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A Linguistic Analysis of the 2002/2007 Arab Peace Initiative Documents

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1. Opening

A. General

2. Textual Analysis

A. General Atmosphere

- (1) Press Release**
- (2) Other 2002 documents**
- (3) Previous documents**
- (4) Later documents**

B. Structure of the Text

C. Linguistic Analysis

- (1) The "Request Clause"**
- (2) Terminology**

3. Conclusions

A Linguistic Analysis of the 2002/2007 Arab Peace Initiative Documents¹

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“Israeli [political] circles appear to err in understanding Arab positions, and to evaluate them wrongly.” (President Mubarak, speech at the 2000 Cairo summit Meeting).

1. Opening

A. General

The phrasing of the Arab peace initiative of 2002, which has been endorsed by the 2003 Teheran summit of the organization of Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers and by the 2007 Beirut summit meeting of the Arab League, supports the rationale for its acceptance by Israel.

In 1981 King Fahd of Saudi Arabia came up with his peace plan, which in 2002 was endorsed by the Arab League. Four years later even HAMAS expressed readiness to consider accepting the initiative (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8/2/06). However, it is important to note that according to one of the Initiative's first promoters, Marwan Muashir, neither the initiative at large nor its details were accepted easily by all Arab countries, and that side by side with the new style of the 2002 Press Release on the Arab Peace Initiative, documents containing the old one were published at the same summit meeting.

2. Textual Analysis

Attempting to extract the message from a document such as the 2002 Press Release entails a double task: to establish the meaning of the phrases used for their phrasers, but not less important – to guess their guess of the Israeli perception of the same terms.

A. General Atmosphere

(1) Press Release: The style of the 2002 press release of the Arab Peace Initiative is the warmest of any Arab document which has ever dealt with Israel. According to the evidence of its very compiler, it was phrased so as to convey a positive message and pacific atmosphere, which it does by a combination of means, among which are:

- (a) A direct invitation to the Israelis to adopt the initiative;
- (b) Refraining from offensive phrasings or accusations. For example, the document requires “complete withdrawal” of Israel from all Arab territories,

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered and published in Hebrew at the Jerusalem Institute in 2007: 'Leshon Yoamt ha-Ligah Ha-Aravit.' (the Language of the Arab League Initiative) in: Michael, K. (Ed.) (2007). *Yozmat Ha-Ligah ha-Aravit – Ha-'omnan Hiadammut Historit?* (The Arab League Initiative – A Historical Opportunity?) (Hebrew). Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.

whereas in some of the other documents the requirement is accompanied by “unconditional,” or “with no exception” (*kÁffah*).

(c) The respectful choice of words;

(d) For the first time in all the Arab summit documents: A statement to the effect that there is no military solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict. It, perhaps, results from Emir Abdallah’s speech at the meeting, in which he invited Israel to wager on peace, as her wagering on war has not produced the expected results for her;

(e) The opposition to bloodshed.

It is important to add that all these are expressed without concealing Arab demands from Israel. The fact that the document declares that it reiterates the 1996 summit resolutions, but in fact only refers to (1) peace as the Arab strategic choice; (2) the appeal to international umbrella; and (3) the requirement that Israel make the same choice, may render the additions, and omissions, in our document of special importance.

(2) Other 2002 documents: The above is not true to the same extent for other 2002 documents, namely the Declaration and the Draft, in which Israel is treated much in the traditional negative manner: she is a regional threat; she is laden with the responsibility for the refugee problem and for hampering the peace process; she does not abide by her agreements and commitments, and is guilty of war crimes, for which she is openly threatened with sanctions.

(3) Previous documents:

This negative phraseology is most apparent in the documents prior to 2002. Their vocabulary includes words such “infiltration” (*taghalghul*), a word which is strongly tinged with unfaithfulness; or “violation” (*intihak*) a word that carries a strong illicit sexual meaning. Other words to the same effects are “*ghashim*” (tyrannical, brute, oppressing, taking another's property wrongfully &, or by force), *wahshi* (bestly, brute, barbaric, ruthless), or *jara'im bashiYáh* (hideous, grisly crimes.)

