

# Regional Peace Plan May Hold Hope for Israel

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TEL AVIV—Peace with the Palestinians does not appear to be a high priority for ordinary Israelis or their political leaders these days. Nevertheless, reducing its role ruling over West Bank Palestinians remains vital to Israel's long-term interests.

Israeli hesitancy to take major steps in the short term to shift responsibility to the Palestinian Authority tends to be poorly understood but is quite understandable. The root of the problem is security.

While life in Israel's bustling seaside urban center has more or less returned to normal since the outbreak of the so-called stabbing intifada in early October, the propensity of young Palestinians to thrust knives into Jewish Israelis is on people's minds as terrorists continue to perpetrate attacks in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Despite ceaseless incitement by PA-controlled media and educational institutions, PA President Mahmoud Abbas seems not to control the current round of attacks. This underscores for many Israelis that Abbas—whose grip on power is threatened by Hamas's West Bank branch, kept in check with the help of Israeli security forces—should not be regarded as reliable partner capable of agreeing to, much less delivering on, the painful concessions incumbent on both sides for the achievement of peace.

Moreover, having waged three campaigns in Gaza since 2009 to stop mortar, rocket and missile attacks on civilians, Israel is keenly aware that Hamas exercises iron-fisted rule over Gaza Palestinians, rebuilt its fortifications since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, and replenished its weapons stockpile.

In addition to the Hamas-backed Sunni Arab threat from the south, Israel faces an Iran-backed Shiite Arab threat from the north. Israeli officials estimate that Hezbollah, which has turned the towns and villages of southern Lebanon into armed encampments, possesses some 150,000 projectiles, including Iranian missiles capable of reaching any site in Israel. This represents an increase of 25 percent to 50 percent since the early summer when the Obama administration concluded the Iranian nuclear program deal.

Meanwhile ISIS boasts forces in the Sinai Peninsula while controlling huge tracts of territory in lands somewhat anachronistically referred to as Iraq and Syria. Russia's entry into the brutal civil war in which Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran are battling a combination of

mostly Sunni jihadi forces commands regular attention in the Israeli press. And massive outflows of Syrian refugees threaten to overwhelm tiny Lebanon and to destabilize pro-Western Jordan, which has a peace treaty with Israel.

Small wonder that the fighting that rages throughout the region causes many Israelis to despair of progress in the pursuit of peace with the Palestinians. However, the Israeli Peace Initiative Group views matters differently. The IPI is a non-partisan organization founded in 2011 whose approximately 1,800 members come from the left, center, and right and include businessmen, high-ranking former military officers, diplomats, and scholars. According to organization leaders with whom I spoke this week, circumstances present Israel a unique window of opportunity to achieve a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians and leading Arab states.

Israel's military superiority surpasses anything it has ever known. With Syria's descent into chaos, Jerusalem faces no significant threat from conventional military forces. It coordinates operations with Jordan and Egypt. And Israel and the Gulf Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, have discovered solid shared interests in combatting Shiite Iran's and Sunni ISIS's quest for regional dominance. The level of cooperation between the Jewish state and America's Sunni Arab allies, most of which occurs below the radar screen, is unprecedented and substantial.

In these circumstances, contends IPI, Israel should seize the moment to end the conflict with the Arab world by achieving a peace agreement with the Palestinians that is based on two states for two peoples and which provides for regional security and economic development. IPI emphasizes that more than 20 years of failure since Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat signed the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn show the futility of relying exclusively on bilateral negotiations. Instead, IPI argues, negotiations must also include a regional track in which Israel negotiates directly with key Arab states. The proper point of departure, IPI maintains, is the Arab Peace Initiative, which was proposed by the Saudis in 2002 and aims at normalizing relations with Israel.

The inclusion of Arab states—starting with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—in the quest for a regional agreement is crucial, IPI argues. It will provide Palestinian leaders legitimating support. And it will enhance Israeli security and prosperity.

IPI has been engaged for several years in quiet diplomacy and quiet advocacy. Based on confidential, informal meetings with influential non-governmental figures in Arab states and the West Bank, it asserts that government-level support extends throughout the region for a regional approach. Organization leaders also point to polling data that show majority support in Israel—encompassing much of the left, center, and center right—for a regional initiative.

Some of the parameters of a comprehensive peace that IPI endorses—for example, the division of Jerusalem—would be rejected by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s narrow right-wing government. Consistent with Netanyahu’s proposal for a two-state solution, IPI stipulates that the Palestinian state must be demilitarized.

While IPI does not call for recognition by the Palestinian Authority of Israel as a Jewish state as a critical element of any peace agreement (which Netanyahu does), it stipulates that the PA must cease using media and schools to incite hatred of Israel. And IPI rejects the contention that some 5 million Palestinian descendants of the 1948 refugees possess an individual right to return to the state of Israel. IPI’s position is that those who wish may return to a Palestinian state produced through negotiations with Israel and that the international community and Israel should provide financial compensation to refugees who do not and their host countries.

IPI believes that a regional agreement would yield immense security and economic benefits. A united front would be a force multiplier for Israel and Arab partners alike. Over a decade, IPI estimates Israel would be able to reduce spending by 15 percent; increase tourism by 34 percent; and expand foreign trade by 14 percent. IPI envisages a \$96 billion Israeli peace dividend over 10 years, no small amount in a country whose 2016 budget is approximately \$108.6 billion.

The IPI vision is open to serious objections. In early October, the distinguished political scientist Shlomo Avineri gave forceful expression to common Israeli concerns, arguing that Palestinian refusal to recognize Israel’s legitimacy runs so deep that, in the short term, agreement on a two-state solution is impossible. But Israel, according to Avineri, is not without options. He listed a number of steps Israel should take to disengage from significant swaths of the West Bank.

The Avineri view and the IPI approach are not incompatible. In the face of Palestinian intransigence and disarray, Israel, consistent with its security requirements, could act on its own to increase Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank. At the same time, Israel could pursue quiet advocacy and quiet diplomacy throughout the Arab world to advance its long-term interest in a regional peace agreement. Modest as that combination may sound, by Middle East standards it would constitute dramatic progress.

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