

The Arab Peace Initiative: Israel's Strategic Loss and Historic Opportunity

About Molad

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Executive Summary:

Since its inception in March 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative (API) has not been given its proper place in the political strategies of either Israel or the international community. Although the Initiative expressed a fundamental shift in the positions of Arab nations and a historic opportunity for the State of Israel, it largely passed unnoticed in Israel due to a combination of unfortunate timing and a distorted representation of its content and meaning to the Israeli public. This decade-long disregard for the API has caused, and continues to cause, serious strategic harm to Israel.

The Initiative offers a clear deal: Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, an agreed upon solution to the refugee problem, and the establishment of a Palestinian state, in return for "normal relations" with numerous Arab states including their recognition of Israel's legitimate right to exist "in peace and good neighbourliness". Although the Initiative is not entirely without its problems, all the alternatives to an affirmative response—inaction, bilateral negotiations with the Palestinian Authority or unilateral steps—suffer from similar problems yet benefit from none of its advantages. The Initiative is therefore the most attractive option for peace to date.

This Molad report aims to put the Arab Peace Initiative squarely on the public agenda and present it as a way out of the deep political crisis in which Israel is presently mired. Besides suggesting a solution to Israel's most fundamental problem—the occupation—and the deterioration of its international standing, the Initiative affords the potential to both improve Israel's security situation and meaningfully strengthen its economy. Moreover, Israeli acceptance of the Initiative would be deeply aligned with one of Zionism's initial historic goals; for neighboring nations, including the Palestinians, to recognize the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel.

This report also deals with the aspect of the Initiative which has been portrayed as the central challenge from the Israeli perspective, namely its stipulation on the refugee issue. The Initiative's adversaries in Israel often claim that it is tantamount to an Arab demand for a full return of refugees to Israeli territory. Molad's analysis reveals that this is an erroneous interpretation at best, and a deliberate distortion of facts at worst. The API doubtless contains a call for genuine Israeli recognition of the problem; but it leaves plenty of leeway for practical solutions.

This report also deals with the region's shifting reality in the years since the Initiative was put on the table—the civil war in Syria, the rise of Islamist movements in some of the Arab states, and the split in the Palestinian leadership—and demonstrates how these transformations only make the Initiative more appealing.

Finally, this paper presents a general outline for an Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative. The Initiative's declarative nature calls for a similarly declarative response. In such a declaration, Israel can respond positively in principle, while stressing the need for negotiations on details. This is a unique opportunity for Israel to redefine its relations with its neighbors.

The likelihood that the current Israeli government will embrace the efforts of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry by responding positively to the Arab Initiative is slim to

none. It is therefore the responsibility of the Israeli opposition to turn the Initiative into a cornerstone of its policy. The opposition will thus espouse a reasoned and responsible program that constitutes a clear alternative to the right's dangerous path. It should furthermore make clear its intentions to formally adopt the Initiative once it regains the public's trust and forms a government.

One of the central reasons for the Israeli left's present weakness is that it lost credibility with the public on issues of peace and security. The time has come to relieve ourselves of the stagnant mindset that identifies direct bilateral negotiations as the only way forward and take advantage of the benefits to be found in a multi-lateral, regional approach. As long as Israel's governments continue to fail in the quest for peace, Israel's opposition parties ought to affirm this historic opportunity waiting at their doorstep.

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"It's huge.... It's a heck of a deal."

(President Clinton, 2011)

The story of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 is the story of a lost strategic opportunity of historic proportions. The "Iron Wall" strategy that guided Israel for much of its history has been abandoned at a critical moment. The "Iron Wall" approach, according to Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky, was meant to enable Israel's regional integration. In his words, the process of integration would be complete when "moderate groups will approach us with a proposal that we should both agree to mutual concessions." But shortsighted governments coupled with a profound political insecurity led Israel's leaders to miss an opportunity to secure this supreme Israeli interest when it fell in their laps in March of 2002. The advantages of the Arab Peace Initiative far outweigh its disadvantages, especially given the present geopolitical situation. With the failure of direct negotiations, and in the face of opportunities born of regional shifts, the Arab Peace Initiative provides a basis and can function as an outline for real progress in the Israeli political sphere. Israel must accept the API and enter a regional, multilateral process leading to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian, and consequently, the Arab-Israeli, conflict.

1 Background: The origin of the Arab Peace Initiative

In the aftermath of the Six Day War of June 1967, the Arab League convened in Khartoum. At the conclusion of the conference, representatives of the member states declared "Three no's": No to peace with Israel, no to recognition of Israel, and no to negotiations with Israel.¹

Notwithstanding the aggressive character of this declaration, unofficial relationships soon developed between Israel and some of the Arab states—many of them well before the Yom Kippur War of 1973; King Hussein of Jordan, for example, was in contact with Israel, and, Egypt put out diplomatic feelers for a peace agreement in return for an American-brokered Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. The united Arab front was finally shattered when diplomatic negotiations began between Israel and Egypt in 1977. In the wake of the signing of the peace agreement with Israel, Egypt was ostracized by the rest of the Arab world, which persisted in refusing to reconcile with Israel's existence.

It was only in the early 80s that Arab countries could enter dialogue with Israel without facing immediate ostracism. In August 1981, as a result of the Saudi desire to heal the internal Arab rift caused by the Camp David accords, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd launched a new diplomatic initiative. Though it primarily made demands of Israel, the seventh clause bore novel significance in declaring that all states in the Middle East have the right to exist in peace. By implication, that right extended to Israel as well should it accede to Arab demands.

Two additional motives for the Saudi move included first, a desire to find favor in the eyes of the United States and the West, and second, a desire to establish an agreed-upon, Arab base for a peace process with Israel in order to prevent future crises like the earlier rupture with Egypt. Yet, in November 1981 at the Arab League Summit, the Saudis failed to pass their initiative, primarily as a result of Syrian opposition. A year later, in September 1982, Syria and the Palestinians, still smarting from the results of the First Lebanon War, were finally forced to sign on to the initiative. For their part, the Saudis had internalized the lessons of the past, and coordinated their initiative with the other Arab states before the vote took place. Consequently, the initiative accepted in 1982 did not contain the disputed clause from '81 about the recognition of the right of every state in the Middle East to exist in peace. It was replaced by a different clause, one that called on the United Nations to guarantee peace between states in the region, including a Palestinian state. In other words, the Arab states' readiness to recognize Israel, to whatever extent it had existed in the original initiative, was transformed into a mere allusion.²

In the wake of the First Gulf War (1990-1991), the Bush administration spearheaded a political process that intended to change the face of the Middle East. Its centerpiece was the Madrid Conference convened on October 30, 1991. The three-day affair brought together delegations from various states at the invitation of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the European Union. All of the states party to the Middle East conflict

participated: Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon—as well as various other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia. As a result of Israeli opposition to extending an invitation to a Palestinian delegation, the Palestinians joined the conference as part of the Jordanian delegation. The hopes of the conference organizers were only partially fulfilled—the gathering led to neither a comprehensive peace agreement nor any bilateral peace agreements between participants. Nevertheless, the Madrid Conference did herald some historic outcomes: at first there were initial, informal contacts, and later, the Oslo Accords, a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, and the thawing of relations between Israel and the Arab world, especially in North Africa.

