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The Arab Peace Initiative: Why Now?

One year on from Annapolis – the need for a regional frame for negotiations

Gabrielle Rifkind

Foreword by **HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal**

Executive Summary by
Professor Oliver Ramsbotham

November 2008

Report following an Oxford Research Group meeting on 'The Arab Peace Initiative as a Possible Exit from the Current Impasse: What needs to happen' 15-17 October 2008, Oxfordshire, UK

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About the report

This report is based on an expert roundtable, which was organised by Oxford Research Group (ORG) on 15-17 October 2008 at Charney Manor, Oxfordshire, UK, to give the Arab Peace Initiative (API) a higher profile. Present at the roundtable were senior serving and former diplomats and officials who have influence in and access to their own governments in the Arab world, Israel, US and UK. The Executive Summary aims to reflect the broad mood of the meeting. The rest of the report also draws on interviews and discussions that took place on the fringes of the meeting and during its preparation. There is no claim that all participants are in agreement on every point.

About the author

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Executive Summary

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The consensus of the meeting was that the API offers the outline of an agreement that is very much in the strategic interest of Israel. It was seen as a deal that the founders of the State of Israel would surely have embraced with characteristic boldness, and negotiated with vigour. Participants agreed that there is no alternative framework that does or can effectively guarantee the future of a Jewish democratic state on 78% of mandate Palestine within a context of regional recognition and cooperation. In the words of one participant, the API offers to "provide future generations with security, stability and prosperity" after 60 years of conflict and bloodshed.

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Foreword by HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal

Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies and former Saudi Ambassador to London and Washington

When Gabrielle Rifkind asked me to join a small roundtable discussion group on the Abdullah Peace Initiative I immediately accepted her invitation and said: "I will do as you wish". I had worked with Gabrielle on another meeting which took place in Riyadh, and appreciated her seriousness and dedication. She informed me that there were going to be Israelis involved and I asked if they were officials or not. It would not have been appropriate with officials there..

The Abdullah Peace Initiative is the vision for a future peace between the Arab world and Israel that is based on a quid pro quo: Israel will withdraw totally from all occupied Arab land, including East Jerusalem as the capital of a sovereign Palestinian state, in return for total Arab recognition, end of hostilities, and normalisation between all the Arab states. A settlement for the Palestine refugees would be mutually agreed to by both parties.

This proposal became the Arab Peace Initiative in March 2002 at the Arab summit meeting held in Beirut. All the Arab states signed up to the Initiative then and remain committed to it until today. The Hamas attack on Natanya and Ariel Sharon's invasion of the West Bank eclipsed the Initiative when it was approved in 2002. Ariel Sharon's dismissal of the Initiative as the "most dangerous" proposition facing Israel, in the words of Sharon's advisor, Dov Weisglass, equally dampened any enthusiasm in Israel for the Initiative. All the Arab summits held since Beirut have reiterated Arab commitment to the Initiative.

Last year, Ehud Olmert expressed guarded and qualified understanding of "elements" of the Initiative, as he said, and, last September, at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York, Shimon Peres saw positive elements in the "spirit" of the Initiative. These are encouraging signs from Israeli officials, but they show misunderstanding of the Initiative.

Henry Seigman has expressed the view that the Initiative is not a plan that can be negotiated. Rather it is a view of the end result of negotiation. He is right. What has allowed the Initiative to withstand Israeli rejection, and American and European lack of interest is the soundness and viability of the Initiative. It is the clarity of the Initiative's vision, that is now bringing it to Israeli and worldwide appreciation and interest.

The positive response of the Israelis who joined the discussion group is an encouraging sign that, as Israelis become more aware of the quid pro quo offered by the Initiative, they will see the great opportunity that this vision of a final and definitive peace between Israel and the Arab world offers.

Turki Al Faisal

Executive Summary

President Shimon Peres has appealed for Israel to "stop holding separate negotiations and go for a regional peace agreement with the Arab states and the Arab League".

The Arab Peace Initiative (API), proposed in March 2002 by all 22 members of the Arab League, offered a definitive end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, full recognition for the State of Israel, and the establishment of normal relations and mutual guarantees of future security. In exchange, the API asked for full Israeli withdrawal from lands occupied in June 1967, including Syrian and Lebanese territories, a just settlement to the Palestinian refugee problem 'to be agreed upon' in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194, and the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem.

The meeting recognised the API as a remarkable and historic document, effectively reversing the three 'noes' of the 1967 Khartoum Arab Summit (no peace, no recognition, no negotiation with Israel). It is the only regional peace proposal on offer and is widely regarded as the 'only show in town' that encompasses the three sets of bilateral negotiations (with Palestinians, Syria, Lebanon) within a comprehensive multilateral framework. It has been reaffirmed most recently at the Damascus summit in 2008.

The consensus was that the API offers the outline of an agreement that is very much in the strategic interest of Israel. It was seen as a deal that the founders of the State of Israel would surely have embraced with characteristic boldness, and negotiated with vigour. Participants agreed that there is no alternative framework that does or can effectively guarantee the future of a Jewish democratic state on 78% of mandate Palestine within a context of regional recognition and cooperation. In the words of one participant, the API offers to "provide future generations with security, stability and prosperity" after 60 years of conflict and bloodshed.

Yet from March 2002 onwards the API "has been greeted with a yawn by the Israeli government" and has aroused remarkably little public interest in the country. This was seen to be partly due to its timing, coinciding as it did with the beginning of the outbreak of the second (al-Aqsa) Intifada, the early months of the Sharon government which rejected the premise on which the API was constructed, and the Bush administration's reorientation of US policy as a 'war on terror' after the 11 September 2001 attacks.

This has been compounded not only by a continuing widespread ignorance in Israel about what the API proposes but also by an ongoing unwillingness to give up tangible control of territory that gives security in exchange for what are seen as unreliable future promises in an atmosphere of mutual lack of confidence, suspicion and fear. Internal divisions within Israel and the Palestinian Authority, together with weak leadership, have so far rendered bilateral Israel-Palestinian negotiations ineffective. The incremental nature of the 2003 Road Map and Israel's strategy of 'unilateral separation' entirely sidelined the API in the years up to 2007. And it was not mentioned in the Joint Understanding that initiated the Annapolis summit on 27 November 2007 even though this revived final-status negotiations.

However, a recent revitalisation of interest in the API, in some Israeli and Palestinian circles, was noted. There are indications that the mood in Israel is changing from an exclusive focus on bilateral Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian negotiations to calls for a comprehensive regional peace, which would represent a marked departure in Israel's diplomatic strategy. A number of shifts were identified in the conflict environment, requiring a restructuring of the international framework for advancing Middle East peace processes. At leadership level, President Shimon Peres has appealed for Israel to "stop holding separate negotiations and go for a regional peace agreement with the Arab states and the Arab League". It is important that this advocacy does not get obscured by elections in Israel in February/March 2009.

Similarly, President Mahmoud Abbas has stated, after attempted reconciliation talks with Hamas in October 2008, that "all eyes must now be set on the peace initiative, which is no longer an Arab proposal, but also an Islamic one since many Islamic countries have also endorsed it" - including the 55 members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Further, the meeting was advised by a well-informed participant that "the Arab League achieved significant progress in convincing Hamas not to depart from Arab consensus on issues pertaining to the Arab Israeli conflict and to accept a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders" - although this was later jeopardised by the international boycott. The Arab League is ready to re-engage Hamas on these issues if and when the context changes.

