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SEIZING THE MOMENT

IMAGINING A NEW MIDDLE EAST

Jack Rosen

IF the many practitioners of politics around the globe can agree on one thing, it is the notion that “timing is everything.” The 2002 Middle East peace initiative—referred to as the Saudi Peace Plan or the Arab Peace Plan—has languished for well over a decade as a striking example of an idea that failed the “timing is everything” test. But it is an idea whose time may be coming soon.

While the Plan offered the bold promise of a wide-ranging rapprochement between Israel and its neighbors, it arose in the midst of the Al Aqsa Intifadah—the second and bloodier of the two Palestinian uprisings—claiming the lives of roughly 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians between 2000 and 2005.

That might have been a propitious time to get the combatants to come to the ne-

gotiating table; but the decades-long history of the conflict tells us it is the United States that plays the role of the indispensable mediator to push and prod the parties forward. When the Beirut Summit took place in March 2002—the venue at which then-Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah made his peace proposal—America was still in a state of shock from the events of 9/11, in the midst of being engaged in a war in Afghanistan, and one year away from invading Iraq.

In short, the timing was awful. But the wheel has turned more than once in the region, and the outlook for Israelis and Palestinians—as well as the key outside players—has changed. Certainly, peace seems no closer today than a decade ago; but the real threat of ever-widening Iranian hegemony has served to concentrate the minds of many

Peace seems no closer today than a decade ago; but the real threat of ever-widening Iranian hegemony has served to concentrate the minds of many Arab leaders in ways that could produce a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

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Hillary Rodham Clinton and Jack Rosen

Arab leaders in ways that could produce a once-in-a-generation opportunity. We are witnessing a historically disruptive moment. Fear is a powerful motivator.

THREATS IN THE GULF

While Israel has carried the banner for those in the region who see Iran as a dangerous, even existential, threat, the Arab Gulf States also are in the crosshairs.

For example, Tehran has long menacingly eyed Shia-majority Bahrain, with occasional indiscreet and revealing comments by the regime of the mullahs suggesting the small island nation ought to become the newest province of Iran. But as an Arab Member State of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain's

religious character may not be the trump card that defines its future. Even Manama's ethnic-Persian citizens are highly dubious about life under the Ayatollahs. Still, Iran's tentacles are long and its ambitions great—as, for instance, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon can attest.

Indeed, Iran's growing influence in the Arabian Peninsula has ratcheted up the stakes dramatically for the entire region. In recent months—with dangerous Persian proxies finding increased success—GCC members have set aside old rivalries and tensions in the interest of creating a more solid front.

The December 2014 GCC meeting in Doha found broad agreement as to the most serious common threats. As Al Jazeera

trumpeted, the meeting in Qatar was an important step in diminishing internal GCC conflict and focusing sharply the regional organization's attention on the twin dangers of Iran and ISIS. As recently as mid-March 2015, the Emir of Qatar made a personal trip to meet with President Obama to discuss the Iran threat and review opportunities that have the potential to change the political landscape. He is not alone among regional leaders in trying to gain President Obama's ear in the hope of convincing the White House that the Middle East requires priority attention, as well as more active involvement of the United States.

As David Petraeus, President Obama's former CIA Director and perhaps the top military strategist of our time recently said, "I would argue that the foremost threat to [...] broader regional equilibrium is not the Islamic State; rather, it is Shiite militias, many backed by—and some guided by—Iran."

Petraeus, who still consults with the White House, argues the Iranian regime "is ultimately part of the problem, not the solution" to the region's issues.

The most powerful Gulf player, Saudi Arabia, has been the most outspoken.

For many years, Saudi princes have traveled to Western capitals to sound the alarm about Iran—especially with respect to Tehran's decades' old, multi-billion dollar effort to acquire nuclear weapons. Their opeds have filled newspapers, whilst their advocacy—sometimes taking the form of a charm offensive and at other times utilizing threats—has been constant.

The great irony is that while it has become more politically isolated in recent years, many of the Gulf states have quietly but unmistakably shown they are willing to think about Israel in a new light.

