

HENRY SIEGMAN

Peace is blocked by the Three Nos of Jerusalem

The Arab League meeting in Cairo yesterday was unprecedented in its overture to Israel, offering to meet Israeli representatives to clarify the peace initiative that the League re-endorsed at its meeting in Riyadh on March 28. The two events underscore the complete reversal of the paradigm that for so long has defined the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the effort by armies of several Arab countries to abort its birth, until well past the war of 1967 which left Israel in control of all of Palestine, Israel was seen by much of the world as both victim and peace-seeker. Arab countries were seen as warmongers and rejectionists. The paradigm was reinforced by the "Three Nos of Khartoum" when, in 1967, Arab countries pledged there would be no peace, no negotiations and no recognition of the Jewish state.

This image of the Arab world's total rejection of Israel persisted into the 1980s, even after it became clear that the prime minister, Golda Meir, had ignored peace initiatives by the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, for which Israel paid dearly in the October war of 1973. Nor did a change in Arab attitudes to the Jewish state implicit in the Saudi Fahd plan, adopted by the Arab League in 1981, prompt any rethinking of that image in Israel or in the west.

Since then – particularly in the aftermath of the Oslo accords in 1993 and the MENA Economic Summits hosted by various Arab countries – Arab rejection of Israel's legitimacy has largely dissipated. Well before the Saudi initiative of 2002 senior Arab officials sought to persuade Yasser Arafat, former Palestine Liberation Organisation leader, to accept peace terms offered by Ehud Barak, Israel's former prime minister, at Camp David in 2000.

Then came the Saudi initiative, in which the most conservative of Arab countries and the most conservative of

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Saudi princes, Crown Prince Abdullah, declared that Saudi Arabia would fully normalise its relations with Israel and welcome its embassy and flag in its capital as soon as Israel ended its conflict with the Palestinians, an offer endorsed by every Arab country.

The Israeli response to this tectonic change in Arab psychology and politics was worse than rejection: it was complete indifference, as if this 180-degree turnround in Arab thinking had no meaning for Israel and its future in the region.

Ehud Olmert, prime minister, and his government have reflexively rejected every Arab peace offer, whether from Saudi Arabia, Syria, the Arab League or Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president. Ariel Sharon's and Mr Olmert's policies these past seven years have shaped a new paradigm in which Israel is the rejectionist party. The Three Nos of Khartoum have been replaced by the Three Nos of Jerusalem: no negotiations with Syria, no acceptance of the Arab initiative and, above all, no peace talks with the Palestinians.

Mr Olmert and his associates devote their diplomatic skills to finding ever more tortured pretexts for blocking every opportunity for peacemaking, while posturing as peace-lovers in search of "reasonable" Arabs who qualify as partners for peace. Their goal remains to prevent a peace process that would require them to halt Israel's expansion of its settlements and its effort to cut off East Jerusalem from its Palestinian hinterland.

This deception worked well for a while and perhaps still convinces president George W. Bush and those he relies on to understand the Middle East – the folks who gave us the Iraq war – but has worn thin with much of the rest of the world, including many Americans. Several US columnists who bought into the old paradigm, or avoided the subject for fear of being labelled anti-Israel, now reject it.

Israel has lost the high moral ground. It will not regain it until its citizens elect a government that understands that the price of peace – whose outline was agreed to by both sides in the Taba talks after the failed Camp David negotiations – is far less than the cost of its current rejectionism.

To be sure, the moral high ground does not necessarily provide security. But for a western country – located in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world – that has been the beneficiary of vastly disproportionate US and western support because it has been seen as a moral avatar, the loss of that high ground could not be more devastating to its long-term security.

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