In light of this analysis, the roundtable concluded that now is the moment:

1. To make a concerted effort to arouse interest in and knowledge of the API in Israel with a view to persuading the Israeli government to respond positively with a complementary initiative of its own.
2. To explore what the Arab world would expect by way of an Israeli response sufficient to trigger renewed Arab engagement, and what reciprocal moves could then increase general support and build confidence and momentum.
3. To specify what role the international community can play in this context.

Israeli participants undertook to mount a major publicity campaign in Israel aimed at decision makers, policy experts and the general public. The aim would be to acquaint Israelis with the details of the API and to elicit a positive official response from the Israeli government and mirror the Arab initiative by putting forward its basic principles for a comprehensive regional settlement. Among the points in the API to be highlighted would be:

1. That for the first time Arab states refer to 'East Jerusalem' as the capital of a future Palestinian state rather than 'Holy Jerusalem' or equivalent; thus implying a future recognition of West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
2. That, again for the first time, an "agreed upon" solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees is called for, albeit in the context of UN Resolution 194.

The phrasing of these points gives scope for negotiations of detail on these vital matters. From earlier attempts to reach agreements, it is understood that final border specification and interim security arrangements are also matters to be mutually determined.

There was a sense among Arab participants that following an adequate initial Israeli response to the API, Arab leaders would be ready to rally waning popular support for the Initiative in the Arab world and make further concerted efforts to explain and promote the API to the Israeli public.

The key Israeli actions that would have an immediate positive effect in the Arab world were identified as a properly monitored and effective freezing of Israeli settlements and determined steps to dismantle illegal outposts. Negotiations are futile while there is continued settlement expansion, which threatens the very viability of a future Palestinian state. If progress were successfully initiated in this way, reciprocal gestures to build confidence and generate momentum could be orchestrated. In this context, some participants mentioned the electrifying effect of President Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977.

International participants felt that the international community needs to respond robustly to the API's invitation to "all countries and all organisations to support this initiative", bearing in mind its appeal in particular to "the United Nations, the Security Council, the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the Muslim States, and the European Union." Up until now the international community has been lacking in unity of purpose and has been far too indecisive.

Without Israeli reciprocation, support for the API will inevitably continue to dwindle in the Arab world – perhaps fatally – together with an erosion of belief in a two-state outcome among Palestinians.

The four main roles for the international community were identified to be:

1. To apply persistent political pressure and support to advance the principles of the API.
2. To offer monitoring and facilitate other confidence-building capacity.
3 To give reliable security guarantees through the (unavoidably) vulnerable transition processes.
4 To provide whatever funding may be required – for example crucially by way of compensation and rehabilitation for Palestinian refugees as appropriate, and also through continued financial and commercial incentives in general.

The general mood was that, despite the current political uncertainties in Israel and Palestine, and the untried character of the new US administration, the revival of the API together with an appropriate Israeli response offers the best – indeed the only – framework for a comprehensive peace agreement to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. The dangers of failing to do this were also spelled out:

- Continued indefinite Israeli rule over the whole of Palestine would mean that there is already effectively a form of 'one-state' outcome that is not sustainable given that for Israel, in the light of demographic trends, it would mean an end to either the Jewish or the democratic nature of the state; and for Palestinians it would mean the indefinite continuation of occupation and the denial of their independence and self-determination.
- Without Israeli reciprocation, support for the API will inevitably continue to dwindle in the Arab world – perhaps fatally – together with an erosion of belief in a two-state outcome among Palestinians.
- In the wake of failure in the Annapolis negotiations and an absence of new initiatives, the rapid radicalisation of both Arab youth and militant Jewish settlers will continue to accelerate – readily exploitable by the enemies of any peace agreement. The prospect can only be one of mounting violence and instability.

Recommendations

1. An internal political marketing campaign in Israel was recommended to actively acquaint the Israeli public with the API. It was recognised that ignorance in Israel is partly due to a lack of perceived relevance of the Initiative and therefore the campaign would involve increasing awareness at the public and political levels. This could involve educational campaigns directed at both policy makers and the general public. There is a need to overcome the emotional and psychological barriers that are preventing the API from being considered rationally.

2. The Arab world should actively work with the new US administration to make it aware of the importance of the API. It was recommended that meetings with President-elect Obama take place before he assumes office.

3. The international community could play a crucial role in ensuring that all the work in the current negotiations is built on and a sturdy regional framework put in place. It could create and host a new negotiating framework while being sensitive to the work already done. This could mean supporting current negotiations but with the intention of making them more comprehensive and inclusive and tackling the legitimacy issue.

4. The real challenge now is to restructure the negotiating process to reflect the shift in Israel in support of a regional model and to establish a 'multi-bilateral framework' which integrates the Arab Peace Initiative into the process. This could offer a safety net and consistency in the negotiations in spite of changes of government.

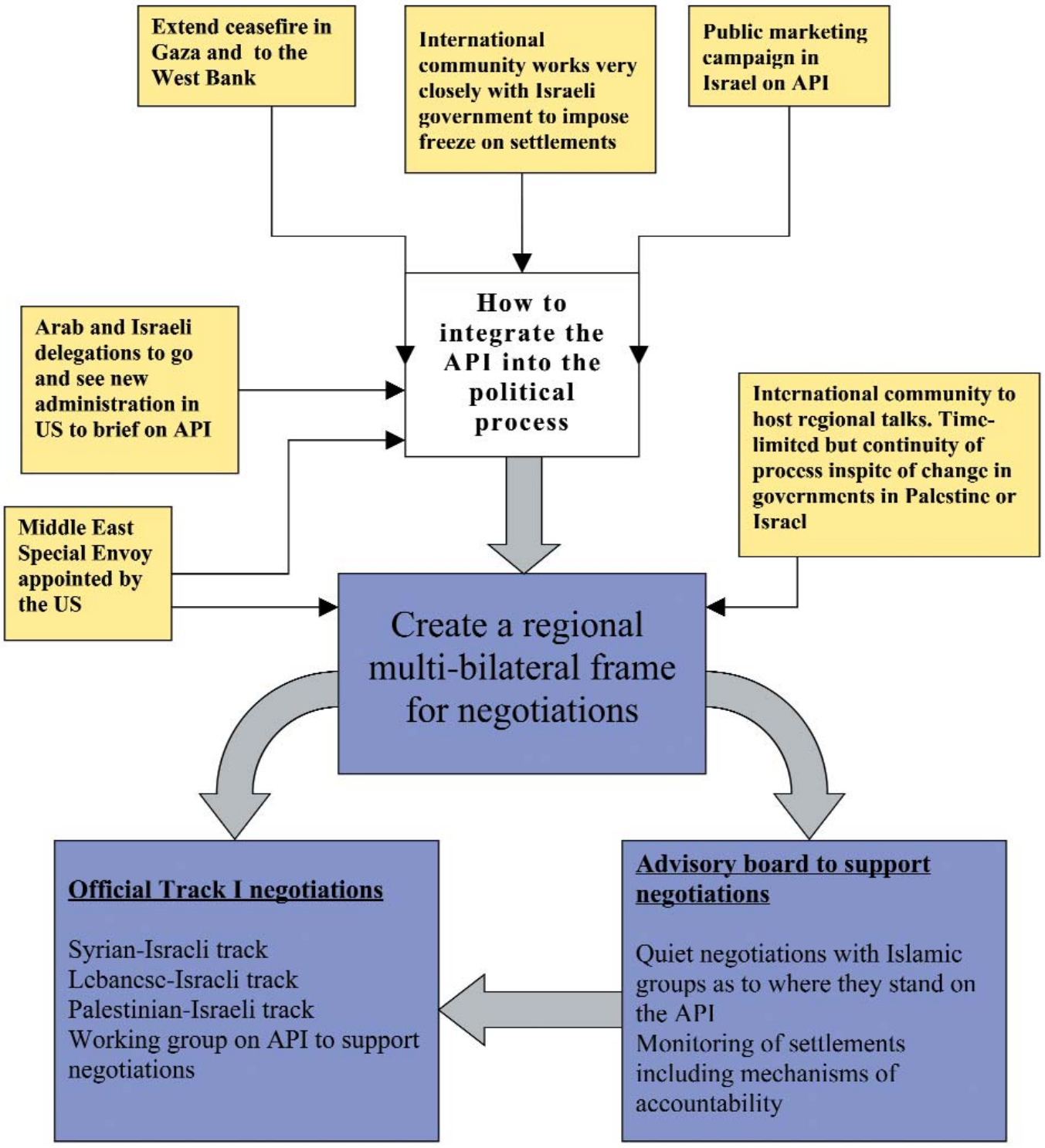
5. Any new structure needs to be time limited. There is genuine concern particularly amongst the Palestinians that any such negotiating frame could be used as a delaying tactic. As suggested in the report, time is running out for a two state solution and whilst the majority of Palestinians would clearly still welcome this outcome, the changing facts on the ground are working against it, prompting serious discussion amongst the Palestinians about a one state option, even though there is an evident lack of clarity or agreement on what this might mean in practice.

