

The Arab Peace Initiative - Positions of Key Arab States and Non-State Actors

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The Arab Peace Initiative (API), a Saudi-brokered peace deal that was unanimously approved at the 2002 Beirut Summit of the League of the Arab States (LAS), remains the peace plan with the most widespread support from Arab governments. It puts forward three demands to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict: 1) a full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied in the 1967 war, including the Syrian Golan Heights and the Shebaa Farms in South Lebanon; 2) a just solution for the 3.8 million Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194; and 3) the creation of a sovereign, independent Palestinian State in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. In return, Arab governments will consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, make peace with Israel and establish normal relations with it as a neighbor, and agree on collective arrangements to provide security for all the states of the Middle East.

In spite of the little to no progress in peace-making in the Middle East throughout the last 8 years, Arab states continue to support the API. The collective endorsement of the initiative was reiterated twice in recent LAS summits, in Riyadh 2007 and in Damascus 2008. In the 2010 Sirte (Libya) Summit, despite some Arab governments calling prior to the summit for abandoning the plan in view of continued Israeli defiance, the LAS once again renewed its collective support for the API.

Yet despite this continued official endorsement of the API in recent years, the mood on the popular level is less supportive. The significance of the API as an all-inclusive Arab peace offer—and not a framework for negotiations—is closely related to public opinion trends, and Arabs are far more

skeptical today of the peace process than they were in 2002 when the API was first announced. In a 2009 poll, 50% of Arab respondents said they did not believe a peace deal would ever be reached. Only 6% believed a resolution could be reached in the next five years, which was down from 13% in 2008.² The trend in public opinion is towards greater skepticism of the viability of the peace process, and as a result popular support for the API is gradually eroding.

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Positions of Key Arab States

In light of these competing views of the peace process, Arab positions vis-à-vis the API are split into two camps. The first, pro-API camp consists of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, while the second, critical and indeed anti-API camp, is primarily made up of Syria, Qatar, Hamas and Hezbollah. The first camp continues to win official endorsements of the API at Arab League summits, yet the second has more popular support and is strengthened by continued Israeli intransigence on nearly every issue related to negotiations. At present, these two camps are relatively evenly balanced, and as such Arab efforts at resolving the conflict have degenerated into a state of paralysis. Calls for greater American intervention and pressure on Israel to help restart the peace process have grown more frustrated of late, as President Barack Obama has focused on making the API more attractive to Israel rather than on pushing Israel to adopt the offer as it stands.

Saudi Arabia

Nevertheless, the main Arab moderates have remained committed to the API in the hopes that it can end the Arab-Israeli conflict and bolster their credibility throughout the region and the world. Saudi Arabia, as the main broker of the peace plan, has an obvious stake in its success. While they remain proponents of resolving the conflict with Israel through negotiations, they have also made it clear that such resolution will depend on Israel's response to the peace plan. In particular, Israel must accept the three main demands of a return to the 1967 borders, a just resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

With the arrival of the Obama administration and its increased focus on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, there has been renewed discussion of the API. The American and Saudi governments have debated how to proceed, using the API as the Arab plan for a resolution to the conflict. While the Saudi government has maintained that the API, as it currently stands, is its sole offer to

the Israelis, the Obama administration has asked the Saudis to make the offer more attractive by granting some of the concessions in the plan individually in return for similar, small-scale gestures from the Israelis. The American vision is more of a gradual, piecemeal implementation of the API, rather than the wholesale, take-it-or-leave-it approach currently proposed by the Saudis. In the Saudi view, the API is a final peace offer and not a framework for future negotiations to be incentivized. The Saudi government likely hopes that the Israelis, when confronted with the stark choice of full-scale recognition by and peace with all Arab states versus continued conflict and insecurity, will accept the API and grant the Saudis a diplomatic victory.

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Egypt

The Egyptian government has adopted a somewhat similar position and continues to support the take-it-or-leave-it approach towards the API. Its peace treaty with Israel, however, allows it to play a more active role in negotiating with the Israelis. In the absence of such a peace treaty, the Saudis have not entered into negotiations with the Israelis, and so their diplomatic hand is a bit more constrained than the Egyptians’.

Yet the Egyptian role in supporting the API has been severely undermined by several factors. While its relations with all of the major parties in the conflict have allowed it to be very active in negotiations, and it has continued efforts to mediate between Hamas and Fatah and between Hamas and Israel, its failure to achieve any meaningful progress in either of those mediation efforts has greatly weakened its political and diplomatic credibility. The Egyptian government is seen as biased in favor of Fatah against Hamas, particularly as it has continued to enforce the blockade on Gaza, and so it has little credibility as a neutral mediator. Such prejudice has made Hamas less willing to trust and work with the Egyptians, making any Palestinian national reconciliation harder to achieve. Egypt has also failed in its efforts to mediate between Hamas and Israel. Its one accomplishment, a six-month ceasefire between the two sides in 2008, was almost immediately followed by the devastating Israeli assault on Gaza that left over a thousand Palestinians dead and much of Gaza’s infrastructure in ruins.