Throughout the 1990s, negligible progress was made along the multilateral track, while the bilateral track (Israel-Jordan, Israel-Palestinians and Israel-Syria) saw far more progress. The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process toward the end of 2000, as well as the earlier collapse of the Israeli-Syrian peace process and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, had a detrimental effect on the prospects for long-term improvement in the relationship between Israel and the Arab world. These events, coupled with the 9/11 attacks and Iran's quest for regional ascendancy, provide the context for the Saudi moves that led to the adoption of the Arab Peace Initiative at the Beirut summit in March 2002.

Fifteen of the nineteen terrorists who participated in the 9/11 attacks were Saudi citizens. This fact led the U.S. to pay close attention to Saudi Arabia's inadequate efforts to halt growing religious fanaticism inside its borders. Needless to say, the Saudi regime realized there was an urgent need to improve its image in the West. There was also an additional Saudi interest in consolidating a moderate Arab camp against the growing regional power of Iran. The ongoing escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the inaction the part of the Arab regimes increased the unrest of the Arab street. Arab regimes began to fear that their failure to end violence in the occupied Palestinian territories could destabilize their governments.³

In light of this situation, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah met with *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in early 2002. In their conversation, excerpts of which appeared in the *Times* on February 17 of that year, the Crown Prince expressed his readiness to spearhead a regional initiative in which Arab states would normalize relations with Israel in return for Israel's withdrawal from the territories.⁴ In the excerpts Friedman chose to quote in his column, no mention was made of demands from Israel regarding the right of return of Palestinian refugees from 1948. Abdullah's position in the Friedman interview was subsequently dubbed "the Saudi Initiative."

On the basis of Crown Prince Abdullah's statements, the Arab League met in Beirut on March 28, 2002 where it unanimously adopted the "Arab Peace Initiative." The League's declaration essentially expressed Crown Prince Abdullah's address to the gathering. The wording of the Initiative contained a number of changes made after Abdullah's conversation with Friedman a month prior; most notably a clarification that "Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 boundaries" included the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon. There were also two new clauses dealing with the Palestinian refugee problem. But the deal was still clear: In return for acceding to a number of basic Arab—and particularly Palestinian—demands, Israel would be granted the regional legitimacy it has yearned for since the dawning of Zionism.

2 The Arab Peace Initiative: text and questions

A – Official translation of the full text (Beirut, 2002)⁵

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 U.N. 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.

Before we analyze the Initiative, it is worth paying attention to its context. The document itself is exceptionally brief, declarative in nature, and contains neither the detailed wording of a comprehensive peace agreement nor the complete outline for such an agreement. It is a declaration of an Arab position which calls for a parallel declaration from Israel.

Although the Initiative was published in the midst of a period of violent confrontation—portrayed in the Arab world as an Israeli massacre of Palestinians—the document lists no “Israeli crimes” and instead focuses on the vital need for a political solution. Furthermore, the opening section clarifies the basis for this political solution: international resolutions to which Israel has already expressed its agreement—namely, United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. The same section clarifies what is at stake: an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state in return for “normal relations,” predicated on Israel operating not on a single front—say, Palestinian or Syrian—but rather in the framework of a comprehensive peace.

The Initiative makes two practical demands of Israel: First, a full territorial withdrawal from all the territories occupied in the Six Day War of June 1967 and second, a just, agreed upon solution to the refugee problem on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolution 194.⁶ Furthermore, the initiative stipulates that a permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in their Arab host states will not take place if they “conflict with the special circumstances of the Arab host countries.” This clause is a standalone article, not part of the other demands made of Israel.

These changes—the emphasis on a withdrawal from Syrian and Lebanese territory, as well as the additional clause on Palestinian repatriation—were the Saudi (and Jordanian) response to issues raised by Syria and the country hosting the summit meeting, Lebanon, both of which have large refugee populations. In an effort to craft language that would make it easier for Israel to accept, Jordan was able to broker a concession: the patriation clause would not be included among the rest of the Initiative’s demands.⁷ In this instance, much like the instance of the Saudis’ previous initiative in 1981, building

consensus among Arab nations outweighed shaping its acceptability to Israeli ears.

B – Interpretations

Once the Initiative was publicized, a number of disagreements arose in Israel concerning its interpretation. The three main disagreements are as follows:

1. A sincere declaration or a deception aimed at internal public relations?

Among the various commentators who have weighed in on the Initiative, there were some who cast doubt on the sincerity of the Arab states' intentions. The sense was that these states had not signed on with serious intent to achieve a political solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict. Proponents of this view emphasize the domestic context of its presentation to argue that Israel was not the main addressee of the API.⁸ While it is hard to ignore the ways in which the Initiative serves the interests of the Saudi throne, a close reading and careful consideration of Arab opposition movements' reactions to it make it clear that the Initiative should be seen as sincere and honest proposal.

Ilay Alon⁹ points to several linguistic features in the Initiative that attest to its sincerity. First, the overall tone does not display the customary coldness habitually shown to Israel by Arab states.

Second, the fact that the text addresses a "request" rather than a "demand" for "Israel to reconsider its policies" is significant. The former is usually reserved for members of the Arab League, and the latter had been used to address Israel in all in previous statements. In addition, the original Arabic text of the API calls on Israel to "incline to peace." This phrase, drawn from the text of the Quran, is from the verse that reads: "And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing."¹⁰ Alon notes that, in effect, this phrasing provides religious authorization for making peace with the enemy.

As Meir Litvak points out,¹¹ the reaction of Islamic opposition groups in the Arab world to the API can be useful in interpreting it. These groups certainly have at least as much capacity to speak as any Israeli commentator when it comes to their acquaintance with the relevant cultural backdrop, and, moreover, in no way can be accused of whitewashing their sentiments so as to suit the tastes of either the Israelis or the Arab regimes. The outcry voiced by Islamic groups against the normalization articulated in the Initiative can thus validate the sincerity of the Arab League's intentions.¹²

2. Invitation to negotiations or *diktat*?

Ever since the initiative was first placed on the table, the Saudis have repeatedly declared that the API is a non-negotiable proposal awaiting an Israeli response.¹³ Naturally, such statements underline the problematic nature of the Initiative's two practical demands: a withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders and a vague commitment on the refugee issue. Taken at face value, it would appear that Israel must accept the Arab League's opening positions "as is", even before the talks begin.

However, it is important not to attach too much importance to the fact that the Initiative is formatted as a fixed proposal as opposed to an invitation to a discussion. The API is not a detailed peace agreement that Israel is expected to accept or reject in full. It contains none of the vital components that would make up such an agreement. For instance, the Initiative is only one page long, whereas the Gaza-Jericho agreement with the Palestinians is several dozen pages long. The Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement ("Oslo II") comes to several hundred pages (including its appendices). The sparse wording of the Initiative omits not merely the "generic" issues (distribution of water, transportation, etc.), but also those at the very heart of the confrontation between the two peoples, like jurisdiction over the holy places in Jerusalem. Would it be at all possible to produce a signable peace settlement that did not include a solution to this issue? In the same vein, assuming that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement will include land-swaps, is there any doubt that such swaps will satisfy the Initiative's territorial requirement, despite the fact that the withdrawal will plainly not be to the original '67 lines?