6. External monitoring of the freezing of settlements would be necessary. Arab participants at the meeting gave a very clear message that while settlement and outpost expansion continued, Israel could not be seen as a serious negotiating partner and there would not be new gestures from the Arab world in the spirit of the API. Israeli participants indicated that the current political realities in their country mean that it would not be easy to deliver on this question in the near future.

7. Should there be reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah this would offer an opportunity to explore where Hamas would position itself in terms of the API. Within the parameters of any new political frame for talks, a non official track of Middle East specialists could explore what scope there was for the Arab Peace Initiative to be broadened into an Islamic Peace Initiative.

8. It was recognised that the US was indispensable to the resolution of the Palestine–Israel conflict and needed to actively use all its diplomacy skills. Strong hope was expressed in the meeting that a serious heavy weight US Middle East envoy would be appointed immediately by the new government. The sentiment of the meeting was however that the new administration in the US would take a time to embed itself. In this context, the British government with the support of European partners could play a more catalytic role in making the negotiating process operational.

Figure 1: Required strategies to harness the potential for the Arab Peace Initiative and establish a stable negotiating process



It has been said that such a proposal, had it been put forward several years ago, would have had Israelis dancing in the streets. Why, then, has it had them barely stirring in their seats?

The Arab Peace Initiative: Why Now?

Setting the scene

When the API was originally conceived (see the Appendix for the full text), the thinking within the Arab world was that there were insufficient incentives for Israel to make the concessions that Palestinians could accept and survive. The realities were that the Palestinians had nothing in the way of incentives to offer the Israelis. At the time, the US had neither the political will nor the ability to bridge the gap. It was in this context that 22 Arab countries concluded that a durable peace would have to be comprehensive – involving all Arab states which held the key to Israel's security rather than only the Palestinians.[1]

There was a growing realisation in some circles that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could not be sustainably resolved without reference to its regional context. The approach needed to be as inclusive as possible. It was recognised that many key actors across the region had a stake in the conflict and this would entail including them in a robust framework for regional stability. This offered the opportunity to re-conceptualise the conflict not as an obstacle to peace and development in the Middle East but as a catalyst for transforming relations within the region.

The launch of the API six years ago and its re-affirmation in 2007 and 2008 has ignited little public interest in Israel. The API has not had much impact in the wider international arena either, despite holding out the promise of full peace and normal relations with Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from the territories it captured in 1967. On the face of it, the API reflects a dramatic shift in the Arab position from the famous 'three noes' of Khartoum in September 1967 to a complete acceptance of Israel into the Middle East.[2]

The API arguably provides Israel with what it has been seeking since its inception. It has been said that such a proposal, had it been put forward several years ago, would have had Israelis dancing in the streets. Why, then, has it had them barely stirring in their seats? It has also been said that public opinion in Israel towards the API ranges between those who have never heard of it and those who do not believe a word of it. Crucially, with the election of a new US president and the Annapolis negotiations showing no sign of delivering an agreement in the foreseeable future, the API becomes all the more relevant in the context of insufficient progress and a stagnating peace process.

The October 2008 meeting organised by Oxford Research Group explored the scope to resuscitate the API by assimilating it into a concerted broader push to finally achieve peace between Israel, the Palestinians and the wider Middle East. A year on from the launching of the Annapolis talks, the dangers of a deadly vacuum around the peace process make it all the more urgent to integrate the API into a final agreement and thus offer this as an incentive to Israel.

Current situation

The Middle East continues to defy attempts at resolving one of its core and most intractable conflicts. This is despite the fact that the official positions of virtually all the principal parties are more closely aligned today than at any previous time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, based on two viable states and a comprehensive regional settlement. But there is also a confluence of events, from political upheavals and an election in Israel, to the deep divisions in Palestinian society and the change of administration in the US. This could lead to a further escalation in violence or political moves on the part of or with regard to the Palestinian Authority which could leave the principle of the two-state solution no longer an option for the resolution of the conflict. In that event, we would be left with no realistic apparent option for resolving it.

There are mounting calls for the dismantling of the PA and a serious discourse about ending support for a two-state solution, opting instead for a one-state solution. Such an option is an anathema and inconceivable to Israelis.

The collapse of coalition talks in Israel means, at time of writing, that the identity of the future prime minister and the political composition of the new government following the election to be held in February 2009 is unknown. The stage is set for a contest between Tzipi Livni and Binyamin Netanyahu, with Ehud Olmert remaining in control as caretaker Prime Minister until after the election. Deal-brokering is likely to consume internal Israeli politics until then, and maybe after then too depending on the result. However, whatever the outcome, eventually the internal, regional and international pressures will oblige Israeli to face a fateful choice between a comprehensive regional peace or a future of perpetual conflict.

For their part, the Palestinian Authority feels time is running out and has little patience with Israeli domestic politics, its delays and its restraining impact on the peace process. They wish to engage with a government that has the authority to deliver. The mood amongst the Palestinians generally could be portrayed as cynical and disillusioned. Even within the pragmatic camps, there are mounting calls for the dismantling of the PA and a serious discourse about ending support for a two-state solution, opting instead for a one-state solution, whatever that might mean. Such an option is an anathema and inconceivable to Israelis.

Deep divisions amongst the Palestinians have led to Gaza becoming a Hamas-run entity with Fatah in control of the West Bank. There are signs of reconciliation between these two factions, but at the time of writing this remains unresolved. However, the aim still exists for Egypt to broker a national consensus government in a bid to lift the international blockade on Gaza and prepare for presidential and parliamentary elections by 2009. Meanwhile, Mahmoud Abbas who was due to leave his presidential position in January 2009 has indicated that he is not intending to step down from office when his term ends.