Israel, occasionally referred to as Zionist, is an aggressor, expansionistic, and racist. She engages in massacres, extermination and expulsion (*ibÁdah wa-tahjir*), and on the whole violates human rights. She also conducts state terrorism and desecrates holy places.

(4) Later documents:

The most frequent issue in the pre-2002 documents period was Arab solidarity, a position for which it was replaced after that year by the Arab Peace Initiative. In general, the style of 2007 summit documents is one of openness, pluralism, and humanism, connecting these to the values of Islam. However, here too, there are exceptions, such as certain expressions in King Abdallah's speech.

B. Structure of the Text

The structure of the 2002 Press Release is rather unusual in that it refers to some issues twice, once as a summary of Prince Abdallah’s speech, and again as items in the body of the document. The occurrences, however, are not identical, as in the summary

neither the refugee problem, nor the termination of the conflict are mentioned. A possible explanation of the repetition may be the wish to play down the impact of the term “return” of the refugees, to open the door for Israel to negotiate the issue, to express gratitude and appreciation to the Saudi initiative, or to put this contribution in relief for the American administration.

Also, in the title of the document, the initiative is referred to as “Arab” rather than “Saudi.” According to one Arab commentator, the reason is the Saudi apprehension over possible opposition at home.

C. Linguistic Analysis

(1) The "Request Clause"

One key clause in the 2002 Press Release which I propose to analyse reads as follows: "[The council] asks (*talab*) Israel to reconsider (*I'adat al-nazar*) her policies and to incline to peace (*tajnah lil-silm*) [by] declaring that just peace is her strategic option too." This sentence is important for more than one reason: (i) the use of the verb "ask", rather than the customary "demand". Traditionally this verb only served Arab official documents in reference to other Arab or foreign countries; (ii) the invitation to "reconsider" rather than the traditional, if at all, "change", and most importantly – (iii) the Quranic quotation of "incline to peace."

Astonishingly, this expression is not quoted in the official English translation of the Arab League, and consequently neither is it cited in other languages. This omission is significant, as the verse is a cornerstone of the Islamic law of war and peace, providing authorization to make peace with an enemy. The text itself is taken from the Quran (Anfal, 8:60-1) which reads (Yusuf Ali's translation): "But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah."

The main significance of the reference in the present context seems to be the following: as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become, for better or worse, a declaredly religious business, it is necessary to offer a religious way of settling it. Such a step is indispensable for both the Israelis, who would find a mere political solution to be short of the mark, and the Islamic world, which might consider a peace agreement with Israel a religious impossibility for more than one reason.

The verse, although recommending a positive response to a peace offer by the enemy, also advocates caution of treachery. (Muslim commentators point particularly to the treachery perpetrated by the Jewish tribe of Quraizah against the Prophet Muhammad.) It is also true that not all commentators agree about the validity of the rule that necessitates a positive response to the inclination to peace by the enemy.

(2) Terminology

(a) Refugees

The 2002 Press Release suggests the "reaching of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194." The significant addition here is the call for agreement. However, the other Beirut 2002 documents are not all of one skin with regard to the refugee problem: Prince Abdallah, in his speech,

presents the return ('*audah*) twice as an irreconcilable condition. Other documents lay the responsibility for the problem on the leaders of Israel. They also flatly reject the possibility of settling the refugees outside "their homes" (*diyar*). The use of this noun cannot but lead the Muslim reader to verses 39-40 of Surat al-Hajj which is traditionally interpreted as allowing Muslims who were driven out of their homes (*diyar*) to fight for them.

Patriation (*tautin*) of the refugees in Arab countries, which contradicts the right of return, is not flatly excluded in the Press Release, as it is in other League documents: it is rejected only in host countries in which it conflicts with their special circumstances.

As with other issues, the attitude presented by previous summit meetings is very different: in most cases the demand made is for the right of return with no exception, in some cases not even with the possibility of reparations for those who would opt for not returning.