Treating the Initiative as a straightforward demand for immediate implementation is plainly a misunderstanding; it is a declarative document that invites Israel to respond with a stance of its own. Crucially, then, a positive Israeli response will not commit Israel to a final position on any of the core issues. This interpretation is reinforced by Alon's claim that the Initiative's wording, as well as negotiating practices in the Arab and Islamic worlds, supports the possibility that a positive Israeli response will open the door for further negotiations on the final parameters.¹⁴

3. The refugee issue: flexible pragmatism or an end to Israel as a Jewish state?

One common reaction to the Arab Peace Initiative is to read a *de facto* acceptance of the right of return of Palestinian refugees into its clause on the issue. Although the flexibility afforded by the wording of the Initiative on the refugee issue is limited, the demand for an agreement based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194 opens a door to a peace settlement that need not include the return of all—or even most—Palestinian refugees.¹⁵ This formula was the basis of the discussions between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert regarding the return of a symbolic number of refugees (40,000 to 60,000) to Israeli territory.¹⁶ Indeed, there is good reason for Olmert and various American officials to claim that the refugee issue is soluble.¹⁷ Nevertheless, although the issue is not explicitly stated, the API's formulation on the refugee issue cannot be construed in good faith as a disavowal of the demand for Israel to recognize the fundamental aspects of the problem; namely, the injustice done or the legitimacy, in principle, of their right of return (even if the practical realization of this right is "waived"). The limited opposition voiced by the Islamic movements on this subject can be taken as proof that the Initiative does not harbor a major Arab concession on the refugee issue.¹⁸

The clause expressing opposition to the patriation of Palestinian refugees in their Arab host countries should be read in the context of Lebanese interests. Lebanon, the 2002 Summit's host country, hosts a non-patriated Palestinian refugee population of roughly 450,000. While Syria hosts a comparable population of refugees, in Lebanon they constitute some ten percent of the total population. In a country up to its neck in

ethnic strife, granting citizenship to nearly half a million Sunni Muslims has the potential to disturb an already unstable social fabric. Moreover, of all the Arab states hosting non-repatriated Palestinian refugee populations, Lebanon's is the least integrated into the country's social and economic life. A key example is Lebanon's longstanding prohibition on Palestinians working in twenty different professions within its borders, thus preventing them from establishing a solid economic base for themselves.¹⁹

Given its reality, Lebanon was adamant that the Initiative take into account the "special circumstances" of Arab host countries when it came to a permanent place of residence for Palestinian refugees. Litvak understands this stance as a demand for the return of the refugees to Israel.²⁰ It is, however, equally plausible that the clause represents a Lebanese demand that someone else assume responsibility. While such a reading does not diminish the need to come up with practicable solutions, it presupposes that the Lebanese are less concerned with the solution itself as long as the problem is taken off their hands. In fact, this is precisely how senior Lebanese officials presented their stance during the draft stages of the Initiative.²¹ Additional evidence for this reading is Lebanon's agreement that this clause not be addressed to Israel.

In the final analysis, then, the Arab Peace Initiative does not propose any concessions on the principled aspects of the right of return. However, it does present an official Arab position which leaves room for flexibility on the implementation of that right. Twenty years of negotiations have taught us that far-reaching compromise is possible on the refugee issue.

3 Reactions to the Initiative

A – The Palestinians

As the representative body of the Palestinians in the Arab League, the Palestine Liberation Organization voted in favor of the Arab Peace Initiative when it was first proposed, and at every conference since. Some of the members of the Palestinian leadership, President Mahmoud Abbas in particular, continually reiterate their commitment to the Initiative in various declarations and speeches.²² They have even attempted to market the Initiative to the Israeli public.²³ As soon as Barack Obama took office in 2008, Abbas urged him to adopt the API. That same year, the Palestinian Authority placed an ad in Israeli newspapers that called on Israelis to adopt the Initiative. And when Arab world leaders proposed a review of the Initiative in light of "Israeli intransigence," Abbas was the first to oppose it.²⁴ When asked about the Arab Peace Initiative in 2011, Abbas replied, "We must preserve this Initiative and must not abandon it. We must recognize its vast significance and focus on it because it contains the complete solution for the Middle East."²⁵

Although the PLO and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, are the official representatives of the Palestinian people to the international community, Palestinian politics have been split since 2007 between the PLO and Hamas. Hamas currently governs the Gaza Strip and exerts considerable influence in the West Bank and the Palestinian refugee camps in various Arab states. Like other Islamic movements, most of Hamas's spokespeople expressed opposition to the Initiative when it was first proposed. Nevertheless, Hamas has sung a different tune more than once since then. On the occasion of the Arab League summit in Riyadh in 2007, where the API was reaffirmed, Hamas Prime Minister in Gaza Ismail Haniyeh made it clear that, despite his movement's opposition to the Initiative, were Israel to respond positively, Hamas would manage to find an agreed upon formula together with the other Arab states.²⁶ He later retracted his statements. On various separate occasions, senior Hamas officials, including the movement's political chief, Khaled Meshal, have declared that the movement would not be the one to prevent the implementation of the Initiative. These same officials occasionally use the lack of Israeli response to the Initiative to resist pressure to express an explicit position of their own.²⁷

B – Israel

The reaction in Israel to Friedman's interview with Crown Prince Abdullah was ambivalent at best. At the time, Israel was in the midst the Second Intifada and the government's official stand was that the "Saudi" initiative was unacceptable. The claim was that it sought to replace the diplomatic agenda prescribed by UN resolutions with one more convenient for Arab states.²⁸ Moreover, members of the Israeli cabinet argued that a sweeping Israeli withdrawal to the '67 borders was completely out of the question to begin with. Yet senior Israeli officials sought more information on the Initiative through other, particularly American, channels. Among other things, then-Israeli President Moshe Katsav proposed meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah in Saudi

Arabia or Israel, but the Saudis rejected the invitation, which they considered an Israeli attempt to advance normalization before accepting the terms of the API.

If Israel was ambivalent toward the "Saudi Initiative" (which never really existed), it categorically rejected the official "Arab Peace Initiative" adopted at the Beirut Summit. Conditions for an Israeli acceptance of the Arab Initiative were particularly unfavorable at the time, since the Initiative was approved by the Arab League only one day after the terrorist attack on Passover Seder night in the Park Hotel in Netanya and on the eve of Operation Defensive Shield, when Israel Defense Forces troops reoccupied the Palestinian city centers in the West Bank.

What is more, Israeli officials believed that the addition of the clauses on Palestinian refugees in the Initiative constituted a step back from previous offers. For example, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, a cabinet member at the time, stated: "The process that took place in Beirut...has brought the Initiative to regions that are problematic for us."²⁹ Against the background of mounting security concerns, no official discussion was held on the Initiative. In a casual reference to the Arab Peace Initiative, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon claimed it held some "positive signs", but added that it also contained "radical demands".³⁰ This line of thought continued to dominate Israeli policy until 2006. Even in the Israeli peace camp, the API played second fiddle to the Geneva Initiative and the Nusseibeh-Ayalon peace plan.