The entire Gulf community has relied heavily on the United States to stand with its traditional friends and allies in the continuing Sunni-Shia struggle. Recently, however, trust in the United States has diminished; doubts about the White House's commitment to stop Iran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons are common—not even

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's personal pleas for patience in Riyadh were able to forestall the kingdom's recent announcement that it is taking initial steps to attain nukes.

Throughout the Gulf and across the Arab world, today there is a willingness to think anew—in good ways and bad—about old relationships and assumptions. The strength and reliability of decades-long ties with the United States is under review through-

out the Sunni Middle East—given the general Arab unhappiness over U.S.-Iran negotiations on nuclear weapons.

None of this has been lost on Israel. The great irony is that while it has become more politically isolated in recent years, many of the Gulf states have quietly but unmistakably shown they are willing to think about Israel in a new light. Israelis have begun working under the radar with some neighbors who see a nuclear Iran—rather than Israel—as the greatest threat to stability and security in the Middle East.

Whether these events alone are enough to drive them further into each other's arms remains to be seen; but it wouldn't be the first time unintended consequences produced profound change. If a cost-benefit analysis showed that the best way to achieve enhanced security and prosperity was via a broad rapprochement between Israel, the Palestinians, and most of the Arab world—as outlined in the 2002 Arab Peace Plan—it might well become the consensus vehicle to satisfy core interests endangered by Iran.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

With the prevalence of long-term economic stagnation widely evident across the Middle East—from North Africa across the

Arab world to Mesopotamia—Israel stands out in stark contrast from most of its neighborhood. The exceptions, of course, are the regimes blessed with enviable natural resources. While they have bet all their marbles for sustaining political and economic security on their hydrocarbon industries, one day they may rue the fact they have not done enough to diversify their economies.

Achieving a peace sanctioned by the larger Arab world would generate vast opportunities across the region.

The lack of economic progress in much of the Arab world has been chronicled for decades, and is attributed to many things. For example, beginning in 2002, the United Nations issued a series of

Arab development reports that cited three major "development deficits" to progress. These roadblocks were defined as: knowledge, women's empowerment, and freedom.

Even in the relatively successful Gulf, economic prosperity has not flowed down to all citizens. Whether it is a lack of economic diversification or one or more of the factors noted in the development reports, Gulf regimes should be concerned about issues of inequality, pockets of dissent, and the one-dimensional nature of their economies. These leave them overly dependent on fluctuations beyond their full control.

Famously known as the “Start up Nation” for its booming high tech industries, Israel has not been spared from the vagaries of other market economies. Income disparity, for example, is extremely high; but quality education for all citizens and a risk-taking culture that breeds both innovation and leadership make it well situated for long-term growth and prosperity—especially if and when its security problems are resolved.

Having had its economic growth tied throughout its existence to defense and security needs has resulted in somewhat contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, through necessity Israel has built its own weapons infrastructure—allowing it to export various munitions in the world market, which helps its trade balance sheet. On the other hand, the country still devotes an inordinate percentage of its GNP to defense spending. Freed from that burden, its economy no doubt would soar to new heights.

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With its cutting-edge position in countless applications in medicine, biomedical research, and agricultural innovations, as well as an array of IT products, Israel is already the envy of many emerging economies—seen by many as a desirable partner. Israel’s development and trade officials are popular guests in China,

India, and the world’s other major markets.

It doesn’t take a wild imagination to understand the potentially enormous benefits of a political breakthrough between the “High Tech Nation” and a group of oil-driven economies in search of investment ideas and a pathway to economic diversity through twenty-first-century opportunities. Such ties might even lead to new hope in the wider region—especially

among the vast number of idle and underemployed young Arabs, who see the world passing them by. It could be the spark that creates an economic surge, fomenting a spirit of entrepreneurialism extending to key Arab nations—most notably including Egypt and Jordan—which already enjoy relatively quiet borders with Israel, albeit in the form of a cold peace that does not yet involve economic, cultural, or other links.