Context of current conflict environment

In order to better understand the potential role of the API it must be explored as a special context within the current conflict environment. ORG's analysis (see Figure 2) shows that the political potential of the API is currently constrained by three leading interrelated tensions:

1. **The perceived relevance tension** driven by the fact that API provides an historic declaration of Arab intensions towards 'End of Conflict' which Israel has so far failed to respond to due to both lack of awareness as well as a more general sense of "historical peace fatigue".
2. **The vision-process tension** emanating from the gap between the kind of vision put forward by the API and the current negotiation framework based on disconnected bilateral processes which lacks any means for incorporating the API vision into its processes.
3. **The diplomatic-ground tension** fuelled by the growing divergence between diplomatic drivers and ground events drivers, each portraying almost a different system of realities and constrained by totally different sets of considerations. Hence any strategies developed to harness the potential role of the API towards transforming the conflict system must aim to influence these tensions, by both direct and indirect means.

Figure 2. Current conflict environment

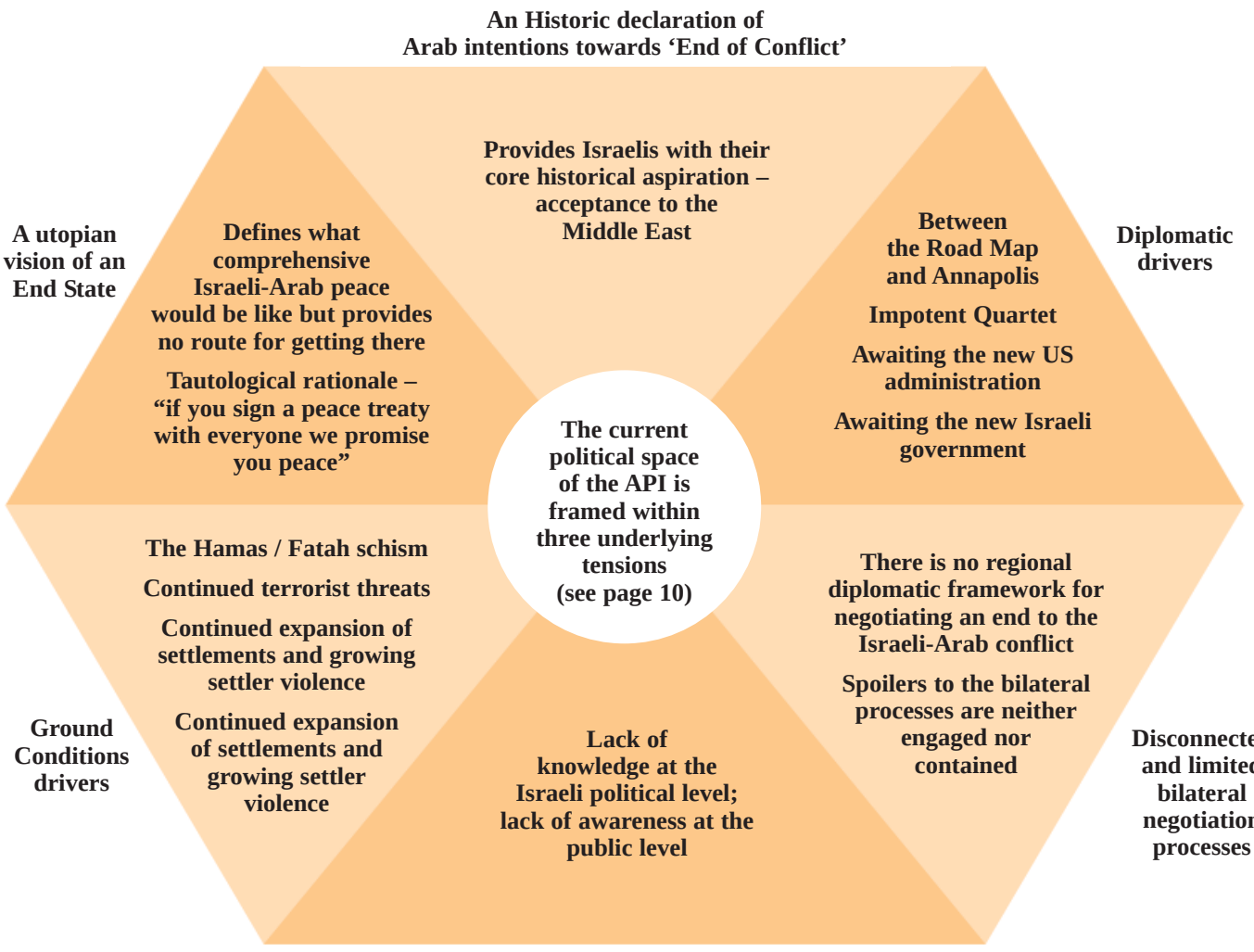


Diagram based on a presentation by Orit Gal

The peace process is characterised by missed opportunities, broken promises and optimistic moments shattered by violence and a hardening of attitudes.

Tragic timing for the launch of the API in 2002

The peace process is characterised by missed opportunities, broken promises and optimistic moments shattered by violence and a hardening of attitudes. An opportunity now presents itself in the reinvigoration of the API. When the Initiative was first presented in 2002, the Arab world took a step in which it formally acknowledged the right of the Israeli people to live in peace and security alongside other people in the region. It was a proactive effort on behalf of 22 Arab nations to solve the conflict by not only addressing Arab needs but the needs of the Israelis as well.

The timing of the presentation of what was originally dubbed the Saudi Peace Initiative was a tragedy. On 27 March 2002, on the eve of the opening session of the Beirut Arab Summit during which the API would be launched, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the dining room of a seaside hotel in Israel killing around 30 people. It was the worst timing possible for those who were trying to end Israel's occupation through peaceful means.[3] The elation felt by those who had worked so hard to create the API, a major historic achievement, was short-lived as the plans to start promoting the Initiative to the Israelis and the western publics were aborted almost immediately. Operation 'Defensive Shield', the largest military operation in the West Bank since 1967, was launched by the Israelis on 29th March, only one day after the Initiative was unveiled by the Arab League. The level of the conflict was so intense that it was impossible even to hear the offer placed on the table.

The level of the conflict was so intense that it was impossible even to hear the offer placed on the table.

The mood today is different. It is a mixture of calm because the level of violence has been reduced, and the growing realisation that time is running out for the implementation of a two-state solution. This sense of urgency could provide a new opportunity. Key will be the extension of the ceasefire in Gaza which is due to expire in December 2008.

What does the API offer?

> *"The API is perhaps misnamed - it is a statement of principle, not a method to produce outcomes. It doesn't tell us how to do it - unlike the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement which was not just a statement of principles but also had structures that made it operational."*
> Lord Alderdice, 15 October 2008

The API is "a proactive effort on behalf of 22 Arab nations to solve the conflict by not only addressing Arab needs but the needs of the Israelis."[4] It claims to emanate "from the conviction of the Arab countries that a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties" and requests Israel to "reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well."[5] It calls upon Israel to affirm:

- Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the 4 June 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.
- Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194.
- The acceptance of the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied since 4 June 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

From Arab countries, it asks affirmation of the following:

- Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel and provide security for all the states of the region.
- Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.

The API is a collective offer to end the conflict with security guarantees for all states in the region, including Israel. This is significant because, for the first time, Israel is assured that its security will be guaranteed not only by its immediate neighbours but by all Arab states. Also, for the first time, the Arab world has committed itself to an agreed-upon solution to the refugee problem, addressing Israel's concern that Arabs would demand that four million refugees be sent to Israel and thus obliterate Israel's Jewish identity.[6]

Some have nevertheless argued that the Arab League does not propose much more than what it would have done any way if Israel had reached a resolution of its conflicts with the Palestinians and Syria. The argument continues that the API was presented as if to say that if Israel acts positively according to the API, the Arab League would press groups such as Hamas and Hizballah towards the same principles. Indeed, senior Arab participants at the Oxford roundtable have confirmed that the Arab League worked to elicit public commitment from Hamas' leadership that it would not depart from the Arab consensus – with the understanding that regarding Israel this consensus is the API. Moreover, Hamas' Prime Minister Haniyeh accepted the Arab League's invitation to its 2007 Riyadh meeting, reaffirming the Arab commitment to the API. Marwan Muasher, a lead drafter of the API, possibly alluded to this when he wrote that in the context of a comprehensive agreement with all the Arab world the role of Hamas and Hezbollah will become marginal.