Excessive focus on the minute details of the Initiative, along with the pressure of events at the time, contributed to Israel's ability to disregard the historic importance of the Arab League's step forward. Indeed, Israel could have acknowledged the Initiative as a significant progress and push for further discussion, even if it was ultimately unable to accept its terms or remained wedded to alternative frameworks. In practice, however, hardly any discussion of the Initiative took place during this period.³¹

After the Second Lebanon War—and, according to some, as a consequence—Prime Minister Ehud Olmert began to engage with the API. According to various reports, during a visit to the U.S. in September 2006, Olmert met with the Secretary General of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar bin Sultan; two months later, in a speech marking the anniversary of the death of David Ben-Gurion, Olmert mentioned the "Saudi Initiative" in a positive light. While he continued to speak positively specifically of the "Saudi Initiative", Olmert also appeared not to reject the Arab Initiative out of hand, though he never espoused it. When he made reference to the API in a speech delivered at the start of the Annapolis Conference negotiations, he refrained from making any substantive statement that would indicate acceptance.³² At the time, then-Foreign Minister Livni continued to speak of the API's "problematic nature."³³

A positive attitude toward the Arab League's moves characterized Olmert's colleagues in Kadima and some of his partners in the coalition, but other voices could also be heard. Both Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman were vociferous in their opposition to the API. For example, in 2007, Netanyahu said that "the Initiative in its present form is dangerous for Israel and dangerous for peace."³⁴ After the election of a right-wing government led by Netanyahu, official references to the Initiative dwindled. But Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman still declared the Initiative a "recipe for the destruction of Israel" in 2009.³⁵ That same year, in a rare reference to the subject, Netanyahu took a

much softer tone. In a speech at an event held in the official residence of the Egyptian ambassador, Netanyahu said that, "if these proposals are not final, they can create an atmosphere in which a comprehensive peace can be reached."³⁶ Such declarations attest to the fact that, even in Netanyahu's view, there is a need to distinguish between the Initiative's content and its general spirit. Moreover, the statement appears to reveal Netanyahu's recognition of the significant progress embodied in the Initiative, despite certain elements that may not coincide with Israel's national interest as Netanyahu sees it. In light of this, the passive, perhaps even hostile, attitude displayed by the Netanyahu government towards the API raises looming questions. Recently, in an indirect reference to the topic, Netanyahu again articulated a skeptical stance towards the Arab world. In a eulogy he delivered for former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Netanyahu echoed Shamir's assertion that "the sea is the same sea, the Arabs the same Arabs."³⁷ It would seem that even if there had been some change in Netanyahu's position on the API, no change has been made to his fundamentally skeptical approach to the Arab world—and so he has remained unable to recognize and take advantage of the potential offered by the Initiative.

The Israeli left had a more positive reaction to the Initiative, though at no point did it turn the API into a mainstay of its policy. Immediately after the Initiative was made public, then-opposition leader and Meretz party chairman Yossi Sarid convened an extraordinary Knesset session in which he accused the government of responding inadequately to the Initiative.³⁸ This event proved to be an exception. For the most part, the Israeli left continued to focus on a resuscitation of bilateral channels, first within the context of the Nusseibeh-Ayalon peace plan (2002) and subsequently with the Geneva Initiative (2003).³⁹ Interest in the API continued to dwindle until it was reawakened in 2007–8 after the Second Lebanon War and in the face of Iran's ascendancy. In the wake of rekindled interest and in the context of the 2009 national elections, groups like the Geneva Initiative and the Council for Peace and Security made efforts to rouse Israeli public opinion on the subject. Peace Now even responded to an ad that the Palestinians had taken out in the Israeli press calling for Israeli support for the Arab Peace Initiative by placing similar ads in Palestinian newspapers.⁴⁰ Recently, there has once again been renewed interest in the API among extra-parliamentary groups on the left, including the Israeli Peace Initiative, an organization dedicated to promoting the API. The Israeli Peace Initiative is unique in that it goes beyond mere campaigning and proposes a full Israeli response to the Arab Initiative.⁴¹

To sum up, the official Israeli response to the Arab Initiative ranges from total rejection to a general, albeit often qualified, positive attitude. At no stage did any Israeli government consider accepting the API in either its entirety or in part, and it certainly never made it into a substantive component of its policy. Based on statements made by different Israeli political leaders, the most conspicuous reason for this is the demand the Initiative makes concerning refugees.⁴² It can be estimated that these reservations stem largely from a fundamental Israeli preference for bilateral negotiations brokered by a single mediator—preferably the United States—to multilateral settings. Except for brief periods, there was no consistent opposition from within the ranks of either the major political parties or civil society organizations. Even today, both the opposition in the Knesset and civil society organizations continue to uphold the bilateral paradigm for negotiations despite its ongoing failure.

C – The international community

The international community responded positively to the Arab Peace Initiative, but at no stage did it mobilize in any serious way to push it forward or turn it into a fundamental component of its regional policy. Crown Prince Abdullah's Initiative earned support in UN Security Council Resolution 1397 two weeks before the Beirut Summit. The resolution itself was not adopted by the Security Council, though UN Security Council Resolution 1435, from September 2002, stated that the Council "recognizes ... the continuing importance of the initiative endorsed at the Arab League Summit held in Beirut."⁴³ Soon after, the API was mentioned in the preamble to the Road Map, published in April 2003, as one of the foundations for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The API's inclusion in that document gave rise to one of the Israeli government's fourteen reservations with respect to Road Map. Since then, support for the Initiative has been voiced by a host of world leaders, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and American President Barack Obama, who said that he "might not agree with every aspect of the proposal, but it took great courage to put forward something that is as significant as that."⁴⁴ Yet it should be emphasized that the international community did not turn the Initiative into a central component of its program; instead it remained wedded to the belief that there is no substitute for bilateralism. In other words, the international community has not deviated from the principle that has guided its arbitration since the early 1990s and generally refrains from addressing the Arab proposal seriously.

D – Islamic movements

The central Islamic movements in the Arab world, primarily the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and Hamas, regard the API as a decidedly negative move. Soon after it became clear that the Initiative would be discussed at the Beirut Summit, the Islamic movements came out against it. They saw it as a prize for Israel at a time when it was, in their view, slaughtering Palestinians. As the Initiative's details became clearer, Islamic resistance focused on two aspects: the very idea of recognizing Israel, and the normalization of relations with it at the end of the process.⁴⁵ No significant criticism was expressed on the refugee issue, although some of the Islamic movements' spokespeople were critical of the readiness to arrive at an "agreed upon" solution, which entails concessions on the implementation of the Palestinian right of return. It should be recalled that, since coming to power in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has not withdrawn Egypt's support for the Initiative and even recently ratified it once again.⁴⁶

E – The history: 2002-2013

2002-2011

Since its publication, the Arab Peace Initiative has been at the center of the conversation about Israel's relationship with the Arab world. Almost immediately after it was put on the table, the API was added to the list of documents that the international

community—including the United States—regards as key for a solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict. For its part, the Arab League has taken pains to present it repeatedly on various occasions.

In the lead up to the 2005 Arab League Summit in Algiers, the Jordanians—who, from the very beginning, served a moderating role in the wording of the Initiative—pushed for a reformulation of the statement that would simultaneously obfuscate the refugee issue and offer normalization with Israel even before the completion of the process. The Jordanians also tried to repeal the clause opposing Palestinian refugee patriation in Arab host countries. Their hope was that the blow Syria suffered earlier that year, when it was forced to withdraw its forces from Lebanon, would make the change easier. But lack of cooperation on the part of both the Saudis and the Egyptians prevented the change.⁴⁷ In the wake of the Second Lebanon War and Iran's increasing regional influence, the Arab states attempted to breathe new life into the Arab Peace Initiative, ratifying it at the Arab League at the Riyadh Summit in 2007. Following the ratification, the Arab League sent Egypt's and Jordan's foreign ministers to Israel in July 2007; their meetings produced no results.⁴⁸ In late 2008, the Palestinian Authority placed massive ads in Israeli newspapers. The ads presented the text of the Initiative and, in the margins, displayed the flags of the 57 Islamic countries whose foreign ministers had approved it at a meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation) in Malaysia in April 2002.