Successfully negotiating an end-of-conflict treaty would constitute the single most dramatic set of changes in the region in a century, and usher in opportunities that would give true meaning to the notion of an Arab Spring. Nothing would do more harm to the region’s extremists than to see a silent majority rise up to assert national prerogatives by pursuing less ideological and more pragmatic options based on the vision of regional economic cooperation, addressing the shortcomings outlined in the UN development reports, and broad based social and political modernization.

Though seemingly far-fetched today, the idea that all these efforts to address the Arab future could include meaningful and productive ties with Israel is less remote than most believe. The main missing ingredient is creative thinking and imaginative leadership that believes Israel can turn from being a regional outcast to becoming part of the regional solution. Assuming the self-interest of a new and better life for the average citizen in much of the region is a winning argument.

REBUILDING GAZA

In the context of a successful peace initiative, Gaza can be seen either as the largest hurdle to surmount in the quest to achieve a political settlement, or as a great opportunity.

Events on the ground have a way of surprising us, and only someone unaware of Gaza’s sad history would suggest easy answers. Conventional wisdom holds that the most salient factors in seeing Gaza clearly include the vicious Hamas-Fatah rivalry; that Hamas is the ideological extension of its parent organization, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood; that Hamas is dependent on, and acts as the proxy of, Iran and its Revolutionary Guard; that large swaths of the Strip reveal unlivable,

bombed-out neighborhoods where potable water and electric power are available only intermittently; and where unemployment is extremely high and governance almost entirely absent.

Further, the typical international aid conferences that take place with regularity—and which provide little more than flowery words and unkept promises of financial assistance—demonstrate

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the cynicism of both Western governments and the oil wealthy Arab countries. For its part, Israel remains under heavy international pressure to allow unrestricted aid to flow into Gaza—with no acknowledgment that Hamas continues to misappropriate reconstruction materials by building more terror tunnels, whilst embezzling humanitarian assistance to support its friends. The nearly two million Palestinians in Gaza are surely exhausted and frustrated after nearly 10 years of living under a terrorist regime sustained by outside forces offering only more conflict and misery—with not a single realistic, tangible political or economic plan for change.

But there is another way to look at the situation—hard as it may be to see much hope.

Though Iran would work hard to block anything that diminished the stature of its Palestinian proxy, Hamas could not survive in its present form in the face of a unified Arab world in which Palestinians would have the genuine opportunity to achieve statehood.

An agreement supported by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi

Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, and most of North Africa would be decisive—especially with the United States, Russia, China, and other major countries on board.

Could this come about through the same channels as in the past, with the United States trying to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians—as attempted by every American president in recent memory? Almost certainly not.

But could it happen in the framework of the 2002 initiative, wherein the wider Arab community takes the lead in a way that speaks to Israel's security needs? As Israeli scholar and activist Alex Mintz has argued, "Such a coalition is Hamas's greatest nightmare."

It's a nightmare scenario—not only because it would end Hamas's dreams of destroying Israel, but also because it would lead to the demise of Hamas as we know it. Amidst its political ashes would rise the first genuine opportunity for investment to alter Gaza's landscape. One of the main reasons putative funders speak loudly in front of the cameras, but then fail to deliver

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Under new management, Gaza could be expected to receive priority attention for the first time from GCC states—not to mention Western countries that could assume their investments would not be squandered. It is a reasonable expectation that in this scenario Gaza would stabilize and begin to flourish. It is not out of the question to think that within a decade of reconstruction, Gaza could become a magnet and a showcase: the beginning of a twenty-first-century Singapore in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For those around the world that insist on pointing fingers at Israel—and who have ignored the price paid by average Palestinian families in Gaza for the destructive role of their leaders—the time will come when their good will and intentions will be tested. But even absent that obligation, investment will come because time will demonstrate that it's a wise business decision.

The time seems right for a comprehensive effort that puts on the front burner the idea that many in the Sunni world are ready to move beyond old arrangements that hold back their progress.