Prince Turki appealed to Israelis to listen carefully to what the Initiative actually says – and to respond positively to it.

Saudi opening remarks

Present at the ORG roundtable for the opening session was HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal, who is the ex-head of Saudi intelligence as well as former Saudi ambassador to London and Washington. The Saudis had felt bruised by the cavalier way the Bush administration both rejected their mediation at Mecca between Fatah and Hamas in February 2007 and also refused to mention the API in the Annapolis talks. Saudi diplomats are known for their discretion and prudence, and Prince Turki was clear in his advocacy when, speaking as a private individual, he appealed to Israelis to listen carefully to what the Initiative actually says – and to respond positively to it. He made the following proposals in the meeting:

1. The Israelis and Palestinians announce, jointly, that they eschew violence.
2. The Israelis stop all targeted killings and collective punishment like the destruction of homes, the destruction of Palestinian infrastructure, the uprooting of olive trees and farmland, indiscriminate imprisonment of Palestinians, confiscation of Palestinian lands to build colonies, the exclusive roads that lead to them, and what he referred to as the "Apartheid Wall".
3. The Palestinians stop suicide bombings, the launching of rockets, and any other violent attacks against Israel.
4. The Palestinians release the Israeli soldier Gilead Shalit.
5. The Israelis release Palestinian prisoners.
6. Both sides accept the presence of a sufficient number of monitors from the Quartet who will monitor the implementation of these five points and sanction any side that fails to adhere to them.

Accepting these proposals would create an environment in the region conducive to peace, and will send a clear message to the Arab street that Israel is indeed serious in wanting to end the conflict and live in peace with its neighbours. Such a build-up of good will would pave the way for reciprocal measures from the Arab world, culminating in the full implementation of the API.

The incremental process is no longer considered relevant – it failed ultimately in Oslo, and there is a need to get back to the core issues.

Israeli responses

Israelis present at the meeting said that despite the fact that more than 70% of Israelis are now ready to pay the price for peace the API has remained unpopular among Israelis. Most agreed that viewing the API as an end product, 'a prize at the end of the road' or 'a flag at the end of the journey' is not much of an incentive. Israelis do not want a 'take it or leave it' situation as they feel that they are always asked to give back 'territory' while only getting 'promises' of peace and normal relations in return. More accurately, however, it is an ignorance of the API among many Israelis, including government ministers who are unfamiliar with the text of the Initiative, that is the source of this unpopularity or disbelief.

The changing mood in Israeli policy circles was emphasised - from straight rejection of the API during the Sharon era, whose strategy was one of long-term interim agreements, to today's growing position of negotiating end games. The incremental process is no longer considered relevant – it failed ultimately in Oslo, and there is a need to get back to the core issues. Shifts of views among public figures are also important. For example, the Kadima leaders Olmert and Livni both came from strong right-wing families and hawkish positions when they first entered politics. More recently, they appear ready to reach agreements leading to the establishment of a Palestinian state,. It is important to understand Livni's motivations as well. She is not only motivated by ending conflict or normalisation of relations with the Arab world, but to maintain the Jewish identity of the Israeli state that is of paramount importance to her.

Concerns were also raised about the inability of the Israeli government to fully guide the military on matters of security.

Many stressed the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and the urgent need for promoting it within Israel so that it does not become another missed opportunity. "The API is currently the only game in the yard, and we can use it to influence public opinion," one participant said. The API is a message that Israel will be accepted into the region. Some felt that the API needs to be part of a comprehensive envelope, with the Arab world as an active participant. A number of Israeli participants said they would like to see the Arab world pursue a more active role, beyond putting the proposal on the table. It was suggested that the Initiative should not be seen as a fait accompli and that there should be room for negotiations within the API. One participant argued that an agreement on permanent borders between Israel and Palestine would create a breakthrough in the process. Others leaned more towards simultaneous bilateral agreements, keeping in mind that the benefits of the API are much broader than the benefits from bilateral negotiations on their own.

A number of obstacles on the Israeli side were highlighted: security, the government/military dynamic, misunderstandings of the API, and the issue of refugees. Israelis need to be reassured about their security and that a repeat of Gaza will not happen in the West Bank. Third party troops were discussed in terms of allaying Israeli security concerns, but others warned that international involvement is not always successful, especially if there are factions that might want to disrupt any agreement by the use of violence. Concerns were also raised about the inability of the Israeli government to fully guide the military on matters of security. Rabin was mentioned as an example of strong leadership successfully managing the government/military relationship.

Several Israeli policy experts have flagged the difficulties they encounter in discussions with other Israeli experts as to the real nature of the Arabs' original intentions and current expectations. It was argued that through the international media leading Arab diplomats could provide an authoritative and decisive point of reference for this internal Israeli-expert debate. It was further noted that the crucial expert communities are the ones dealing with the security-diplomacy nexus, international law and the Middle East.

The refugee issue was a real concern, and there were questions about how the API deals with it.

The refugee issue was a real concern, and there were questions about how the API deals with it. There has been a fear of the refugee issue since 1949. Whereas there have been fluctuations in Israeli positions on Jerusalem and the Territories, there have been no changes in the basic position on the refugee issue. It is a question of demography – a red line, which no government will cross, and, it was said, Palestinians need to recognise that. However, since UN General Assembly Resolution 194 is vaguely defined, and the API for the first time refers to the fact that the solution to the refugee problem should be "agreed upon", it seems that there is scope for negotiation – perhaps along the lines pioneered in the Taba talks of January 2001.

Questions Israelis had about the API included the nature and purpose of the Initiative: Is it a prize or a mechanism? Can it include the Islamists: Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran in a 'Grand Bargain'? Concerns were voiced that Hamas may not accept the API. Crucially, Israelis also wanted to know what kind of response the Arab League expected from Israel.

Lastly, it was suggested that strong, clear messages from the US are needed. President-elect Obama needs to know that supporting the API does not work against Israeli interests. The importance of the role of the US as a shepherd for the peace talks was emphasised.

Action proposed by Israeli participants

- The Israeli participants stressed the need for a domestic Israeli public communication campaign. It would aim to acquaint the Israeli public with the API and revive public support for the peace process. The campaign would appeal to various constituencies: the general public, decision makers and policy experts. Different activities would be organised for each constituency. The goal is to end up with an equivalent Israeli government statement in response to the API.
- The need to restructure the political framework for supporting and guiding the bilateral talks on both the Palestinian/Israel track and the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, followed by deeper engagement with regional players and weaving in the API as part of a new political frame.
- It was also suggested that a joint Arab-Israeli consortium could be formed to lobby the US government to support the API with the aim of convincing US politicians, congressmen and maybe even the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that the API is not zero-sum in that it also serves Israel's interests. Representation could include Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians and Syrians. The consortium could appear before the new US president, encouraging his support, which could strengthen the hand of the new Israeli leadership, depending on its orientation.

The perception in the Arab world is that Israel is not serious about peace.