2011-2013

The Arab Spring is far and away the most significant transformation to take place in the last two years in the Arab world and its impact on Arab states' stances on the Arab Peace Initiative requires further study. Almost half of the Arab League's 22 member states experienced the Arab Spring's powerful shockwaves and five of them saw their erstwhile regimes toppled. The following can be listed among the Arab Spring's repercussions:

- 1 Egypt and Tunisia have seen Islamic political parties come to power in the wake of popular uprisings.
- 2 Syria has been embroiled in civil war for the past two years with no central regime capable of exercising full territorial authority.
- 3 Hamas's unwillingness to support the Syrian regime has produced a crisis in the movement's relationship with the Assad regime's allies—Hezbollah and Iran. Similarly, Turkey has demonstrated both readiness and an interest in consolidating a regional front against Assad.
- 4 The leadership of the Palestinian Authority is adamant in its refusal to enter into negotiations with Israel since, in the PA's estimation, the chances that such negotiations would yield any reasonable benefit for the Palestinians is negligible given the positions of the current Israeli government.
- 5 An increase in the influence of Arab public opinion on the positions of regimes. One characteristic of this public opinion includes hostility toward Israel, largely

centered around (but not exclusively concerned with) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁹

Although even before the Arab Spring, some Arab spokespeople could be heard threatening to take the Initiative off the agenda at the official level, the Arab League in its present constellation has not taken this step. Moreover, according to various reports, early 2013 saw a rekindled Saudi interest in the Initiative, and some U.S. officials have expressed that they, too, see it as a possible route to progress.⁵⁰ Furthermore, at the 12th Islamic Summit Conference in February 2013, hosted by the present Egyptian regime in Cairo the API was once again referred to as one of the cornerstones of the Israeli-Arab peace process.⁵¹

Most recently, in March 2013, the Arab League again ratified the Initiative and requested that the Qatari Prime Minister, Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, fly to Washington to discuss the peace process. The delegation included foreign ministers of many of the Arab states.⁵² The fact that this move was spearheaded by Qatar, the host of the March 2013 Arab League Summit and chair of the Arab League committee which monitors the progress of the API, is of particular importance in light of the Emirate's role in internal Arab affairs. On the one hand, Qatar has a strong relationship with the U.S., and hosts several American military bases. On the other hand, Qatar maintains good relations with Hamas, helps mediate internal crises in Lebanon between Hezbollah and pro-Western groups, and, most importantly, operates the *Al Jazeera* satellite television station, which enables it to exert immense influence on Arab publics. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, *Al Jazeera* has been identified as pro-revolution, which gives Qatar highly disproportionate clout relative to other Arab regimes.

Recently, when asked about the ratification of the API at the 12th Islamic Summit Conference in February 2013, Marwan Muasher, who served as Jordanian Foreign Minister in 2002 and actively participated in drafting the Initiative, replied that the ratification in Cairo could indeed be seen as tacit Egyptian approval to keep the Initiative on the table. Nonetheless, he argued that, unlike in the past, Egypt can no longer be expected to actively push for progress. Muasher further warned that, in light of the Arab street's increased influence on political processes, the ongoing stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the Saudi King Abdullah's failing health, Arab states might find it difficult to stand up to public pressures against the spirit of the Initiative in the long run.⁵³

4 Dangers and Prospects

A – The dangers stemming from the Initiative

From the Israeli standpoint, several of the API's features could prove problematic. For proponents of the settlements—that is, the political camp that rejects a withdrawal to the '67 borders on principle—the demand for such a withdrawal is a completely unacceptable term. By contrast, for those who understand that a Palestinian state along the '67 borders is an Israeli interest, the sole difficulty API's border clause might raise is that it seems to deny Israel a bargaining chip in the negotiations. Although this might be a serious fear with which to contend in a pre-negotiation reality, when one considers the various agreements reached in the long history of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and the international consensus on the issue of borders, this argument holds little water. All official and unofficial peace initiatives have ultimately boiled down to a similar set of principles, the most important of which is an Israeli withdrawal to the '67 borders with mutually agreed upon, 1:1 land swaps. Thus, when it comes to borders, a positive Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative will carry no additional political price tag for Israel.

A more meaningful challenge to Israel is the API's stance on the refugee issue. As argued above, the challenge is not that Israel is expected to agree to a massive return of Palestinian refugees to Israeli territory—the Initiative makes no such demand—but rather the implied demand that Israel recognize its responsibility in the creation of the refugee problem and the practical solutions involving a symbolic return and financial compensation. The Israeli response must clarify, at the very least, that when it comes to refugees, Israel accepts joint responsibility for the creation of the problem and that it is prepared to discuss other aspects of a "just and mutually agreed upon solution" with the Palestinians. During previous rounds of talks, Israeli negotiators have recognized that Israel is called upon, at least to some extent, to acknowledge its responsibility in the creation of the refugee problem. In other words, even in this respect, the API is far closer to positions that Israel has already adopted than its opponents would have us believe.

The other major difficulty many Israeli political analysts have zeroed-in on stems from their reading of the formulation of the initiative as a *diktat*. In this view, Israel is being called upon to either completely reject or completely accept the API with all its conditions and with no room for negotiation to change the currently presented proposal. But it should be emphasized that a positive Israeli response to the Initiative would not render the need for negotiations moot. Israel need not provide a "yes" or "no" answer; it can respond in a document similar in format to the API that would enable it to express some of its positions (just as the Arabs chose to present only some of their positions).

Beyond the challenges posed from within the API, two additional difficulties arise. The first has to do with current developments in Syria. Although the Initiative focuses on the Palestinian issue, Syria's 2002 success in stretching the territorial demands that would appear in the API raises the question of how—even if Israel decides it is prepared to

withdraw from the Golan Heights—it can “cash the check” in the absence of a central authority in Syria.

The second problem is how to secure the consent of radical groups in the Arab world for the API in the event of a positive Israeli response. In this context, one must distinguish between two kinds of organizations. One category includes official movements that aspire to political power, or at least to political status, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The second category includes extremist organizations—Salafist groups and others. Quite remarkably, the Muslim Brotherhood already maintains *de facto* relations with Israel through its representatives in the Egyptian government. Hamas, for its part, is under Egyptian pressure not to make any moves that could destabilize the region, and it is likely to find itself under even more pressure should Israel adopt the API. This is especially true given the positions of many senior Hamas leaders, mentioned above, which indicate an understanding within the movement that it will not be able to oppose a pan-Arab stance in favor of the Initiative. Groups in the second category—radical organizations in the Gaza Strip, Syria, and Lebanon, such as Hezbollah—do not consider themselves bound by Arab consensus nor will they consider themselves bound by the Arab Peace Initiative in the foreseeable future.

