

Avoid the 'Grand Solution' Temptation

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The rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and the revival of the 2002 Saudi-Arab League initiative, is not the result of a sudden outbreak of mutual understanding, interfaith dialogue, or the dedicated work of special Middle East peace envoys. Rather, the cause is rational self-interest, in itself a rare commodity in the Middle East.

The Saudi monarchy, in concert with Egypt, Jordan and other Sunni Arab regimes, views Shi'ite power, led by the triumphant revolutionary government in Iran attempting to acquire nuclear weapons, as the greatest threat to their survival. The insurgency that has dismembered Iraq, the attempt by Hizbullah to control Lebanon, and the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere threatens to engulf the Arab elites. Under these circumstances, a strengthened strategic relationship with the US and a tacit alliance with Israel against Iran are vital for the Saudi and "moderate" Arab regimes.

Notwithstanding the lip-service paid to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and ending "the suffering of the Palestinians," these issues are secondary in this coalition of interests. The Palestinians are as divided as ever, without effective leadership, and can be expected to contribute very little to regional stability; the most important aspect of the Mecca agreement between the leaders of Hamas and Fatah is the name, reflecting Saudi influence and power. The maneuvering over the details of a Palestinian unity government appears never-ending, and even if an agreement is announced, the chaos, internal violence and anti-Israeli terror efforts are likely to continue. But for the Saudis and other members of the anti-Iran and anti-radical alliance, the photo-opportunities, including the Olmert-Abbas meetings, are sufficient.

For Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his government, the revived Saudi initiative is a welcome opportunity to divert the attention of the Israeli public from the corruption scandals, incompetence, and continuing investigations of the Lebanon war. The buzz generated by reports of talks with the Saudis changes the daily headlines and puts Olmert at the center of regional and even world attention. In a few months, when the opposition, led by Binyamin Netanyahu, makes its move to topple Olmert and what remains of his Kadima Party, the momentum of this latest "peace process" will be the government's best card.

IN THE wake of the excitement and optimism generated by the Saudi-Israeli links and renewed hopes for Arab League plan based on recognition and normal relations with Israel, it is important to recognize the realistic limits of these developments. In the past, over-enthusiastic politicians and unworkable grand peace plans pushed other openings beyond the art of the possible, and led to failure.

In March 2002, the original Saudi and Arab League peace initiative was presented in response to the 9/11 terror attacks on the US, and the massive public relations effort to limit the damage to Saudi Arabia's image in America.

When the publicity campaign achieved its goals, the initiative disappeared. On the ground, the resolutions adopted at the Arab League summit did nothing to change Palestinian terror attacks or the pervasive anti-Israel and anti-US incitement, including the Saudi funding.

Similarly, in 1977, Jimmy Carter's attempt to force a grand solution to the Palestinian issue, and to give the Soviet Union a major role in the process, led Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin to detour around Washington. These leaders were propelled by the interests and needs of Egypt and Israel, respectively, and these clearly did not include giving terrorists including Yasser Arafat and the PLO legitimacy and power. Later, in the negotiation process and at the 1978 Camp David summit, Carter repeatedly tried to force his plans for a PLO-led Palestinian state on Begin, almost destroying the fragile relationship with Egypt.

WHILE THE current American government is more experienced and better informed than the Carter administration, the temptation to seek a grand solution remains, reinforced by Europe. But the basic issues that have fueled the conflict for decades, such as Palestinian rejectionism and refugee claims seeking to overwhelm the Jewish population of Israel, will not be resolved in a few months or years.

And the Arab refusal to recognize the need for and legitimacy of a significant Jewish presence in Jerusalem's Old City (and not only dependent on goodwill) is also too strongly entrenched to be changed in the short term. As in the past, simplistic proposals that seek instant solutions to these core obstacles will damage and perhaps destroy the gains from the Saudi-Israeli links, in terms of conflict management and stability.

At the same time, the specific opportunities presented by the revived Saudi initiative, under an American umbrella, should not be wasted. Beyond the immediate and shared strategic concerns regarding the growing Iranian influence and hegemonic goals, this channel can be used to lower the level of distrust and ignorance. The time is long overdue for Saudi leaders - political and religious - to end support for incitement and anti-Semitism. If Israelis are asked to take the Saudi plan seriously, the promised movement toward normalization must be visible, and not hidden behind closed doors.

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