Although Muashir specified that the offer of agreement on the solution of the refugee problem did not grant Israel the veto right, but only the possibility of reaching an agreement on the number of refugees that are to be allowed into Israel, the very raising of the possibility in such a loaded issue supports the interpretation that justice (at least in the issue at hand) would be achieved by agreement.

(b) Peace Terminology:

Peace terms used in the 2002 Press Release are five, arranged here according to frequency of use: "peace" (*salam*); "just peace" (*salam 'adil*); "comprehensive peace" (*salam shamil*); "just and comprehensive peace" (*salalm 'adil wa-shamil*); and *silm* (a synonym of *salam* – peace).

"Peace" seems to refer mainly to the stage following the fulfillment of the Arab conditions by Israel, but during the 90's it is said to have acquired for the Palestinians the negative connotation of "surrender."² "Just peace" is connected to an Israeli declaration indicating her opting strategically for it. "Comprehensive peace" refers to countries rather than to substance: all the Arab countries are committed to it. "Just and comprehensive peace" is the one opted for strategically by the Arabs.

In earlier documents the expressions centre around three nouns: "peace"; "solution" (*hall*), and "settlement" (*taswiyah*) (sometimes translated as "compromise"). These are accompanied by adjectives, which vary by number and order.

The earliest of the four is "peace." It seems that the term is used in the Peace Initiative documents in a neutral sense, as the contexts in which it was used mutually balance off one another: Arab commitment to peace (28% of the cases), in referral to foreign factors (25%), and – in condemnation of Israel (19%).

By contrast, the expression "just peace" appears to connote condemnation of Israel: it is used in this context some 50% of all six contexts; some 38% in that of Palestinian rights as well as of putting conditions to Israel, and only 12% in the context of Arab commitment to peace. This adjective seems to be the strongly associated with the refugee problem in

² Private communication by Prof. Mohammed Dajani-Daudi.

combinations with other peace nouns as well (some 20% of all peace expressions).

The third expression, namely "comprehensive peace", is quoted mostly in the context of Conditions on Israel and Palestinian rights, and in that it refers to conflicts other than the Arab-Israeli one. However, as it is much used in the Press Release, it may carry a positive message to Israel, namely that of a promise for peace by all Arab countries with normal relations with Israel, rather than a negative one, i.e., that separate agreements are out of the question.

The last peace expression is "just and comprehensive peace", whose main context is the Arab commitment to peace, followed by conditions on Israel and Palestinian rights, reference to foreign factors, and condemnation of Israel.

On the basis of the use of the above four peace expressions in the documents of the Arab League, Arab commitment to peace is the primary context in which they are employed. The appeal to foreign factors is the second most employed context (some 22%), then Condemning Israel (19%), Palestinian rights and conditions on Israel (12%), and other conflicts (9%). Hence one may, I think, conclude that the use of peace expressions in the summit meetings reveals a rather convincing commitment to peace.

(c) Jerusalem Names

The 2002 Press Release initiative has Jerusalem adjectived by "East" in the context of the capital of the Palestinian state, but this adjective is not as commonly used as other ones in the League's documents. In previous documents it was rarely used, but following the Press Release it increased considerably.

The city is mentioned in the 2002 documents by other names, and in other contexts, as well:

Al-Quds: the name is used, in 2002 as in many past documents, as the capital of the Palestinian state, as well as in the context of Israeli withdrawal. It is noteworthy that Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, in his interview with Thomas Friedman, demanded Israeli withdrawal *in* Jerusalem, Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, in his interview with Thomas Friedman, demanded Israeli withdrawal *in* Jerusalem,

This name of the city is also used in rejecting Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in condemning the recognition of Congress of this status, and in calling for measures that may amount to breaking off of diplomatic ties with any country which would do the same. In the 2007 documents three other contexts were added, namely, insistence on the Arabness of Jerusalem, objection to the "Judaization" and annexation of it, and pointing out its Islamic essence.

