange of diplomatic relations between Israel and all the Arab states, in return for the completion of Israeli withdrawal from occupied lands in the context of peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and Syria. The plan, which was subsequently adopted as the Arab Peace Plan by the Arab League, also called for the establishment of a Palestinian state and a just solution to the Palestinian refugee question. In 2002, when hard-liner Ariel Sharon was prime minister, the plan was rejected by Israel, and ignored by the Israeli public outside of the independent peace movement. Despite formally supporting the initiative, the Bush Administration did nothing to convince Israel to support the effort.

King Abdullah and the Arab League summit of 2007 reaffirmed their offer, and finally, during this year’s United Nations General Assembly meeting in September, President Peres signaled his personal endorsement of the initiative by calling on the Arab states to “further” their effort.

Peres’s statement was followed by an extraordinary Arab-Israeli meeting held Oct. 15-17 under the auspices of the Oxford Research Group, where 15 leading Arab and Israeli personalities discussed ways to further the Arab Peace Initiative. Among the participants were former chief Palestinian Minister Nabil Shaath; former Palestinian National Security Advisor Jibril Rajoub; former director general of the Israeli foreign ministry and foreign policy advisor to Peres, Avi Gil; Alon Liel, another former foreign ministry director general, who is known for having held back-channel peace talks with Syria; and Matti Steinberg, a former advisor to the Israeli security services.

But the most significant participant was Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief and former ambassador to the United States, who is now head of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Others included former Egyptian ambassador to Washington, Nabil Fahmy; and Hisham Youssef, the chief of staff to Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa. From the United States, there was Henry Seligman, a leading Middle East peace activist and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Although it was hoped that appropriate personalities from Syria and Iran could attend, unfortunately, it didn’t happen.

The Price for Peace

Prince Turki told the symposium that every Arab state “made clear they will pay the price for peace, not



UN/Eskinder Debebe

Israel's Kadima party leader, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, failed to form a government following the resignation of Prime Minister Olmert; early elections will be held in February. At the top of the agenda: the Arab Peace Initiative.

only by recognizing Israel as a legitimate state, but also to normalize relations with it and end the state of hostilities that had existed since 1948." In return, Israel must "accept peace as a strategic choice, ... withdraw completely from all the lands they occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem, ... accept a just solution for the refugee problem, ... and recognize the independent state of Palestine."

On Oct. 23, Peres traveled to Egypt on the invitation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak where, during a press conference, the Israeli President said that, while he doesn't "accept all of the Saudi plan," which he said needs to be negotiated further, its spirit is correct. He added that, "In tandem with the bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians, we need to promote the Arab Peace Initiative."

Peres has been coordinating his efforts to promote the Arab Initiative with Labor Party chairman and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who has voiced support for it. Livni supports the initiative as well.

On Nov. 12, the Arab Initiative will be discussed in an interfaith dialogue conference sponsored by Saudi King Abdullah, to be held at the United Nations. Both Peres and Livni have been invited, which will be the first time such an invitation has been extended by the Saudis to Israeli leaders.

The invitation was also extended to 192 countries. This is the third such interfaith dialogue to be sponsored by King Abdullah. The first was held in Saudi Arabia earlier this year, where Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders convened. Former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani attended. The second conference was held in Spain, where Islamic leaders were joined by Christians and Jews, including several rabbis.

The Geneva Peace Initiative, promoted by Yossi Beilin, the Israeli architect of the Oslo Peace accords, and former Palestinian chief negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo, have been promoting the Arab initiative since it was first proposed in 2003. Prof. Ilai Alon of Tel Aviv University has just drafted a updated Hebrew translation of the initiative.

Shifting Political Sands

Meanwhile, André Azoulay, a Jewish businessman from Morocco, and advisor to the king, was in Israel attending the 10th anniversary of the founding of Peres Peace Center, where he called on Israel to adopt the Arab initiative. "I am a Jew with a commitment," Azouly is quoted by *Ha'aretz* (Oct. 29) as saying. "I'm an Arab Jew. I advise the King of Morocco. ... The Arab mainstream sees Israel as the party responsible for preventing peace, not the Arabs. ... This is something that the Israelis hoped for ten years ago. But who knows about it in Israel today? Who will take the initiative to explain it? The momentum will not last forever. This is a dangerous situation. Tomorrow something could happen in the West Bank and blow the whole deal, and we'll have to wait again."

While these developments hold out the hope that the Arab Peace Initiative will become a decisive issue in the Israeli election campaign which is expected to be very sharp. For months now, the election polls have shown that Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party would win a majority of Knesset seats and therefore be asked to form a government. If that came to pass, his coalition would include parties, such as the National Religious Party, which are even further to the right than Netanyahu's Likud. Nonetheless, the latest polls bear witness to the shifting sands of the Israeli political scene, with Livni's Kadima surpassing the Likud.

Whatever happens in the elections, and with the Arab Peace Initiative, the success of any peace effort requires, above all, the vigorous support of the United States, and a far bigger question mark hangs over the U.S. elections than those of Israel.