Egypt’s history of its own negotiations with Israel has weakened its credibility as well. Egypt is often seen by other Arabs as a traitor of the Arab and Palestinian causes, since it was the first to sign a peace treaty with Israel and is its most powerful potential opponent. The Egyptians risked their credibility throughout the Middle East by signing the Camp David Accords in 1979, and the inability to make any serious diplomatic steps towards resolving the conflict in the three decades since has cost the Egyptians much

of their former prominence in the Arab world. Their alliance with the U.S., their peace treaty with Israel, and their emphasis on negotiations have been pillars of their foreign policy for thirty years. Yet the absence of further steps towards a resolution of the conflict through the means advocated by the Egyptians has done much to tarnish their image and the negotiation track they advocate.

These failures have undermined Egyptian credibility as a powerful diplomatic actor in the region capable of bringing the various sides together. This impotent image is further confounded by the country’s serious internal problems, which have weakened the popularity of the Egyptian model across the Middle East. While Arab countries in particular used to look to Egypt as a guide, the mounting problems the country is presently confronting have tarnished the country’s claim to leadership in the region. Arab countries are increasingly looking away from Egypt and towards countries like Turkey or Iran for guidance. These shifting positions in regional leadership include the manner in which Arabs should deal with Israel, and thus the decline of the Egyptian model overall has affected the appeal of its favored negotiation-model as well.

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Jordan

The Jordanians are in a similar position to the Egyptians, as they are able to negotiate with the Israelis due to the 1994 peace treaty between the countries. They have also continued to support the API, and they have emphasized that it is addressed not only to the Israelis but to the entire global community. It is a sign, they say, that Arabs want peace and are willing to compromise with Israel in order to achieve it. By supporting the API and continuing to offer Israel peace in exchange for the three main demands in the API, the Jordanian government hopes to make Israel appear as the more obstructive side. While the Arabs continue to offer peace, the Israelis' continue to say no, illustrating that they are the greater obstacle to a resolution of the conflict.

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Palestinian Authority

The West Bank-centered, pro-American Palestinian Authority (PA) led by President Mahmud Abbas is the fourth main pillar in the pro-API camp. The PA long ago committed itself to peaceful negotiations rather than violent resistance to end its conflict with the Israelis. Over the course of many years and often-sputtering negotiations, the PA has maintained this commitment.

Yet while it promotes the negotiation track, the PA simultaneously feels somewhat insecure in supporting negotiations too strongly, particularly with Hamas' denunciation of negotiations and its advocacy of violence as the only means to resist Israel. Before entering negotiations with the Israelis, President Abbas has been eager to obtain as much political cover as possible by winning Arab League support. The API represents exactly this kind of cover, and it is most likely the strongest collective Arab support that the PA will get in search of a peace treaty with Israel. The Palestinians want to send a similar message as the Jordanians, that the Arab world wants peace with the Israelis, but the PA has been reluctant to take conciliatory steps towards Israel without broader Arab support. Indeed, before agreeing to the most recent round of proximity talks overseen by Special Envoy George Mitchell, Abbas waited to receive the blessing of the Arab League.

Abbas is particularly reluctant to make any apparent concessions to the Israelis without strong support from other Arab countries because, in recent years, he has lost a great deal of support among Palestinians for his inability to win any concessions from the Israelis in return for several gestures of his own. Most recently, under heavy American and Israeli pressure, Abbas agreed not to present the Goldstone Report to the full United Nations Security Council lest such a step derail whatever possibility there was of rekindling the peace process. His decision was condemned domestically and he came under heavy criticism for offering such a significant concession without winning anything in return. While Abbas does not want to appear to be the main obstacle to peace,



and likely understands that President Obama is the most sympathetic American president with regard to the Palestinian cause in some time, he must balance these considerations with maintenance of his domestic support and credibility. As such, he is reluctant to engage in any serious negotiations without the support of the Arab League. The API offers just the kind of collective Arab support for negotiations that Abbas requires, and so he continues to support the measure.

