How to Make the Arab Peace Initiative a More Effective Incentive for Peace?

Summary of a policy-planning workshop of the Mitvim Institute, the API Regional Network, and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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Almost 14 years after it was first unveiled, the Arab Peace Initiative (API) still has the potential to serve as a key incentive in efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is true despite the fact that Israel has yet to respond to the initiative. The Arab League has reaffirmed the API time and again, the Quartet often meets with the leaders of Arab states in order to promote it, the US Secretary of State and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs emphasize its importance, and, according to the Mitvim Institute's most recent polling, the Israeli public sees the prospects of normal relations with the Arab world as the most effective incentive to promoting peace. And yet, since the API was adopted by the Arab League in 2002, significant changes have occurred in the Middle East, which cast doubts about the initiative's relevancy in today's regional reality. In light of this reality, 25 experts from across academia and policy gathered to discuss ways in which the API can be made a more effective regional incentive for peace. The discussion revolved around issues relating to public awareness to the API, its attractiveness as an incentive, and its feasibility for implementation. This document summarizes the discussion's main points. It does not reflect a consensus of the participants or the views of the host organizations.

A. Public Awareness in Israel

1. **Israeli public awareness of the API is too low.** The Israeli public and decision-makers are not sufficiently aware about the initiative and its content. This manifests itself in public polling from over the years and in the testimonies of individuals who have served in the Israeli governmental system.

2. **There is a growing discourse about regional cooperation, but not about the API.** Since 2014, the Israeli political system has increasingly been debating the country's regional opportunities. The prime minister often speaks about the need to cooperate with the moderate Arab states, and other party leaders speak out in favor of ideas such as a regional peace process, convening a regional conference, and more. And yet, the increasing "regional discourse" is not focused on the API, and often overlooks it. Israeli politicians are often trying to use the idea of regional cooperation as a tool to bypass the conflict with the Palestinians instead of promoting its resolution.

3. **There is a need to create media awareness around the API.** The government's representatives who speak of relations with countries in the region receive much media attention, yet those in civil society and the opposition who are trying to promote the API are sidelined. There is a need to encourage articles in the media – new and traditional alike – about the API.

4. **In the political arena, the API should be marketed to those in the center and the center-right.** The ideological right-wing will likely oppose the API under any circumstances. In more moderate circles, however, there is a greater chance for a breakthrough. The Mitvim Institute's [2015 Foreign Policy Index](#) indicated that among center and center-right wing voters the possibility for normalization with the Arab world is perceived as the most effective incentive – among those which have been offered thus far – to promote peace. Yet, the existing stagnation within these groups in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict limits their potential support for the API. Attempts must be made to create greater openness amongst these groups to new information, possibly by using focus groups.

5. **The API should be marketed to more diverse audiences in the public arena.** Efforts to promote the API, much like other "peace camp" efforts target older, secular Israelis of European descent (i.e. *Ashkenazim*). The support of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, ultra-Orthodox Israelis, and Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern descent (i.e. *Sepharadim*) should also be won over. In the past, attempts were made to market the API to these demographics but these efforts were limited and did not yield the desired results. Effective marketing should strive to take advantage of opinion makers from these groups, as well as employ diverse messaging, which appeal simultaneously both to the heart and to the mind.

6. **Given the current regional reality, marketing the API is a challenging task.** Alongside the marketing efforts, we must remain cognizant of the fact that the security situation in the Middle East will make public opinion difficult to convince of the benefits of progress in the peace process and of the potential of the API. The public has its own preconceptions, which

prevent it from acceding to the API regardless of how good its promotional campaigns will be. This is borne out by the negligible impact of the historic interview Mahmoud Abbas gave Israeli Channel 2 News in 2012, in which he showed willingness to relinquish the right of return.

7. **Efforts to convince the public of the API's utility have been unsuccessful thus far.** Civil society groups have tried to emphasize the advantages – predominantly the economic advantages – of the API. Yet, they were unable to bring about a significant change. The Israeli public is generally averse to taking political risks in relation to regional relations and to that end is willing to forgo potentials gains. The expertise of societal and political psychologists should be used to help the Israeli public overcome the blockages preventing Israelis from internalizing the API's advantages and being affected by them. As time goes by, convincing the public of the initiative's worthwhileness becomes more difficult. For, if the API was so attractive, many would ask why various Israeli governments have not adopted the initiative over all the years since it was first proposed.