While the situation in Syria creates serious problems, in some ways it is also an opportunity. It enables Israel to commit to the API’s conditions in the Palestinian arena while making it clear that the aspects which concern Syria will need to wait until the situation there stabilizes. The consent of the majority of the Islamist organizations is not immediately necessary, as they function in the political opposition. The situation is different with respect three Islamic political parties: those in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Palestinian Authority. As noted above, official representatives of the two former regimes, with Islamic parties at their helm, both confirmed the support of their respective countries for the API at the last Arab League Summit. Hamas is a somewhat different case, although its maneuverability is limited when it comes to the Initiative for two reasons. First, as a result of its institutionalization as the ruling party in the Gaza Strip, which forces it to consider the stability of its regime whenever it makes any decision concerning opposition to Israel, and, second, its growing dependence on Egypt in the wake of the Hamas leadership’s banishment from Damascus and the withering of Iranian support. Furthermore, discussion of the API from within Hamas’s ranks does not start from scratch; as noted above, some of its leaders have expressed readiness to accept the Initiative.⁵⁴

B – The advantages of adopting the Initiative

There are a great many advantages that come with adopting the Arab Peace Initiative. In addition to offering a way out of one of Israel’s most fundamental problems—the occupation—and providing a remedy to its deteriorating international standing,⁵⁵ the Initiative affords the potential to both improve Israel’s security situation on all fronts and meaningfully strengthen its economy. Moreover, an Israeli acceptance of the Initiative would be deeply aligned with one of Zionism’s historic goals since its founding—to have neighboring nations, including the Palestinians, recognize the legitimacy of the existence of the State of Israel. In practical terms, Israel’s strategy

since its founding relied on the "Iron Wall" thesis of Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky. This strategy requires that Israel possess an absolute military-strategic advantage in order demonstrate to the surrounding Arab states that any attempt to erase the Jewish presence from Palestine's maps or history is futile. Crucially, however, this advantage has long been achieved, and is becoming more and more pronounced with the years. Those regional players who actively see Israel as an enemy state do not seriously entertain hopes to destroy it with military might, and instead bank on the power of unrealistic messianic visions. Indeed, it is hard to deny that Jabotinsky's predictions are being realized:

As long as the Arabs feel that there is the least hope of getting rid of us, they will refuse to give up this hope in return for either kind words or for bread and butter, because they are not a rabble, but a living people. And when a living people yields in matters of such a vital character it is only when there is no longer any hope of getting rid of us, because they can make no breach in the iron wall. Not till then will they drop their extremist leaders, whose watchword is "Never!" And the leadership will pass to the moderate groups, who will approach us with a proposal that we should both agree to mutual concessions. Then we may expect them to discuss honestly practical questions, such as a guarantee against Arab displacement, or equal rights for Arab citizens, or Arab national integrity.

And when that happens, I am convinced that we Jews will be found ready to give them satisfactory guarantees, so that both peoples can live together in peace, like good neighbors. (The Iron Wall, Jabotinsky, 1923)⁵⁶

The shift from the "Never!" of Khartoum to the "normal relations" of Beirut 2002, can be seen as the fruition of Israel's "Iron Wall" strategy. It was not for nothing that American President Bill Clinton said, "The King of Saudi Arabia started lining up all the Arab countries to say to the Israelis, 'If you work it out with the Palestinians ... we will give you immediately not only recognition but a political, economic, and security partnership. It's huge... It's a heck of a deal.'⁵⁷ Unfortunately, in 2002, Israel was so busy bolstering its Iron Wall that it neglected to harvest the fruits that had ripened thanks to it. This is a missed opportunity of historic proportions. Although twelve years have passed, there is still time to right this error.

Alongside the historic achievement that would be made with the adoption of the API, there are other advantages that pertain to the given regional context. First, the Initiative offers Israel a comprehensive process that is liable to improve Israel's relations with the entire Arab world, not just with this or that part of it. Second, the involvement and commitment of other players besides Israel and the Palestinians would help end the present stalemate preventing bilateral negotiations.

Moreover, the Arab Peace Initiative was created, *inter alia*, in order to form a moderate regional agenda as an alternative to that of radical elements, primarily Iran. In its struggle with Iran, Israel has an interest in turning Arab states into active allies, not just tacit supporters for some of its actions, as is the case today. It should be added that there are also security advantages to consider: First, a reduction in the potential for military conflicts in the region, and second, an increased commitment to regional security from players with whom Israel has no relations such as Libya, which today is

the point of departure for a considerable quantity of arms being shipped to terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip.

In the Iranian context, a regional, broad-based, comprehensive course of action conducted on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative could create much more convenient operating conditions for the U.S. or any other actor that might choose to take military action against either Iran's nuclear facilities or its allies—much in the same way the George W. Bush administration's Road Map helped form the American-led coalition prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

From an economic standpoint, too, the Initiative offers Israel significant opportunities. This is a topic that has been explored extensively⁵⁸ and, for illustrative purposes, we will identify a number of options relating both to a scenario of minimal cooperation and to one of "warm peace." In the minimal scenario, experts estimate that, were Israel merely to open overland shipping of goods to Arab states, it would generate a significant increase in trade between the Arab states themselves—in some cases, trade could even double. The AIX Group's assessment is that, by collecting a 1% transfer fee alone—on goods shipped through Israel—Israel stands to gain millions of dollars in annual profits.⁵⁹ Similarly, improving geopolitical conditions would contribute to the growth of the Middle East's tourism industry and would enable Israel to enjoy a much larger share of tourism traffic than it does today.⁶⁰ Additionally, as relations between Israel and its neighbors warm up due to an improved political situation, additional markets will open for manufactured Israeli products, and Israel will be able to enjoy the products of states in the region, including, among other things, energy reserves.

It might appear that almost any political settlement with the Palestinians would make these advantages available to Israel to varying degrees. But considering both the political split in the Palestinian leadership, and the potency of radical actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, the API provides a powerful added value: singular, across-the-board Arab backing. This will make it extremely difficult for the abovementioned organizations to oppose reconciliation. Under such circumstances, any action taken against Israel would be regarded as an action against the interests of the entire Arab world, which has demonstrated its limited tolerance for the destabilizing exploits of these groups, especially Hezbollah.

Finally, a positive Israeli response to the Arab Peace Initiative would be perceived in the Western world, and certainly in parts of the Arab world, as a meaningful political step by Israel. The importance of such an improvement in Israel's status in the eyes of the Arab publics—as their influence on domestic politics grows—is both clear and of particular significance in the wake of the Arab Spring. Many experts see progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue as a key that could bring about such an improvement.⁶¹ Today, there are indications of an American willingness to examine methods for promoting the API as well as expressions that the Arab League in general—and Qatar, with its unique role in the Arab world, in particular—are once again interested in its promotion.⁶²

Israel could wait and see how the circumstances develop, and again find itself in a situation where others dictate its agenda. Or Israel could initiate the next move and be seen as a policy leader in a changing world rather than as a player, standing frozen on the sidelines, unable to keep pace as events unfold.

It is worth noting that all the alternatives to a positive Israeli response to the API—inaction, bilateral negotiations with the PA or unilateral measures—suffer from the same disadvantages as the Initiative and enjoy none of its advantages. This is another trait that makes the Arab Peace Initiative the most attractive solution available to Israel today. There is no doubt that pan-Arab involvement will be required for solving the Palestinian refugee problem and forcing Hamas to join an Israeli agreement with the PLO. In this respect, the API offers Israel one of the essential tools for any bilateral peace settlement: broad Arab support.