The name "Venerable Jerusalem" (*al-Quds al-Sharif*) appears in the 2002-7 documents four times out of eighteen cases of the mention of the city. It is used in the following order of contexts: of the Palestinian capital, of Israeli withdrawal, and of its religious status for both Islam and Christianity. However, although the name is the most religiously directed among the other names of the city, it seems to be more associated politically than religiously.

Adjectiving "Jerusalem" by "Arab" is mainly used in the context of the condemnation of Israel and the demand for Israeli withdrawal.

It therefore seems to me that the choice of "East Jerusalem" in the Press Release is more conducive to negotiation than any of the other three names.

(d) Conflict Terms:

The Arabic conflict term which is used in the 2002 Press Release is *niza'*. In the period before 2002 the use of this term was used less than *sira'*, in the 2002 documents other than the Press release *niza'* is more in use, in the Press Release it is the only one used, but in post-2002 documents the use became equal again, i.e., the use of *sira'* returned to its previous rate. While the meaning of the former is closer to "dispute", the latter is "struggle", with strong connotations of wrestling, throwing to the ground, suppressing.

Across the periods, *sira'* is preferred in all contexts except for conflicts other than the Israeli-Arab one, and the universal meaning of the term, in this order. Mostly it is use in the context of condemnation of Israel, then Demands on Israel and Palestinian Rights, thirdly; appeal to foreign factors, and Arab commitment to Peace. *Niza'*, by contrast, is significantly more in use in the context of conflicts other than the Israeli-Arab one, i.e., inter-Arab or inter-Islamic ones. That means that there is an effort on the part of the phrasers of the Press Release to play down the severity with which they perceive the Arab-Israeli conflict.

(e) Region Terms

Region terms are particularly frequent in the 1981-2001 period. It decreases in the 2002 documents other than the Press Release, goes to a significant low in the Press Release, and even lower in the post-2002 period.

They appear in the following decreasing order of contexts: conflicts other than the Israeli-Arab one, demands from Israel and Palestinian Rights, condemnation of Israel, appeal to foreign factors and, finally – Arab commitment to peace.

Specifically they are, according to frequency of use: *Mintaqah* ("the Region"), followed by *al-Sharq al-Ausat* ("The Middle East"), *al-mintaqah al-Arabiyyah* ("The Arab Region"), *Mintaqat al-Sharq al-Ausat* (The Middle East Region), and last – *Mitaqatuna* ("Our Region"), the context in which there are most region-terms is appeal to foreign factors.

(i) "The Region" (*Mintaqah*)

The contexts of the term, and hence, perhaps its meanings, have undergone some change since the beginning of the Arab peace initiative: whereas until 2002 the main context of the term was security, which is put in jeopardy by Israel, in 2007 the main context has shifted to the dangers to the region. This direction is put into deeper relief when examining the contexts themselves: "dangers" disappears in 2002, but jumps sharply again in 2007.

"Security" in the positive sense of stability stability shared by all in the region, underwent increase of use from pre-2002 documents, where it had been 30% of all its contexts, to 40% in 2002,

but in 2007 it decreased to 20%, even lower than the original average.

The term is chiefly used with an in-regional meaning, and perhaps even points to the existence, or possibility of, neighbor-relationship. The shift in context, however, may indicate frustration with the Israeli response to the initiative.

(ii) Middle East (*al-Sharq al-Ausat*):

The term *al-Sharq al-Ausat* is not used in the 2002 Press Release, but in other 2002 documents Arab efforts for peace in the region are strongly hailed. Generally speaking, the term is mostly used in the context of appeal to foreign factors, especially in calling for an "International Peace Conference" and in post-2002 – also in the context of Arab Commitment to Peace. Far below the average use is the context of Condemnation of Israel. In post-2002 documents the term is used in the context of Arab efforts for peace and concern for Israeli nuclear weapons.