8. **Parliamentary efforts can help shape public opinion and raise awareness.** Of all the efforts over the years to promote the API in Israel, none has involved significant parliamentary engagement. Politicians who are willing to promote the issue should be identified and an intensive one-day campaign should be launched. During such a day, they would use their speeches in parliament to promote the API, and these would in turn be carried on live television and promoted on social media. Parliamentary tools can also be used, even if purely for promotional purposes and in order to encourage debate and awareness: tabling a no-confidence vote based on the government's inaction on the API, promoting legislation on the subject, calling for a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee to which Arab ambassadors would also be invited.

9. **Marketing of the Initiative by Arab states could also be useful.** The Israeli public needs to hear about the advantages of the API directly from representatives of Arab states. It would be highly recommended that those endorsing the initiative were key figures in their home countries that also are seen as legitimate. Examples include the King of Jordan, the President of Egypt, the King of Morocco, and the ambassadors of Egypt and Jordan in Israel. In recent years, Turki al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia has come to fill such a role. He grants interviews to Israeli media outlets and appears in international fora alongside senior Israeli officials. And yet, even his remarks do not sway Israeli public opinion. Also, his political importance in Saudi Arabia is not as it used to be. Nevertheless, the increasing visibility of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia can contribute to promoting the initiative, as the Kingdom is a key player within it. In this regard, it is important to underscore the potential for future civilian cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia in an era of peace.

B. Attractiveness as an Incentive

1. **The attractiveness of the API is based upon what its offers and in the way it breaks from previous positions.** The API should be highly appealing to the Israeli public and its leaders as it offers a reshaping of the region that Israel has sought since its founding: the end of the conflict, normalized relations, recognition and security. There is also great importance in the fact that the initiative is reaffirmed again and again by the Arab League since 2002, despite the regional upheavals. This speaks to the seriousness and credibility of the initiative. Its appeal and attractiveness also manifests itself in its substantial break from previously held positions of the Arab world, chiefly among them the Arab League's resolution in Khartoum in 1967 which said no to negotiations with Israel, no to recognizing Israel, and no to peace with Israel.

2. **The possibility of normalization with the Arab world is now less attractive, yet still important.** The central assumption of the API is that the Israelis are highly interested in normalization with the Arab world. It is possible that this assumption is less true today than it was in the past. Today, normalization is treated as a luxury in light of the clear and central need for security, whose star is rising in light of the instability in the Middle East. Israel's current security challenges are not coming merely from the Palestinians, but from across the entire region. Despite this, Mitvim's 2015 Foreign Policy Index showed that amongst the incentives proposed to Israel in order to move the peace process forward, the option of normalized relations with the Arab world is still the most attractive.

3. **In order to increase its appeal, the API's security dimension should be enhanced.** The path to greater public interest in the initiative and to greater support for it goes through its security dimension. The ways in which normal relations with the Arab states will translate into a better security reality should be clarified, as should the ways in which cooperation against extremist elements within the region will be facilitated. The EU, for example, has recently begun referring to the API as the basis for creating a new regional security framework. However, it is difficult to convince the Israeli public that the initiative will bring security at a time when the Arab world is falling apart and is not successfully confronting challenges such as the Islamic State.

4. **Israel desires recognition of its nature, not just of its right to exist.** In the past, the State of Israel has only sought recognition of its right to exist from its neighbors. In recent years, under the guidance of Prime Minister Netanyahu, the demand to recognize Israel's Jewish nature has been added. This new demand is creating difficulties for the peace process, which seems to be the reason for raising it in the first place. Yet, over time, the majority of the Israeli public has been deemed this demand acceptable

as it does not believe that Arab recognition of Israel's right to exist is sufficient. In light of this fact, it is worth exploring if and how this demand can be studied in the context of the API.