5 Promoting the Initiative Today

A – The Israeli government

In light of what has been said up to now, Israel's refusal to deal with the API in a meaningful way is largely unreasonable. It is in Israel's interests that its government adopt the API as the basis for relations with the Arab world via a declaration of its own. A third party can test the reception to such declaration vis-à-vis the Arab states. Such a declaration could then serve as a basis for an ensuing relationship with the Arab world.

A positive Israeli response to the API should be understood not as a compromise out of weakness, but as a political accomplishment, the start of a path steeped with strategic advantages. This sort of perspective will change the Israeli analysis of the balance of interests that has kept Israel from adopting the API as policy. Since the Initiative is declarative, it is only logical that Israel's response should also be so. An Israeli declaration could express a positive approach to the API while simultaneously making it clear that alongside in-principle acceptance, there is a need to negotiate the details. In formulating its response, Israel cannot duck taking up the standard of territorial compromise on the basis of '67 borders nor can it avoid a certain amount of readiness to consent to at least partial responsibility for the refugee problem, including a general expression of willingness to take part in its solution. However, as noted, there is nothing essentially new in a declaration of this sort that Israel's various governments have not already expressed that they are prepared to do. Moreover, Israel would have the opportunity to take full advantage of its acceptance of the API to take a stand on principles it had not previously succeeded in establishing as starting points for negotiations. Unlike the way in which Israeli governments have conducted themselves in the past, the aim would not be to present new conditions to a solution, but rather to clarify, through a fundamentally positive Israeli response, how Israel sees its relationship with its surroundings.

A sober look at the political reality in Israel indicates that the chances that the present Israeli government will take such a step on the API are slim. As its right flank calls for unilateral annexation of extensive parts of the occupied territories, at its left edge, the cabinet minister appointed to take charge of the government's negotiations, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, has said, again and again, that the Arab Peace Initiative does not offer Israel a true course of action. The Knesset opposition's role in promoting the Initiative has thus never been more crucial.

B – The Parliamentary Opposition

As in any case when the government promotes a policy that is unacceptable to the parliamentary opposition, it is that opposition's responsibility to present the public with a clear alternative. In this context, we believe the obvious conclusion is that the opposition leadership must adopt the Arab Peace Initiative not only as a cornerstone of its political position but also as a basis for its political agenda. This would serve

short and long-term Israeli interests, help organize and distinguish the left's political position from the right's, and consequently increase the left's chances of taking up real political power. Practically this would mean first declaring acceptance of the API, primarily by the Labor Party and potentially some of the ultra-Orthodox parties (Meretz has already adopted it), building a "joint round table" that would function as a "shadow cabinet" to promote the API as the policy of the opposition, and designating a spokesperson for the process—presumably a representative of the largest opposition party.

The 2012 elections saw the Israeli left in general and the Labor Party in particular take up socio-economic issues as the backbone of their agenda, downplaying the importance of a settlement with the Palestinians. The abovementioned "round table" would place the API and a final settlement with the Palestinians on the agenda of the left, on par with the socio-economic issues as a part of a comprehensive platform aimed at replacing the right.

B – Civil society organizations

The Arab Peace Initiative can be promoted through unofficial talks between Israelis and representatives of Arab States as "Track II" diplomacy, much the same way as the initial peace process—and others like the Geneva Initiative and the Nusseibeh-Ayalon plan—began. The advantages of such efforts lie in the fact that they do not require commitment from any of the parties, enabling both sides to offer a certain amount of maneuverability absent in official negotiations. Ideas born of such conversations could become the platform for a comprehensive discussion or offer solutions to specific controversial issues in official talks launched at a later stage. This kind of move would also make it easier to prepare public opinion on both sides in a lead up to formal negotiations. Furthermore, it would drive the processes within government. As noted by former adviser to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Dov Weisglass, the Geneva Initiative was one of the factors that led Sharon to announce the Gaza Strip disengagement plan.⁶³

Nonetheless, in the present context, the chances of opening such a channel for talks are limited. First, the challenge that the Arab states have offered Israel requires an official response from the establishment, not one from those whose support for the API is well known. Even were such informal talks to be launched, they must eventually be taken over by official actors. Without the involvement of political players from within the Israeli political system—from either the coalition or the opposition—the insights obtained in unofficial channels will in all likelihood remain ineffective. Insofar as the government will not champion the API, the opposition's inactivity will turn civil society's efforts into a waste of time. The primary effort of civil society organizations must be to exert pressure on both the government and the opposition to adopt the Arab Peace Initiative.

6 Conclusion

Since it appeared in March 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative has not been given its rightful place in the peace process strategy of either Israel or the international community. This proposal, which not only presents a profound turning point in Arab states' position on the conflict but constitutes an historic opportunity for the State of Israel, has escaped the notice of most Israelis. Due to the pressure of current events, in service of a pro-settlement policy, and too much focus on marginal details and deliberate distortions of its contents, the API has been pushed off the Israeli agenda. This was a missed strategic opportunity.

Nevertheless, the historic opportunity expressed by the Arab Initiative is still within reach. A positive Israeli response to the API could provide Israel with several significant advantages: greater political and economic involvement in the region, improved political standing, an Arab coalition to contend with Iran and, most important, the realization of one of the most fundamental interests of the Zionist movement since its inception—an official reconciling with the Arab nations, and recognition of the State of Israel as a legitimate country in the Middle East.

The time elapsed since the Initiative was first proposed has brought with it certain unforeseen changes: Syria's descent into civil war, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in some Arab states, the danger of instability that some other Arab states face, and a split in the Palestinian camp between the moderate regime in the West Bank and Hamas's rule in Gaza. On top of this lies the protracted stalemate of the Israel-Palestinian peace process. In the face of these changes, the API has become an even more attractive solution. We must abandon the fixation on direct bilateral talks as the sole approach to a solution and take advantage of the regional, multilateral approach embodied in the Initiative.

Israel must recognize the advantages before it, and must respond with a positive declaration of its own. While the prospect that the third Netanyahu government will do so is negligible, a responsible, vibrant parliamentary opposition should turn the API into the cornerstone of its policy, with the intent to both implement such policy as Israel's future government, and to pressure the present government to act now. Civil society organizations also have an important role to play in promoting the Initiative: winning over the Israeli public, reaching understandings with Arab partners, and mobilizing the political system to action.

Notes

- 1 Khartoum Resolution. (Dec. 1969). [Retrieved Apr. 2013] available at http://www.cfr.org/international-peace-and-security/khartoum-resolution/p14841?breadcrumb=2Fpublication%2Fpublication_list%3Ftype%3Dessential_document%26page%3D69
- 2 Joseph Kostiner, "The Roots and Vicissitudes of the Arab Peace Initiative," in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), pp. 96-99 [in Hebrew].
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-106.
- 4 Thomas L. Friedman, "An Intriguing Signal From the Saudi Crown Prince", *The New York Times*, 17.02.2002, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/17/opinion/an-intriguing-signal-from-the-saudi-crown-prince.html?src=pm> [accessed Feb. 18, 2013].
- 5 "The Arab Peace Initiative, 2002" available at <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm> [accessed May 8, 2013].
- 6 For the Text of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194, see: <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/C758572B78D1CD0085256BCF0077E51A>. The Geneva initiative explicitly states that any agreement on the issue of the Palestinian refugees must also be based on this resolution. In the road map and at Annapolis, where official Israel agreement was demanded, no mention was made of Resolution 194.
- 7 Marwan Muasher, *The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 129-133.
- 8 See, for example: http://humweb2.bgu.ac.il/herzog/sites/default/files/the_arab_peace_initiative_0.pdf
- 9 Ilay Alon, "A Linguistic Analysis of the Arab Peace Initiative," in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), pp. 165-174 [in Hebrew].
- 10 Surat al-Anfal 8:61. The English translation appears in <http://quran.com/8/61> (accessed May 19, 2013)
- 11 Meir Litvak, "The Islamic Movements and the Arab Peace Initiative," in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), pp. 125-126 [in Hebrew].
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 13 See, for example, Gabrielle Rifkind, "The Arab Peace Initiative: Why Now?" (London: Oxford Research Group, 2008), p. 3. <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/sites/default/files/api.pdf>
- 14 Ilay Alon, "The Language of the Arab Peace Initiative," in Kobi Michael, ed., *The Arab Peace Initiative – A Historic Opportunity? Background, Meanings, and Possible Avenues of Exploration* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2007), pp. 55-56 [in Hebrew].

15 Over the years, a number of solutions have been proposed for the Palestinian refugee problem. One of them was an annual quota of repatriated refugees; this solution appears in the Beilin–Abu Mazen agreement of 1995. The central solution presently on the agenda in this context is based on the five principles proposed in American President Bill Clinton’s parameters of 2000: settlement of the refugees in the future Palestinian state, their settlement in the territories that will be swapped and which will be transferred to the Palestinian state, their settlement in the Arab host states, their settlement in the State of Israel and their settlement in a third state. The last three options would be limited in accordance with the preparedness of the absorbing countries. In the Geneva initiative, all five of these options were adopted in addition to two clarifications: 1) In establishing the number of territories it would be prepared to absorb, Israel would take into account the average number of territories absorbed by the third countries 2) In all these options, priority would be given to the Palestinian refugees currently residing in Lebanon. These solutions are also congruent with the declared Palestinian position; see <http://nad-plo.org/etemplate.php?id=12&more=1#4>. It should be emphasized here that the Palestinians’ declared positions are more rigid than those which they have presented in the various rounds of talks over the years; furthermore, these declared positions have traditionally been only starting–points for the negotiations.

16 Ben Birnbaum, “The End Of the Two-State Solution – Why the window is closing on Middle-East peace”, *New Republic*, 11.03.2013, available at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112617/israel-palestine-and-end-two-state-solution> [accessed Apr. 11, 2013].

17 Elior Levy and Roi Kais, “Abu Mazen: Not logical that you will absorb 1 million refugees,” *Ynet* [Heb.], 25.01.2011, available at <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4018525,00.html> [accessed Mar. 27, 2013].

18 Litvak, “The Islamic Movements and the Arab Peace Initiative,” pp. 130, 133–134, 135–137

19 “Lebanon,” *UNWRA website*, available at, <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=65> [accessed April 9, 2013].

20 Litvak, “The Islamic Movements and the Arab Peace Initiative,” p. 133.

21 Muasher, *The Arab Center*, p. 131.

22 Jack Khoury, Barak Ravid, “Abbas tells Israel: Palestinians won’t accept deal based on temporary borders,” *Haaretz*, 27.05.2013, available at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/abbas-tells-israel-palestinians-won-t-accept-deal-based-on-temporary-borders.premium-1.526082> [accessed on Apr. 12, 2013]

23 Nir Yahav, “Abu Mazen to Obama: Adopt the Arab Initiative,” *Walla!* [Heb.], 22.10.2008, available at <http://news.walla.co.il/?w=13/1383562> [accessed Apr. 14, 2013].

24 “Qatar urges Arab peace offer review, brands Quartet failure,” *AFP*, 12.09.2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/60141/World/Region/Qatar-urges-Arab-peace-offer-review,-brands-Quarte.aspx> [accessed Apr. 14, 2013].

25 "Abu Mazen: We must maintain the Arab initiative because it contains the solution," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs [Heb], 25.09.2011, available at <http://www.jcpa.org.il/JCPAHeb/Templates/showpage.asp?FID=798&DBID=1&LNGID=2&TMID=178&IID=26040> [accessed: Apr. 14, 2013].

26 Litvak, "The Islamic Movements and the Arab Peace Initiative," pp. 131-132.

27 For a collection of positive statements by senior Hamas officials on the Arab initiative, see <http://reut-institute.org/he/Publication.aspx?PublicationId=131>; The Arab Spring has had a major impact on the strategic standing of both Hamas and the alliances in the Arab and Muslim world on which Hamas relies. The total impact of the Arab Spring could make it very difficult for the movement to oppose the Arab initiative, should Israel supply an answer that would be acceptable to the Arab states. For an extensive analysis of the impact of the Arab Spring, see below.

28 Elie Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Plan: The Passing Up of an Historic Opportunity?" in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), pp. 69-70 [in Hebrew].

29 *Ibid.*, p. 72

30 *Ibid.*, p. 71

31 Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The Saudi Peace Initiative as an Historic Opportunity," in Kobi Michael, ed., *The Arab Peace Initiative – A Historic Opportunity? Background, Meanings, and Possible Avenues of Exploration* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2007), p. 26 [in Hebrew].

32 Prime Minister Olmert's Speech at Annapolis, November 2007, available at <http://www.cfr.org/israel/prime-minister-olmerts-speech-annapolis-november-2007/p14925> [accessed Apr. 2013].

33 Uri Yablonka, "Barak: Evacuation-compensation law for Judea-Samaria settlers must be passed," NRG, (*Maariv*), 02.12.2007, available at <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/666/221.html> [accessed Apr. 1, 2013].

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38 Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Plan: The Passing Up of an Historic Opportunity?" p. 71.

39 Ibid., p. 74.

40 Ibid., p. 84.

41 The proposed text can be seen at: <http://yozmim.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/IPI-in-Hebrew-April-6-2011-FINAL.pdf>.

42 For an alternative interpretation, see: <http://humweb2.bgu.ac.il/herzog/sites/default/files/draft.pdf>. According to this interpretation, the reason Israel has never accepted the initiative is that most Israelis, including their political leaders, are unwilling to agree to an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines.

43 For UN Security Council Resolution 1435, see <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3dda0ec8c.html>

44 Arnon Gutfeld, "The Obama Administration's Attitude toward the Arab Peace Initiative," in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), p. 145 [Hebrew].

45 Litvak, "The Islamic Movements and the Arab Peace Initiative," p. 129.

46 See below.

47 Bruce Maddy-Weizman, "How the Arab Peace Initiative Should Be Interpreted," in Ephraim Lavie, ed., *Israel and the Arab Peace Initiative* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 2010), p. 121 [in Hebrew]; on the chain of events surrounding the "Jordanian initiative" of 2005, see Assaf David, "Normalization, the Jordanian Initiative and the Future of the West Bank in the Wake of the Disengagement from Gaza Plan" (Economic Cooperation Foundation, 2005).

48 Podeh, "Israel and the Arab Peace Plan: The Passing Up of an Historic Opportunity?" p. 82.

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