Arab responses

The Arab participants in the meeting described how support for the API is eroding in the Arab world while it is only starting to gain momentum in Israel. Public opinion in the Arab world is questioning how this initiative will be different from others, believing that Israel only understands the language of force, as indicated by the apparent successes of Hamas and Hezbollah. The perception in the Arab world is that Israel is not serious about peace. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the Arabs have not done a good job at explaining the API. However, putting any energy into doing so requires some kind of an official, positive Israeli response to the API. When Arab participants at the meeting were asked what kind of response they had in mind, their answer was that Israel needed to do something on the ground to convince Arab public opinion that it was serious. A positive response could be: "We will stop building settlements for the next 18 months while we negotiate".

In response to Israeli questions regarding the objective of the API, Arab participants clarified that it is not meant to be a negotiating tool but an attempt to address Israel's primary concerns – a regional dividend of peace. It is a result of the Arab world getting together to envisage the Middle East after peace. The API is meant to help bilateral negotiations, not take their place. After having proposed it, the Arab world is still ready to move but only in the context of achieving peace and putting an end to current destructive Israeli policies on the ground (settlements, checkpoints, imprisonment). The Arabs feel that they are always asked to make gestures to promote the API, which they fulfil – for example, Jordan translating the API into Hebrew and its King sending a copy to each Member of Knesset.

They feel, however, that these gestures are never acknowledged by Israel. The view is that Israel is not ready to make irreversible moves (for example, removing settlements or re-routing the separation wall), and that the position in Israel at the moment is not helpful enough for them to make any more gestures. It was stressed that the API is not an operational document: it does not specify any mechanisms of action. In answer to a question about whether the Arab League would set a time limit on the Initiative, the response was that they would not pull the API from the table unless a confrontation with Israel is intended, which is not going to be the case.

The Arab League had taken significant steps to ensure that Hamas will not depart from an Arab consensus and that it would accept a Palestinian state within 1967 borders.

The Arab participants also stressed the importance of engaging the new US administration, especially in the November-January period before it formally assumes office. In terms of the inclusion of Hamas, the Arab League had taken significant steps to ensure that Hamas will not depart from an Arab consensus and that it would accept a Palestinian state within 1967 borders. However, boycotts from the Quartet and the international community after Hamas won the Palestinian legislative election in 2006 have allowed the situation in Gaza to deteriorate. To include Islamist groups, it will be necessary to work on changing their motivations and focus on the fact that they want to be part of the region and have legitimate influence. Most crucially, the situation on the ground needs to change to make the peace process viable.

Action proposed by Arab participants

- Focus on reconfirming commitment to the API within the Arab world and thereafter moving efforts towards Israel and the US. It was proposed that Egypt and Jordan advance API in Israel, and this could later be expanded to include efforts by other countries (such as Qatar) if Israel takes concrete steps towards peace. Jordanian and Egyptian officials can continue to talk to the Israeli press.
- It was suggested that the Arab world would have an important role in making the new US administration familiar with the API. It could also work with the new President-elect before he assumes office. Engaging with US Congress and working with the President's advisers is also crucial. It would also be vital to clarify at the international level what would be the implications of the failure to achieve peace in the Middle East.

The API was acknowledged as a potentially transformative text, supported by the fact that all Arab countries have signed up to it.

Responses from the International Community

The API was acknowledged as a potentially transformative text, supported by the fact that all Arab countries have signed up to it. However, so far it has not played a transformative role; what can the international community do about it? Actors were identified as the US, UN, Russian Federation, EU and EU member states, acting individually or through the Quartet, and also the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

British perspective

Senior representation from the Foreign Office emphasised that what is now required is a set of international actions and guarantees which add robustness to the deal on which Israelis and Palestinians could agree. What is required is an architecture of implementation. The two-state solution is the only realistic outcome and the API represents an outline of an end deal along these lines that now needs to be operationalised. There have been too many missed opportunities in the past and decisive action is now required.

It was pointed out that there are five sets of key issues in terms of any deal between the two sides:

1. **Consent in both countries.** At present there is a lack of popular consent on both sides to agree to a deal.
2. **Legitimacy.** It is a bigger issue on the Palestinian side, in terms of Arab legitimacy, Islamic legitimacy and international legitimacy. This is particularly where the API fits in.
3. **Security guarantees.** These need to be part of any new security doctrine in the Middle East, essentially sponsored by the US.
4. **Monitoring and arbitration.** The implementation of any peace agreement reached must be monitored by those who are empowered to arbitrate between the parties in case of the eruption of any disputes. It needs to be recognised that implementation will be a long-term process.
5. **Funding.** If a deal is reached, one of the key issues will be how you pay for elements of the deal, such as the issue of refugees and security. Such guarantees of implementation have been missing from any process since 1993 onwards.

The role of the European Union

A senior European mediator in previous protracted conflicts expressed the view that approaching the EU as a whole would be ineffective and that efforts should be concentrated on two or three selected national governments.

Action needed

- The Europeans could play a supportive role in providing an extended frame for the peace talks not under the aegis of the EU, as they currently do not appear to have the political will to act in unison, but it could involve the active engagement of, say, two or three willing governments in Europe to put serious political capital around the framing and hosting of continued peace talks.

The US could appoint a high-level Middle East special envoy.

The role of the US administration

Caution was expressed about the prospects for an immediate focus by the new US administration on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In terms of priorities and international pressure points, the US is going to be encumbered with a potentially catastrophic economic crisis, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the high priority Iranian nuclear issue, plus the increase in tension between Russia and the West as a consequence of the recent war in Georgia.

Action needed

- The US could appoint a high-level Middle East special envoy.
- It could convene a regional 'multilateral/bilateral' round of talks under US auspices, in which the API is built into the negotiation framework.
- The question was asked in the meeting as to whether it is possible to bring Iran into a reward system that could create a different climate for any future negotiations. It might be possible to explore where the Iranians would position themselves on the API should normalisation between the US and Iran be discussed. Such negotiations in terms of US engagement could follow a narrow nuclear Iran-Iraq track or a broader Grand Bargain agreement.

The failure of the international community to support the Mecca Agreement led to the strengthening of multi-legitimacies in the Palestinian territories and thereby limited the authority of Mahmoud Abbas to deliver on a peace deal.

Hamas and the API

There was no Hamas participation at the meeting, although serious consideration was given to this. The thinking behind this was that this would be necessary to better understand where they would position themselves in terms of the API. In the event of this not being the case, it was decided that this could happen at a later stage as part of a consultation. There were however participants in the Oxford meeting who had met with the senior leadership of Hamas in Damascus, Beirut and Gaza.

The content of this section is therefore shaped by the perspectives of those participants and by the author through conversations with two Hamas specialists – Azzam Tamimi, the author of 'Hamas: Unwritten Chapters' and Khaled Khroub, author of 'Hamas: Political Thought and Practice'.[7] At the time of writing, negotiations for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah under Egyptian supervision in Cairo remained unresolved.

It was stressed in the meeting by some of the participants that it had been a serious mistake on the part of the US and EU governments to boycott the elected Hamas government as it undermined the legitimacy of the Palestinian authority to deliver on the peace process. One participant in the meeting argued that when Arafat was in power such was his charismatic leadership he had the authority to 'cut a deal', and the legitimacy to represent the people. The fragmentation of the Palestinian political system following Arafat's death as well as the failure of the international community to support the Mecca Agreement led to the strengthening of multi-legitimacies in the Palestinian territories and thereby limited the authority of Mahmoud Abbas to deliver on a peace deal.