5. **The API's approach to the refugee issue has turned from a potential asset into a burden.** One of the participants at the workshop claimed that at the time the API was drafted, the Arab leaders believed that the way in which the language on the refugee issue was phrased – which calls for a solution that is acceptable for Israel as well – would increase its appeal in the eyes of Israelis. In reality, the opposite occurred, and this section became a main source of Israeli opposition to the API. This was especially true in light of the initiative's reference to UN Resolution 194, which Israel interpreted as a demand to realize the Palestinians' right of return.

6. **The API's appeal would increase if it was adopted by multi-national organizations in the Arab and Muslim world.** The fact that the API was adopted in the past by the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) contributed to its appeal to Israelis. Efforts should be made ensure the API's adoption by other regional organizations, such as OPEC, various interfaith forums and more.

7. **What is more effective for increasing appeal: emphasizing the Arab unity or disunity about the initiative?** The more that Arab unity about the initiative is emphasized, the more attractive the API will seem to Israelis, especially at a time when the Arab word is suffering from internal divisions. However, it may also be possible to make Israelis feel greater sympathy towards the API through emphasizing the opposition of Arab extremists to it. In other words, the purpose would be to promote the notion that if Hamas opposes the initiative, it might be good for Israel.

8. **An Arab effort leading to Hamas adopting the API would have significant impact.** As long as Hamas rejects the API, its influence as an incentive is limited. It is not enough that Abu Mazen and the PLO accept it. This is taken for granted. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar must show that they have the capacity to change Hamas' attitude toward the initiative. Such a development would likely prove the initiative's potential to alter the attitude of regional actors toward Israel, and in so doing increase its appeal to Israelis.

C. Feasibility for Implementation

1. **In the absence of a pro-peace Israeli leadership, there is no feasibility for realizing the API.** The Israeli government is not interested in moving towards a peace agreement with the Palestinians. It is not willing to pay the necessary price to implement the API, therefore rendering it irrelevant. This is the more substantial impediment, for in a reality in which there is no peace process, it is increasingly more difficult to convince people to examine the API seriously. In such a situation, it is difficult to even stir up public discourse about the initiative. An external "anchor" – i.e. a diplomatic development in the peace process – is needed to encourage people to show interest in it and call them to action.

2. **The Israeli opposition, too, does not substantially support the API.** Even outside the government it is difficult to find a senior political official willing to adopt and promote the API without adding many preconditions and restrictions. Even former foreign minister MK Tzipi Livni recently stated that she would not adopt the API due to reservations she has. In February 2016, the Zionist Union's party convention decided to respond to the API and stated that "Israel must offer its first response to the Arab Peace Initiative, including offering comments and reservations to it." While this was a limited referencing of the initiative, it created the potential to promote the issue among the party's MKs.

3. **The assertion that regional cooperation can be maintained without a peace process should be undermined.** The Israeli prime minister and other members of his government claim that Israel's relations with the Arab world are better than ever and that broad cooperation can be achieved even without progress in the peace process. This contradicts the natural order set out in the API and relies on the fact that some of the region's countries are indeed willing – to a limited extent and on the basis of ad-hoc interests – to cooperate with Israel in a way that is disconnected from the Palestinian issue. The Israeli public needs to be educated about the extent to which normalized relations with the region are contingent upon progress in the peace process.

4. **Regional cooperation augments the initiative's credibility, but many are still suspicious of the Arab world.** The fact that there is ongoing cooperation between Israel and some Arab states, and that this is gradually becoming public knowledge, should increase the public's confidence in the API. If in the past there was mistrust in the Arab world's willingness to cooperate, today this prospect seems more believable in the public's eyes. And still, the title "The Arab Peace Initiative" could be problematic in light of the public's suspicion of the Arab world and its intentions. Efforts such as portraying the initiative as "things that the Arabs are willing to do in exchange for peace" and presenting it as part of a
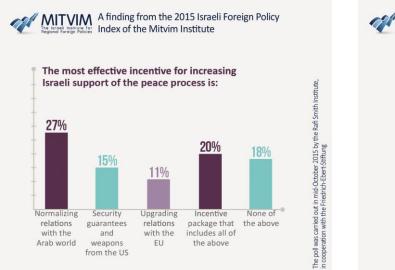
package of international incentives under the auspices of the Americans with the involvement of others are likely to help.
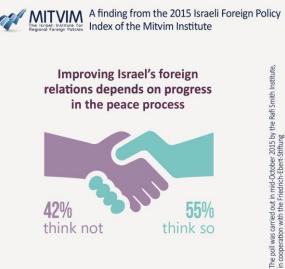
5. **In 2013 it was proven that the API is not an "all-or-nothing" proposal.** In the first years after it was unveiled, Israel criticized the Arab unwillingness to negotiate and modify the language used in the API. The Israeli claim was that, in fact, the initiative was not an incentive but rather a dictate, and therefore less relevant. The first discussions about amending the API took place in 2007 but led to naught. However, in 2013 that precise thing happened, with the agreement of the Arab League, at the request of the US Secretary of State John Kerry, adding reference to the principle of mutually agreed land swaps. Yet, this was done without guaranteeing that Israeli would give anything in return, and without the change in language leading to a more positive Israeli response of the initiative. This will make future changes in language more difficult.