No one should be surprised that Israelis will be near the front of the line. They have been stymied for obvious reasons, but Israelis are eager to back real change—and they know Gaza's success will enhance Israel's security and prosperity. After all, Israelis and Palestinians have formed business relationships for decades in the West Bank. There is no shortage of Israelis with business know-how who have proposed reconstruction plans and who are ready for partnerships with responsible counterparts in Gaza who share the Singapore vision. Without the terrorist presence of Iran-backed Hamas, there is no reason a successful peace plan can't create a new and inviting investment environment that welcomes Israelis, and one day catapults Gaza into the twenty-first century.

The dirty little secret about the persistent Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that there can be no final winner or final loser. Ultimately, they will either win together or lose together. If peace comes, one side's prosperity will reinforce the wellbeing of the other. Their destinies are linked, and while all people must be free to pursue independent paths, the potential exists over time to create partner-

ships that can serve to advance a variety of mutual interests.

ISRAELI PERSPECTIVES

While the particulars have changed, the siege mentality generations of Israelis have lived with persists after more than six decades. As they look around the region, there is little to suggest meaningful change will arrive soon.

Even before its birth, through its War of Independence in 1948, and in all the years until today, Israel never has had an opportunity to work out its differences with the Palestinians without the intervention of outside Arab countries. Their combined forces attacked the fledgling state in the hope of snuffing it out in its crib; and when that didn't work, Egypt took Gaza for itself while Jordan took the West Bank.

Needless to say, this was not done for the good of the Palestinian people, and the land grab was not sanctioned by the international community. Evidently, for nearly two decades it never occurred to Palestinians, Jordanians, or the international community that a Palestinian state should be established on those territories.

When three outside Arab states provoked the pivotal Six Day War in 1967, the aim was not to redress any perceived wrong done to the Palestinians, but to try to eradicate the then 19-year-old country.

The history of the conflict demonstrates that every time Arab states took it upon themselves to try to eliminate Israel, the

If the Gulf states, together with Egypt and Jordan, emerge as forces Israel believes are reliable, and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas coalition can be diminished, Netanyahu may yet surprise his critics—at home, in Ramallah, in Washington and elsewhere around the globe.

Palestinians paid the heaviest price whilst Israel got blamed. The moment at which we have arrived today may be one where the Arab world finally could be mobilized to make a positive contribution—not because over time they have fallen in love with Israel, but because therein may lie the salvation to their own existential problems.

The essence of the 2002 Arab Peace Plan was remarkable for its promise that reaching the finish line would provide Israel not just an agreement with the Palestinians, but a comprehensive deal with all its neighbors—opening up political and economic opportunities throughout the region.

Understandably, many Israelis now see the glass as more than half empty. Security problems abound in every direction.

Hezbollah has moved into parts of southern Syria to expand its presence along Israel's border, and other terror organizations such as the Al-Nusra Front and even ISIS elements are literally meters away from Israel in the once relatively calm Golan Heights. In the south, Hamas actually boasts that it is working feverishly to rehabilitate its tunnel system meant to get inside Israel to kill civilians. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas—now ensconced in the eleventh year of his four-year term of office—seems preoccupied not with ending corruption and improving governance, or even negotiating directly with Israel, but with erecting more statues and naming more public squares to “honor” terrorists whose claim to fame is killing Israelis.

In this context, a preponderant skepticism reigns in Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent reelection reveals again the power of fear and insecurity as Israelis assess their nation's place in a hostile Middle East. The consensus view is that reviving direct talks between Palestinians and Israelis is futile for the foreseeable future. It's possible, though, that starting from a different vantage point—which has been necessary for years—may have received a boost as a consequence of the election.

Revisiting the Arab Peace Plan could give Netanyahu a lifeline to demonstrate he seeks solutions, with a broader approach coming to possibly offer more assurance that moderate Arabs are potential allies to address the shared Iran problem and terror threats. If the Gulf states, together with Egypt and Jordan, emerge as forces Israel believes are reliable, and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas coalition can be diminished, Netanyahu may yet surprise his critics—at home, in Ramallah, in Washington and elsewhere around the globe.

Many in the Gulf have said privately for many years that they are receptive to a normalization of relations with Israel—but that they do not want to go first.

