

THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE – FAQ

What is the Arab Peace Initiative (API)?

The Initiative is an outline for a regionally inclusive policy that aims to bring the Arab-Israeli conflict to an end in the context of an agreement that will establish a Palestinian state. It was introduced in a speech delivered by the Saudi Prince at the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, and was signed by the members of the Arab League and Islamic states. Since its unanimous acceptance at the start of the last decade, the Arab League has repeatedly ratified the API, most recently in 2013.

What are does the Initiative require of Israel?

Full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, including the Golan Heights, and to achieve “a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194.”

What will Israel obtain in return?

The Arab countries that stand behind the Initiative will sign on to a peace treaty with Israel, and “consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended.” The countries will be obliged to normalize relations with Israel as well as “provide security for all the states of the region.”

Will the PLO (Fatah and the Palestinian Authority) accept the Initiative?

Yes.

And Hamas?

No, although its leaders have previously declared that if Israel accepts it, they can reach “an agreed upon formula” with the Arab League. Significantly, the Initiative takes an interpretable position in relation to the refugee issue — it re-

jects to the right of return, and instead reflects on the need to arrive at a “just resolution”. This, in part, is why Hamas cannot officially accept the agreement.

It is noteworthy that, if tested, Hamas will find it exceedingly difficult to act against the Initiative. The circumstances of a post-Arab Spring Middle East have dictated Hamas’s dependency on various prime signatory nations of the Initiative like Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey. Even if Hamas were to decide to oppose the Initiative, its ability to bring a pan-Arab process to its knees is far less than its capacity to sabotage a bilateral Israeli-Palestinian process.

What are the advantages of accepting the Arab Peace Initiative as opposed to holding direct, bilateral negotiations with the Palestinians?

A multi-lateral regional approach is preferable to a bilateral approach for a number of reasons. First, at present there is **no trust** established between the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships. Such a situation, as the last four years prove, creates an impasse for direct negotiations.

Second, internal Palestinian rifts are such that even if an agreement were achieved between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Hamas would undoubtedly do its utmost to torpedo it. An agreement between Israel and the Arab nations in the region will push Hamas into a corner and minimize its influence. Additionally, it is important to note that the refugee issue is not only a Palestinians-Israeli dispute, but also **an Israeli-Arab dispute**. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have settled in Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries that have never granted them citizenship. Consequently, any solution to the refugee issue demands more inclusive and broad Arab involvement. This is also true when it comes to questions regarding the administration of Jerusalem’s holy sites, which demand, among other things, the formation of consensus in the Arab world.

One additional significant advantage of a multilateral approach is that it can be

used to break the "**power imbalance**" inherent in bilateral decision making, especially on the difficult core issues. A regional approach will not only provide a softer landing for any agreement, but will also afford the parties a framework that will ensure the continued existence and relevance of such an agreement.

Finally, it's worth noting the vast **Israeli profit** built into the API. Normalizing relations between Israel and Arab States will have massive economic implications that will contribute significantly to Israel's economic growth, principally by giving its energy and tourist markets a boost. In parallel, building peaceful ties with Arab nations will critically strengthen Israel in the fight against **Iranian nuclear ambitions**. In this case, Israel shares interests with many Arab states, and is interested in turning the issue into one that enjoys the quiet, active support of allies.

What are the challenges attached to an Israeli response to the Initiative?

It is striking to note that the Israeli right's opposition to the Initiative stems from its aversion to a two-state solution. The very notion of a return to the 1967 borders, even with agreed upon adjustments, is unacceptable to the right. The critical challenge for left, which accepts the two-state solution, is the conception they've inherited: that the Initiative comes in the form of a *diktat*.

The real political danger in agreeing to discuss the refugee issue as the Initiative lays it out has little to do with the Initiative's demand for a massive swell of refugees to arrive at Israel's borders. The Initiative demands no such thing. The real problem facing an Israeli acceptance of the Initiative is that such acceptance will likely be interpreted as an Israeli agreement to shoulder sole responsibility for the initial formation of the refugee problem. In any future agreement, this would shackle Israel to the questions around symbolic return and reparations, denying it important leeway. An added danger is the Initiative's require-

ment of withdrawal from the Golan given the present situation in Syria.

How should we face these challenges?

Israel need not say yes or no to the Initiative. An Israeli response should be formulated as a document similar to the Arab Peace Initiative itself, and present the principles of an Israeli stance. Of course, these two documents will in no way function as replacements for detailed negotiations.

In the Israeli response it should be clear that Israel does not see itself as solely responsible for the refugee issue, though it can accept shared responsibility for the formation of the problem. Israel can then rightfully join a discussion for a “just” and agreed upon solution with the Palestinian side. In terms of the demand for a pullout from the Golan, it must be made clear that this is unreasonable and impossible under the present circumstances. The lack of a central ruling body in Syria will allow Israel to leave this chapter “pending” as the lack of stability endures to its North.

Presently, the right is in power. What can the opposition do that will contribute to advancing a settlement while it remains outside the government?

If the left is interested in regaining political power, it must build a pro-active, alternative agenda. Building and consolidating this kind of agenda is a prerequisite to advancing such an alternative. One of the central reasons for the left’s weakness is that it lacks the trust of the public in its ability to offer security and policy solutions to Israel’s dilemmas. This, in part, is why the opposition should adopt the Initiative as the basis of its security platform. If the left is successful in basing its oppositional stance firmly in the Initiative, it can approach future elections with a clear agenda: A vote for the right is a vote for the frozen status quo, with all of the dangerous political implications that come with it — the left, in opposition, will provide the viable political path towards a solution and its

price.

Have public and security officials expressed support for the Initiative?

Former senior political officials, from both Israel's security and diplomatic spheres have already expressed public support, publishing a positive response to the API. Some of them even signed a document called the "**Israeli Initiative**", which presents an Israel stance on the Arab Peace Initiative.

What does Israel stand to lose by responding to the Initiative?

Very little. Practically, it is difficult to justify Israel's disregard for the Initiative. An Israeli response, including the acceptance of the principles of the Initiative as a platform for negotiations in addition to presenting the its own principle requirements, is an act that would leave Israel with the upper hand in any scenario: Were the Initiative to cause a breakthrough in Israeli relations with various Arab countries, such a thing in and of itself would be a first-rate security and economic achievement. No less important would be the historic achievement it would represent, no doubt in line with one of Zionism's foundational goals. Even if the Initiative proves to be merely an exercise in public diplomacy on the part of Arab states with the wider world, Israel still gains important leverage (which it lacks today) in the international arena.

If the Arab Peace Initiative is removed from the table with no attempt by State of Israel to seriously examine it, we will not only see an historic loss of opportunity, but criminal negligence on the part of the government of Israel towards future generations.