Each of these four actors, who form the backbone of the moderate Arab position vis-à-vis Israel, have faced mounting criticisms over their emphasis on peaceful negotiations despite Israel's increasingly confrontational attitude towards negotiations of any kind. Egypt and the PA in particular have sacrificed a great deal of credibility throughout the Arab world in their pursuit of a negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Israeli actions have been perhaps the most damaging factor in weakening the credibility of the pro-negotiation position advocated by these moderate Arab states. The argument in favor of moderation is that it is more likely to soften the Israeli negotiating position, but in return for staking their credibility on peaceful negotiations, these moderate Arab actors have won no major concessions from the Israelis, and have made no serious steps towards resolving the conflict. Israel's continued belligerence, in particular its brutal assault on the Gaza Strip, has revealed its lack of respect for these moderate Arab states and has continually undermined their positions in the Arab world. The lack of progress through negotiations has made it increasingly difficult for these actors to justify their continued support for the negotiation-track. Even Saudi Arabia signaled that, in the absence of serious Israeli engagement, the moderate Arab states will not indefinitely maintain their support for the API, or for the negotiation track more generally.

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Anti-API Camp

Much of the pressure on these four governments over their continued support of the API comes from two states, Syria and Qatar, as well as a variety of non-state actors, including Hamas and Hezbollah. These critics, in spite of the fact that they supported a detailed alternative vision for how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict beyond the rhetoric of resistance, argue that there has been no progress towards resolving the conflict since the API was launched in 2002. They have won no concessions, and have not even met with a positive, receptive response from the Israelis in return for the collective Arab offer of peace and full recognition. Indeed, the Israelis have repeatedly rejected the API, and the United States has shown only weak support. The Israeli response to the API, according to this camp, has been its 2006 invasion of Lebanon, its blockade on Gaza since 2007, and its war on the Strip in 2008-2009. It has not budged from its positions occupying the Golan Heights or the Shebaa Farms, and it has continually endorsed and expanded its settlement activities in the West Bank. The current Israeli government has not only continued its expansion of settlement activities throughout the West Bank, but it has launched unprecedented settlement construction in East Jerusalem. The API has done nothing to soften the Israeli position on any of these issues, and so critics denounce it as a failure.

They also say that the API grants Israel peace at a low price. The three main demands are not particularly costly for the Israelis, according to critics of the API, and allow Israel to make peace for almost nothing. At Oslo, for example, the Israelis won a series of concessions from the Palestinian Authority while offering only recognition of the PA's legitimacy in return. The API, in the eyes of these critics, is similarly weak in extracting any serious concessions from the Israelis.

Syria and Qatar argue that it is time to consider other options for resolving the conflict with Israel, including what they see as legitimate resistance of the kind undertaken by Hamas and Hezbollah.

They argue that Israeli has seemed unable to understand peaceful measures, so perhaps force is the only way to push it towards any resolution of the conflict. Continued Syrian support and armament of Hamas and Hezbollah has been one method by which it has signaled its support for a more confrontational stance towards Israel. Syria maintains influence over any potential peace deal through of its support for Hamas, since any successful negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis will require the approval of Hamas. Thus its support for Hamas allows Syria to check Egyptian and Saudi support for Fatah and the negotiation track.

They also hope to pressure the international community into exerting some force on Israel to push it towards compromise. Saudi- and Egyptian-led moderation has not led Israel to such compromises, they argue, so perhaps force is the only way. One such method to pressure the international community is to support the unilateral Palestinian announcement of an independent Palestinian state, along the lines of the plan promoted by Salam Fayyad.

One option in regards to the API proposed by these states is to tactically freeze the proposal temporarily, placing it on the shelf until Israel becomes less defiant. An Arab League summit in January 2009 called for the temporary suspension of the API and the cessation of all forms of normalization with Israel, in response to the Israeli attack on Gaza. This anti-API camp seems to have prevailed, at least temporarily, and in extraordinary circumstances, in convincing its Arab partners that Israel is not a serious partner for peace. At the same time, Qatar froze all of its relations with Israel, closed the Israeli trade office in Doha, and sent home the Israeli employees. Perhaps the removal of the API will help convince Israel to soften its position, as it sees the consequences of its intransigence in the narrowing of the window for a negotiated settlement.

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Arab Paralysis

These two camps find themselves in somewhat of a stalemate at present. While the pro-API camp has succeeded in winning continued Arab League endorsements, the anti-API camp has growing popular support among the Arab publics. Moreover, the former camp is growing weaker and is getting little help from the Israelis, so they are in no position to offer further concessions of the kind requested by the Obama administration. And while President Obama has made a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict a major goal of his foreign policy, he has thus far been unwilling to exert much serious pressure on Israel. Only progress on the peace process can tame the pro-resistance sentiments increasingly popular among Arabs. Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular have suffered from the strategic failure of peacemaking, as their efforts have produced very meager returns and they have been faced with successful challenges and blockade tactics by countries like Syria and Qatar. While Arab governments remain collectively committed to the API as the best path towards a settlement, Arab publics and some individual Arab states have been growing increasingly impatient with the meager results of the negotiation-track. The result of these competing positions is a political impasse that sees no real resolution in sight.

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Footnotes:

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2 Shibley Telhami, "Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey," Zogby International, survey conducted April-May 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.pdf.

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