One key difference now from when the Arab Peace Plan was introduced in 2002 is widespread Arab awareness of the acute peril they face. If Israel was uncertain about the meaning and intent of Arab outreach a decade ago, Iran's drive for nuclear weapons has made it abundantly clear that most of the Sunni world shares Israel's profound worries today. There may never be a better time for Israel to act on this dynamic.

Furthermore—at least for some Arab states—recognition of the futility of basing an entire foreign policy on anti-Israel diatribes is not entirely new. For example, Israel had a representative office in Qatar 15 years ago. Neither party made a huge fuss about it,

but neither was it a big secret. Things changed, and the office was closed, but Qatar was the canary in the coal mine that provided a hint of the benefits that could accrue under a cooperative arrangement. Neither side has forgotten those days, and surely there are many who reminisce at the thought of what might have been—secure in the knowledge that forging a mutually beneficial relationship was doable then, and is possibly so again today.

In fact, many Israelis have moved past the theoretical to the practical. There already exists a forward-looking community of investors, business people, scientists, and others who communicate with and quietly travel to see counterparts in the GCC and elsewhere. With an existing Qatari model in mind, conversations have taken place again in Doha, the United Arab Emirates, Riyadh, and elsewhere—and the common Iranian threat only propels these initiatives forward with greater urgency. Just as in Israel, the time seems right for a comprehensive effort that puts on the front burner the idea that many in the Sunni world are ready to move beyond old arrangements that hold back their progress.

Hamas's nightmare of better days through regional cooperation with Israel would be just as much a disaster for those pulling strings in Tehran as for those launching rockets in Gaza.

Even though the private sectors are ready, political leaders will have to make new outreach a priority—a brave decision to sweep away irrational fears from another era, predicated on recognizing that national security realities have changed. This is why people everywhere crave strong leaders who can see around obstacles and embrace progress.

Many in the Gulf have said privately for many years that they are receptive to a normalization of relations with

Israel—but that they do not want to go first. Just about everyone has been willing to be second in line. If they are serious about addressing the new threats to their security, this is the time for someone to take the lead, bear the burden, and take the Arab world forward. Israel is the

place—and not Iran—to test the theory of whether an outstretched hand can be met with an unclenched fist.

THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

As the preeminent global power from the post-World War II era until today, the United States has been viewed as the only outside country with the ability to play a facilitating role in bringing recalcitrant parties to the table and influencing the outcome

of negotiations. For all the current discussion about America's diminished capacity to lead, Washington still carries great weight.

The long wars in which the United States has been engaged for more than a decade understandably have lessened the public's enthusiasm for military adventures; but given the many tools available in its basket—diplomacy, economic assistance, intelligence sharing, political support—the United States remains an indispensable partner in the Middle East. The prime variable is the quality of American leadership.

No one can dispute the strategic value to the region and the world of a successful initiative that practically reinvents the modern Middle East. Though it always has been an absurd fallacy to argue that peace between Israel and the Palestinians would be the balm to soothe every regional problem, it is also undeniably true that a broader rapprochement that included much of the Arab world will create new alliances and partnerships that could address many long-standing problems. Some (not all) of the region's terrorist problems would be easier to deal with, moderates in most states would gain at

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the expense of extremists, and attention could be turned towards economic challenges rather than the pursuit of destructive ends.

Furthermore, as the process of working toward a plan along the lines of the 2002 Middle East peace initiative would gain more traction, the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Revolutionary Guard would suffer a major setback in the drive for regional hegemony. Hamas's nightmare of better days through regional cooperation with Israel would be just as much a disaster for those pulling strings in Tehran as for those launching rockets in Gaza.

The last six years have witnessed a desire by Washington to “pivot” to the problems posed by various Asian nations—especially a rising China. Few would argue with the assessment that American economic and security interests should focus intensely on the challenges along the Pacific Rim. But a great nation must be able to do more than one big thing at a time. It cannot afford to turn away from a region now on fire—a part of the world in which it has historic, economic, moral, and security interests at stake.