If players who have large constituencies are excluded, they will work to sabotage the process.

At the time of the Mecca Agreement, Hamas did not want to be the ratifying power for an agreement with Israel even if it controlled the legislature. Hamas and Fatah agreed on a coherent division of labour in government that stated that even though Hamas would not recognise Israel, under the auspices of a national unity government, they would do so implicitly. This for them was a legitimate way in which they could proceed politically but not obstruct the peace process. In doing so, Hamas had offered something more nuanced which, it could be argued, offered the possibility of further clarification in terms of end of conflict. At the time they demanded a referendum on President Abbas' negotiating efforts, should they produce an outcome. Hamas' intention was not to be involved in the negotiations but also not to stand in the way of them, and it agreed to be bound by the outcome of a referendum.

According to Hroub, the Hamas-led government in March 2006 and the National Unity Government (NUG) of March 2007 were both very close to endorsing the API. First of all the two had declared their acceptance of the two-state solution principle (but without recognising Israel). They referred to the UN resolutions in ways that were unprecedented in Hamas' discourse. Specifically, on the NUG platform Hamas was one step short from 'accepting' all previous agreements between the PLO and Israel, when it vowed to 'respect' them instead. Hamas was preparing for the transition but could only go at the pace of the internal consensus within the movement in order not to splinter it.[8]

Experience tells us that serious peacemaking requires a model to be established that recognises the legitimacy of all the significant parties. If these players who have large constituencies are excluded, they will work to sabotage the process.[9] The Annapolis talks involve engagement only with the Fatah government and thereby undermine the President's authority to deliver a final outcome. The real question now is would a future reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah provide an opportunity to increase President Abbas' legitimacy and thereby his capacity to deliver on any peace deal?

A senior American Middle East expert at the ORG meeting reminded the group that after President Carter's press conference in Damascus in April 2008, Khaled Meshal, the Hamas leader in Damascus, had said:

- Hamas will not recognise legitimacy of Israel.
- Hamas' focus is on pre-1967 boundaries.
- If there is a peace agreement between Mahmoud Abbas and the Israelis, it needs to be submitted to a referendum.

Meshal had at the time said even though Hamas as a party will not recognise Israel, as a member of the unity government they can do so. It was pointed out by a participant at the Oxford meeting that at the time no US or European government showed any interest in pursuing further clarification on these questions and how they could have made a contribution to moving the peace process forward.

It is worth remembering that all of the 57 states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) have expressed their support of the API. The members of the organisation re-affirm their support at almost every meeting of the OIC.[10] In addition to this, when the API was ratified in 2007 at the Arab League summit in Riyadh at the time of the Mecca Agreement, both President Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyah were present at the summit.

Action needed

- Should a unity government be formed in the future between Hamas and Fatah, a consultative process would be needed in order to clarify where Hamas stands in terms of its vision on how to end the conflict.
- If this does not happen, it will still be necessary to explore with Hamas what would it take for them to support the API.

A vital potential for introducing a new comprehensive regional framework for promoting peace and ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

New political architecture post-Annapolis

> *"From a situation where for seven years things were frozen, now all the balls are in the air ...in truth security for Israel depends on peace with the Arab world and not just the Palestinians; and an end to the stateless tragedy of the Palestinians depends not just on support from Israel but support from their Arab neighbours."* David Miliband, 4 November 2008

The roundtable explored the potential role of the API and identified a number of shifts in the conflict environment. These shifts require restructuring the international framework for advancing the Middle East Peace processes.

A year on in the Annapolis process there are few who carry optimism that it will be able to deliver a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is acceptable to both sides. Many argue that a new architecture for peace now needs to be put in place which would either build on the structures of the Quartet to include the Arab League and host a more comprehensive peace process or for a new international conference to convene along the lines of the first Madrid conference. What is clear is that there is a need to avoid the old pattern of erratic and intense engagement followed by dangerous vacuums.

While Annapolis has yet to produce significant breakthroughs in the Israeli-Palestinian track, the very return to negotiating the end-game (as opposed to the gradual phased process dictated by the Road Map) has shifted attention back to the core issues comprising the conflict. At the same time, the re-launch of the Israeli-Syrian track provides another constructive force towards a structural shift in the regional system. Together with the 'rediscovery' of the Arab Peace Initiative within Israel, the reiterated assurance among the Saudis and Egyptians to further engage in the peace process, and an expected reassessment of the US approach, all these converge to create a vital potential for introducing a new comprehensive regional framework for promoting peace and ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sensitivity will be needed to ensure that the work that has already taken place is not undermined, but built on. There is an opportunity for a new political frame in which all the work carried out at Annapolis and on the Syrian-Israel and Lebanon-Israel tracks was incorporated into a regional process which included the API.

In Israel the mood may be changing. Whilst it was previously felt that a multilateral structure is against Israel's best interest, it seems no longer to be generally viewed like this. It is now increasingly recognised that there is a need for more political scaffolding around the negotiations and a regional cover for any peace agreement in order to compensate for the problem of contested legitimacies on the Palestinian side.

Current negotiations are still taking place within the old framework of disconnected bilateral processes with no formal room allowing a supportive role for other international and regional actors, nor with the engagement and / or containment of disruptive forces who seek to undermine the process. Under these conditions even an historical breakthrough such as the Arab Peace Initiative cannot be translated into an actual constructive force. Hence there is a need to design a new negotiation framework which could promote both bilateral and multilateral advancements through mutually supportive dynamics.

Action needed

- Convene a small group of regional and international experts for a two-day operational design exercise. The team would produce a proposed framework for a new Middle East peace negotiation process that will be based on the following rationales: multi-bilateral processes, multilateral support, international facilitation, committed ongoing engagement, public outreach and containment of potential spoilers.

Conclusions

There is now a building of momentum in Israel, the Arab World and the US that the revival of the API, is the only framework for a comprehensive peace agreement to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. The real challenge now is to restructure the negotiating process to reflect this and to establish a 'multi-bilateral framework' which integrates the API into the negotiations. This could then offer a safety net and consistency in the talks in spite of changes of government.

The US is indispensable to the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict and needs to actively use all its diplomacy skills. However it is not clear whether or when the Middle East will become a prime focus of US foreign policy under the new administration. In this interim period, the European Union under the rubric of some key actors (including, say, Britain, France and/or other willing state actors) could establish a regional negotiating frame. This would be closely coordinated with US involvement as and when there was readiness.

Within a regional context, for as long as such actions as the expansion of settlements and checkpoints in the Palestinian territories continues, Israel will not be seen as a serious negotiating partner by the Arab world. It is unlikely that there are going to be any new gestures from them on the API until there is evidence of at least a freeze on settlements. It was clear from participants at the meeting that Israel has had difficulty delivering on this partly because of the power of the settler movement The international community now needs to face the challenge of helping to break the deadlock between the parties and be prepared to employ both incentives and disincentives to this end.