(iii) "The Middle East Region" (*Mintaqat al-Sharq al-Ausat*)

The term is not used at all in the Press Release, but in other 2002 documents it is associated with threats to the region. In pre-2002 period, when it is much in use, the main use is in the context of Condemning Israel; appeal to Foreign Factors, and Demands on Israel, strongly associated with Israeli nuclear weapons and threats to the region. The connection of the term to the context of Arab Commitment to Peace is very weak indeed. The term, thus, obviously carries negative attitude towards Israel as it is so significantly used in the Condemnation of Israel context on the one hand, and so significantly underused in other Middle Eastern conflicts.

The same general attitude is maintained in the post 2002 period, although it is considerably less used than in the pre-2002 period.

(iv) "The Arab Region" (*al-Mintaqah al-Arabiyyah*)

This term, which is not used in the Press Release, but was in other 2002 documents in association with "Arab solidarity" and threats to the region, was used far below the average in the pre-2002 period, when it was associated with the demand for foreign guarantees, and with threat to the region. It disappeared completely in the post-2002 period. This term is only used significantly in three contexts: above the average - Conflicts Other than the Israeli-Arab One, and below it - Condemnation of Israel and Foreign Factors. It seems, then, to serve basically for internal consumption. It thus appears as though Arab leaders decided to cease its use once the peace initiative was endorsed in 2002.

(v) "Our Region" (*Mintaqatuna*)

This term too, seldom used, is not used in the 2002 documents. Both in pre-2002, and post-2002 periods it is only associated with Arab

solidarity and threats to the region, in the contexts of appeal to foreign factors and conflicts other than the Arab-Israeli one.

(vi) Interim Conclusions

Examination of contexts through the prism of the region terms used in the documents reveals that Arab commitment to peace increased considerably in 2002, and went down again later. Condemning Israel went down towards 2003-2007. Demand on Israel went down in 2002 to rise again afterwards. The ratio of conflicts other than the Arab-Israeli one increased gradually throughout the entire period.

In all the region terms, security plays the main role statistically. Starting in 2002, disarmament goes up to second place from its former fourth. The context of foreign factors does not appear at all prior to 2002, but then it occupies the third place with regard to region terms. The element of threat to security of the region is only introduced in 2002 (albeit in fourth place among the associations of the terms). It is interesting to note that the issue of peace only appears in the context of the proposed international peace conference.

The combination of the threat to security with the context of conflicts other than the Israeli-Arab one may point to the relatively greater importance of those conflicts in the security of the region.

3. Conclusions

On the sole basis of linguistic analysis, it seems that the 2002 Press Release reflects a will to convince its readers of its phrasers' sincere wish for peace.

I base this impression on the following linguistic indications:

1. The general character of the 2002-7 documents is far less harsh than that of earlier documents, as is its choice of words: peace terms, conflict term, refugees, names of Jerusalem, and names of the Middle East.
2. The primary issue of the post 2002 summit meetings is the peace process, which replaced that of Arab solidarity of the pre-2002 ones.
3. The use of the term *silm* may indicate application of peace in its universal sense to Israel.
4. The use of the term "region" may suggest accepting Israel into it.
5. The message that seems to be conveyed, in spite of official denials, is one of invitation to positive pre-conditioned negotiations with a degree of flexibility. The initiative is not to be considered a dictate, especially as in the Middle East negotiations start *after* an agreement of principle has been reached, and everything is always open, for worse, but also for better:
 - a. Offering "agreement" to the refugee problem.
 - b. The use of *niza'* as the term of choice for "conflict" indicates it to be treated as a soluble "dispute" through negotiations.
 - c. Reference to Jerusalem as "East."
6. The most outstanding difference between the Press Release and the other documents is in the group of conflict (573%) terms and Jerusalem names. Perhaps the message here is a change of policy with respect to the view of the conflict, of Jerusalem, and of refugees. If one adds to the Press Release

the other 2002 documents, these documents are significantly different from all others in terms of peace as well. (See table 9001).

7. The use of all terms under analysis in the period before 2002 is much less than that of both 2002 and of post-2002 periods, which may be due to Israeli reticence.
8. Official as well as popular Israeli positions towards Arab threats have always been one of trust. Perhaps it is high time to try it also for Arab peace-talk?