If it has given either friend or foe the impression that it is looking for a way out of the mess—one it in fact may have inadvertently exacerbated—that must be corrected. The idea that the United States simply faces too many problems at home or elsewhere abroad to remain an active player in the region is just as misguided as the notion that it is the world's policeman.

The White House today seems to believe the potential exists to pacify Iran through an agreement on its nuclear weapons program. Whatever one may believe about its virtues and shortcomings, even a narrow agreement—which is precisely what the parties seek—ignores fundamental questions about how a new Middle East might look in the context of such as “success.” Suffice it to say that Iran and the coalition it brings to the table—lackeys in Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and even Iraq—are not candidates to play a positive role.

On the other hand, the potential for Israel and many of its neighbors to enter into meaningful negotiations is real. Leaving aside Iran's allies and proxies, Israel's neighbors are not interested in prolonging war. They have come to recognize that Israel is here to stay, and that they have far more pressing interests—not least of which is to defend themselves against a nuclear Iran further emboldened to expand its Shia Islamic revolution far beyond its borders.

Moreover, this is a project where the United States can play a central role—rees-

tablishing the goodwill it has lost by seeming to downplay the concerns of much of the Sunni Arab world—especially in the Gulf. This would require bold action—but the United States would not have to go it alone. Resurrecting and prioritizing the 2002 Arab Peace Plan would serve Washington well in most of the Arab world in which it has lost ground; in addition, it would instantly gain the support and backing of European allies eager to see reassertion of American leadership in the region.

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS FINALLY COME

I travel often and extensively in the Middle East and have never before felt the same mix of trepidation and hope. It is hard not to focus on the front-page stories of a region spiraling downward into more chaos and violence. Not for a moment do I fail to take serious note of the repeated Iranian threats of nuclear annihilation directed at Israel; the genuine risks of widespread nuclear proliferation; the possibility that terrorists might secure such a weapon; that ISIS savagely is murdering as many Muslims as possible who disagree with its extremist ideology; and that a despotic Iran holds sway in a Shia arc that extends to the Mediterranean—with only ISIS momentarily standing in its way.

But in my time in several Gulf capitals, leaders repeatedly have expressed their openness to pursuing a new Middle East. This is not the usual talk

I have heard in the past that I interpreted as warm Arab hospitality to a foreign guest. These are conversations initiated by leaders no longer willing to stay quiet in the face of what they perceive as growing threats to their countries, and a need to communicate more openly their vision of the future to Israeli leaders.

In the last couple of years, I have outlined the concept of “Science Diplomacy” as a foot in the door for partnership models that benefit a variety of stakeholders. Israel's cutting-edge technological innovations know no borders; Arab partners no less than others in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas are desirable collaborators to achieve peace through prosperity. The United States has its role to play as a facilitator. It isn't a novel idea, but it's one that's ready for prime time: there's no reason that what the American Jewish Congress and the American Council for World Jewry have succeeded in doing on a small scale can't be done throughout the region as part of a larger peace plan.

To be sure, ideas like “Science Diplomacy” within the larger Arab Peace initiative will not cure all that ails the Middle East; the road to gain both Israeli and Palestinian support will surely be bumpy, as usual. Everyone knows that

the details of final borders, the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees, and all the other disputes, haven't gotten easier to fix. That is precisely the reason the time has come to try both old and new ideas. Deferring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict until the region is calm and placid is an unacceptable prescription for never acting at all.

One thing we know with certainty is that there is no such thing as the status quo in the Middle East. Dramatic events occur almost daily, and the condition of the region either improves or deteriorates. We are not past the days when appalling news requires more than condemnation; concerted action in response to violent extremists unleashing more outrages is essential.

Yet we should not forget the inherent potential that exists among people of good will—the large majority of whom desperately want to find the right path out of the maze of troubles that infect the region. The first step in imagining a new Middle East is to pursue this long-gestating idea of a broad approach with the entire Sunni community to achieve peace and security between Israel, the Palestinians, and their neighbors—an idea whose time has finally come. ●