Endnotes:

1 Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), p.105
2 These were NO peace with Israel, NO recognition of Israel, and NO negotiations with Israel
3 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, op cit, p.130
4 Marwan Muasher, "The Initiative Still Stands", Ha'aretz (19 August 2008) http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1011993.html
5 The Arab Peace Initiative (Beirut 2002), official translation of the full text available at http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/AllDocsByUNID/5a7229b652beb9c5c1256b8a0054b62e
6 Muasher, "The Initiative Still Stands", op cit.
7 Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: Unwritten Chapters* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2007) and Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice* (Washington: Washington Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000)
8 Khaled Hroub, *Where are the pressure points to encourage to Hamas to support the Arab Peace Initiative: What role could the Saudis play?* (unpublished article, September 2008)
9 Gabrielle Rifkind, *A Standing Conference Table: A process for a sustainable peace in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict* (London: Oxford Research Group, July 2007), p.5
10 For example, see the Baku Declaration adopted by the 33rd Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers Session of Harmony of Rights, Freedoms and Justice, 19-21 June 2006, at http://www.oic2006baku.gov.az/eng/Baku_Declaration.shtml

Appendix 1

The Arab Peace Initiative
Beirut, 2002

Official translation of the full text of a Saudi-inspired peace plan adopted by the Arab summit in Beirut, 2002, and again endorsed at the Riyadh Summit in 2007.

The Council of Arab States at the Summit Level at its 14th Ordinary Session

Reaffirming the resolution taken in June 1996 at the Cairo Extra-Ordinary Arab Summit that a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the strategic option of the Arab countries, to be achieved in accordance with international legality, and which would require a comparable commitment on the part of the Israeli government.

Having listened to the statement made by his royal highness Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in which his highness presented his initiative calling for full Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab territories occupied since June 1967, in implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, reaffirmed by the Madrid Conference of 1991 and the land-for-peace principle, and Israel's acceptance of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, in return for the establishment of normal relations in the context of a comprehensive peace with Israel.

Emanating from the conviction of the Arab countries that a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties, the council:

1. Requests Israel to reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well.
2. Further calls upon Israel to affirm:
   - I – Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.
   - II – Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194.
   - III – The acceptance of the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied since June 4, 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.
3. Consequently, the Arab countries affirm the following:
   - I – Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region.
   - II – Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.
4. Assures the rejection of all forms of Palestinian patriation which conflict with the special circumstances of the Arab host countries.
5. Calls upon the government of Israel and all Israelis to accept this initiative in order to safeguard the prospects for peace and stop the further shedding of blood, enabling the Arab countries and Israel to live in peace and good neighbourliness and provide future generations with security, stability and prosperity.
6. Invites the international community and all countries and organisations to support this initiative.
7. Requests the chairman of the summit to form a special committee composed of some of its concerned member states and the Secretary General of the League of Arab States to pursue the necessary contacts to gain support for this initiative at all levels, particularly from the United Nations, the Security Council, the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the Muslim states and the European Union.

Appendix 2

Interview with Amr Moussa
Akiva Eldar, *Ha'aretz,* 11 November 2008
www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1036103.html

After an Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories within the framework of an overall peace agreement, foreign forces could be stationed there for a specific period, the secretary-general of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, told Haaretz in an interview over the weekend in Brussels.

Moussa said this was acceptable to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. He added that Israel could withdraw in stages from the Golan Heights and West Bank, so long as the withdrawal would adhere to a reasonable schedule, anchored in a UN Security Council decision. Moussa ruled out the possibility of the Arab League negotiating with Israel on the overall peace agreement, noting that the League supports serious bilateral negotiations.

A complete freeze on all settlement construction is a precondition for any progress in relations between Arab nations and Israel, the secretary-general said. If Israel freezes such construction and takes substantive measures against illegal outposts, the Arab League's door would be open for additional steps and gestures, beyond the 2002 peace initiative itself, Moussa said.

He also maintained that the League has now been waiting six years for an official Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative, and all the while the situation on the ground is changing. The settlements are affecting not only the demography, but also the character of the territories and are rendering ever more remote the possibility of establishing a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel, Moussa explained.

The time is nearing when the Arabs will demand a decision: either Israel will dismantle the settlements or the Arab League will declare that there is no possibility of establishing a Palestinian state, he said. Moussa emphasised that it is impossible to have your cake and eat it, too.

The secretary-general agreed with what Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak told President Shimon Peres at their most recent meeting: First Israel must accept the Arab Peace Initiative in principle, and only then will it be possible to talk about the details. Moussa said he was disappointed that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have not yet officially responded to the Initiative. After Israel accepts its principles, he added, we will invite Israel to present its own proposal and explain its objection to specific sections.

Jerusalem must be united, with special arrangements that will allow passage between all parts of the city without the need to present a passport, he said. I am convinced that we can reach an agreement that includes transferring the mosques to Palestinian sovereignty, Moussa said.

He called on Israel to join the agreement for a nuclear-free Middle East, saying that the International Atomic Energy Agency never claimed to possess proof that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. I do not know if it is true or not, but the Middle East does not need nuclear weapons and that is as true for Israel as it is for every country in the region, he explained.

Moussa also expressed satisfaction with the election of Barack Obama, saying he expects him to apply his winning slogan, "We need change," to the Middle East, too. On a somewhat critical note of George W. Bush, he said the main change needs to come in the form of the U.S. returning to its role as unbiased mediator.

Appendix 3

Media activity immediately after the meeting

Since the ORG meeting in Oxfordshire, there has been a significant discussion in the media, particularly in Israel about the API. This included:

Ian Black, "Time to resurrect the Arab peace plan", *The Guardian,* 18 October 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/18/middle-east

"Barak: Israel giving serious thought to Saudi peace plan", *Ha'aretz,* 19 October 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1029855.html

Ben Caspit, "The Direction: Regional Peace", *Ma'ariv,* 19 October 2008

Toni O'Loughlin, "Israel considers reviving Saudi peace plan to resolve conflict", *The Guardian,* 20 October 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/20/middleeast-israel-saudi-peace-plan

Avi Issacharoff, "Saudi official presents new Israeli-Palestinian peace deal", *Ha'aretz,* 20 October 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1029929.html

"Faisal welcomes new Israeli interest in Saudi Plan", Reuters, 21 October 2008, http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LL361529.htm

Yoav Stern, "Peres to visit Egypt Thursday in bid to revive Arab peace talks", *Ha'aretz,* 22 October 2008, http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1030247.html

"Palestinians welcome Israeli interest in Saudi plan", Reuters, 22 October 2008 http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE49L2YK20081022

Akiva Eldar, "Foreign troops could deploy in West Bank after peace deal", *Ha'aretz,* 11 November 2008, www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1036103.html

OxfordResearchGroup

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is an independent think-tank based in London which works to find non-military solutions to national and international conflict. ORG has a long tradition of bringing together policy-makers with their critics in a safe environment where concerns can be articulated. It is led by a distinguished group of experts in conflict resolution. ORG holds off-the-record meetings and briefings with UK and European officials to ensure that the outcome of ORG consultations and roundtables are communicated to key British and international policy-makers and advisers as appropriate.

The Arab Peace Initiative: Why Now?

The formulation of the Arab Peace Initiative (API) was motivated by the lack of incentives for Israel to make the concessions that Palestinians could accept and survive. The Palestinians have been unable to offer concrete gestures to Israelis. It was in this context that 22 Arab countries concluded that a durable peace would have to be comprehensive and involve all Arab states to ensure the security of both Israelis and Palestinians. When the API was offered to Israel in 2002, it was the height of the second Intifada. Such was the level of mistrust on both sides that the offer went unheard. It was reaffirmed by the Arab League in Riyadh in 2007 and in Damascus in 2008.

There has been a recent interest in the API in Israel and this has coincided with the realisation that the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be resolved without reference to its regional context. This is reflected in a shift from Israel's continued focus on bilateral Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian negotiations to a call for a regional peace, representing a marked departure in Israel's diplomatic strategy. This offers the opportunity to use the API to re-conceptualise the conflict not as an obstacle to peace and development in the Middle East but as a catalyst for transforming relations within the region.

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