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Looking straight at the initiative

By **Asher Susser**

The Saudi peace initiative is a welcome one. Even if Israel does not accept all its details, it should not reject it and should see it as a basis for discussion. However, in contrast to the statements by Elie Podeh ("The substance of semantics", December 14), it seems to me that it is impossible to conduct a serious discussion on the Saudi peace plan without knowing exactly what it says - that is, to analyze it textually. Those who formulated it discussed every sentence seriously. Why shouldn't we do the same?

The issue is mainly about the clause dealing with the refugee problem. The initiative was first approved at the Beirut summit in March 2002, and was approved again at the Riyadh summit in March 2007. In Riyadh it was determined that: "The achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem should be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194 while rejecting all forms of patriation [resettlement]"(in Arabic - tawtin).

This is where the real problem lies, since the beginning of the statement is not consistent with the end. How can an agreement with Israel be arrived at on the refugee question, which clearly cannot be based on the return of millions of refugees, if from the outset the possibility of resettling refugees who will not return to Israel is rejected?

Advertisements in Hebrew-language newspapers that published the content of the initiative, translated the term tawtin as "naturalization" instead of "patriation [resettlement]."

Thus the real significance was blurred. In Palestinian and Arab discourse, the meaning of tawtin is the opposite of return. The meaning of the words "while rejecting all forms of patriation" is therefore, the negating of any solution that is not consistent with return.

However, "rejecting all forms of naturalization" is an ambiguous formulation, inexact and also incomprehensible. Indeed, in the official translation to English the word *tawtin* was not translated as naturalization, but as patriation, that is, the opposite of repatriation.

The problem is that this position, which opposes all resettlement, is impossible for Israel. Marwan Muashar, Jordan's first ambassador to Israel, who eventually became Jordan's foreign minister, who was among the main writers of the first Saudi initiative, reveals in his recently published book that he immediately realized the problem in this formulation, and explained to his Arab colleagues that because of it, Israel will have a great deal of difficulty accepting the initiative in its entirety. Nevertheless, in the closing statement of the Beirut Summit, which was published along with the initiative, what was said about refugees was even more extreme. The statement calls for "the right of return of the Palestine refugees on the basis of the resolutions of international legitimacy and the principles of international law including General Assembly Resolution 194."

It also asserts: "The [Arab] leaders regard Israel as bearing the full legal responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem and for their expulsion and reaffirm their total rejection of plans of solution or the schemes and the attempts intended to resettle them [*tawinihin*] outside their country."

In the Palestinian discourse, for the PLO, Fatah and Hamas alike, Resolution 194 is the international seal of approval for the right of return. The PLO/Fatah are prepared to negotiate with Israel over the implementation of the principle of return, while Hamas is still thinking in terms of imposing return on Israel solely in accordance with a Palestinian decision. According to the PLO/Fatah position, Israel will have to accept the principle of return. The main debate would then be, from their perspective, only on the extent of this return, as indeed it became apparent from recent reports on the Annapolis process.

If the ads in Hebrew papers have wrongly translated the refugee clause, in billboards advertising the Saudi initiative to the public, the matter of the refugees has been completely left out. By misleading, concealing and evading, we will not advance public

discourse. Debate must be on all the details, both the more and the less convenient, as they are.