6. **The realities of the Middle East undermine the initiative's relevancy.** The demand to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which appears in the API, is irrelevant under current conditions in light of the disintegration of Syria. At the same time, the initiative guarantees the establishment of normal relations between Israel and all the Arab states, some of which are falling apart and, therefore, cannot deliver on this promise. The initiative's language, which was drafted in 2002, does not fit the Middle East of 2016. In order to make the case for the relevancy and applicability of the API, this concern must be addressed. Yet, across the Arab world there is a general sense of objection to changing the API's wording.

7. **Adding a clarification document to the API may prove easier than arguing for changing the initiative's language.** A way to work around Arab objections to changing the API's language is to attempt to add a "clarification document" to the initiative. Such a document could explain how the initiative could be realized even without a withdrawal from the Golan Heights; it could draw a step-by-step road map to implementing the initiative both in terms of Israeli and Arab steps that would be required.

8. **The main focus should be on negotiating Israeli-Palestinian peace and not on negotiating the wording of the initiative.** The API is a means for solving the conflict with the Palestinians and is not an end unto itself. It should create an environment that is conducive to promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace. The focus should be on the negotiations with the Palestinians – in which the API plays a part – and not on the negotiations about the initiative or its language, which would overshadow the Palestinian issue and sideline addressing it.
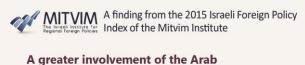
9. **Reference to the API should be included in the international documents that will serve as the basis for future negotiations.** It is difficult to see a reality in which the API serves in and of itself as the basis for renewed negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. It is more likely that the US or the broader international community will put forward parameters of their own as the basis for the resumption of negotiations (or the convening of an international summit), and that they will include references to the initiative as a central component. Under these circumstances, the international parameters could provide answers to the central elements of the API that require updating, clarification or change in language without demanding of the Arab states that they directly change the content of the API itself.

10. **Boosting the relevancy of the API is also a Palestinian interest, not just an Israeli one.** The Palestinians need the help of the Arab world in future negotiations with Israel, and they see the potential of the API. Therefore, they previously asked the Arab League to leave the initiative on the table, even when the League considered altering its policy on the subject. The PLO has even instigated a public campaign in Israel in favor of the API. The Palestinians, too, have an interest in bolstering the relevancy of the initiative and increasing its effectiveness as a regional incentive for peace. Therefore, they can serve as partners in thinking of ways to adapt the API to today's regional reality.

11. **A predetermined Arab point of contact is needed on the API.** It is important that there is a predetermined point of contact (POC) in the Arab world whose role it is to negotiate with Israel and the international community on matters relating to the API. Today, such an effective POC does not exist, which creates the impression that the initiative is also irrelevant in the eyes of the Arab states. The High Follow-Up Committee for the Arab Peace Initiative, which was established by the Arab League, could fill this role.

12. **The API's relevance for the future must be maintained, much like was done for UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 242.** UNSC Resolution 242 from 1967 was perceived as irrelevant for many years. Yet it remained on the table until the political conditions for promoting it were ripe. This occurred first during the Israeli-Egyptian peace talks, and then by the PLO and others. A similar development can occur with the API. Even if it is less relevant today, it must be preserved and reaffirmed in order to be used at an appropriate time in the future.

Appendix

Relevant Findings from 2015 Israeli Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute