



The Arab Peace Initiative at 15 Years

**Summary of an international conference organized by the
Mitvim Institute and the Leonard Davis Institute for International
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The Arab Peace Initiative (API) offers Israel normalized relations with the Arab world in exchange for reaching a peace agreement. It was first presented to Israel by the Arab League in 2002 and since then has consistently been ratified at the League's annual summits. Since the original presentation of the API, Israel has chosen to officially not respond. In recent years, the Israeli leadership has attempted to offer an alternative, according to which it is possible to improve relations with the Arab world significantly without progress in the peace process. Arab leaders have publicly rejected this model, yet it has become increasingly prominent within the Israeli public debate.

On 21 March 2017, scholars, diplomats and politicians, together with directors of think tanks and NGOs, gathered at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to discuss the API on the 15th anniversary of its announcement and to examine how it can serve as a more effective incentive for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Speakers from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Turkey, the EU, and the UN participated in the conference, which was initiated by the [Mitvim Institute](#) and the [Leonard David Institute](#).

The conference included four sessions: The first session focused on the past – the content of the API, its background and the processes which have taken place since it was first presented. The second session focused on the present day and examined the current status of the API, how changes in the Middle East have affected its viability, and Israel's recent policies and attitudes towards the API. The third session covered the future of the API and highlighted policy directions via which the API can help advance the peace process. Lastly, in the concluding session, senior diplomats serving in Israel presented their assessments of the API. The conference closed with a lecture by Member of Knesset (MK) Member Tzipi Livni, former Minister of Foreign Affairs. This document summarizes the presentations that were made during the conference. The entire conference can be watched on the Mitvim Institute's [YouTube channel](#).

A. The Background and History of the API

The first session of the conference, chaired by Dr. Galia Press-Barnathan, focused on the background and history of the API. The speakers in this session were Prof. Avraham Sela, Prof. Ilai Alon, Dr. Michal Yaari, Keren Sasson, and Shalom Turjeman. The session highlighted the ideas and interests which led to the consolidation of the API, the roles played by Saudi Arabia and the Arab League in this process, and how the API developed over time.

1. Prof. Avraham Sela, The Hebrew University

Prof. Avraham Sela emphasized the role of the Arab League in the Arab-Israeli conflict. He described how, over the years, the League has molded rules and norms concerning the Arab conduct towards Israel within the context of the conflict. Over the course of time, the League has helped, among other things, to moderate the Israeli-Palestinian issue, so that its member states can avoid becoming embroiled in cycles of violence which would necessitate actions which oppose their own interests. He noted that the API is not the first such initiative to originate in the Arab countries. In 1982, Saudi Arabia presented King Fahd's plan, which was later authorized — following several changes — by the Arab League. However, while the 1982 initiative stated that the Security Council would guarantee the security of the region's states it made no mention of Israel. The 2002 API clearly spells out a future recognition of Israel and the establishment of normalized relations with it. The API determines that the refugee problem must be resolved in a manner which Israel finds acceptable. According to Prof. Sela, the Arab League's repeated endorsement of the API testifies to the great significance that Arab countries attribute to it. However, he asked who will be able to implement or force others to implement the API? Do the Saudis possess the necessary power to force Yemen or Syria, or Hamas, to recognize the State of Israel? And will the Palestinians grant the initiative legitimacy, given a compromise is made on the refugee issue?

2. Prof. Ilai Alon, Tel Aviv University

Prof. Alon emphasized the importance of language in diplomatic contexts. He presented a study which focuses on a number of key concepts in the Arab discourse concerning Israel from the presentation of King Fahd's plan of 1982 going into 2016. According to Alon, the API is part of the long and extended negotiations – albeit sometimes indirect – between the Zionist Movement and Israel on the one hand and the Arab world on the other, which originates from the very beginning of the conflict and lasts until the present. Nevertheless, it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the API as a milestone; its significance can even be compared to Sadat's visit in 1977. Upon the presentation of the API in 2002, new, and very important, terms entered the Arab discourse which had not previously been employed: normalization, resolution of the conflict, as well as a just and agreed upon solution to the refugee issue. At that same time, the Arab world was still open to negotiations concerning the phrasing of the API, although the Israelis had failed to understand this and regarded the API as a take-it-or-leave-it type of offer. By analyzing many official documents from the Arab League and tracking their use of three central concepts – peace, Jerusalem and refugees – Alon demonstrated that the Arab commitment to peace has remained relatively fixed over the years, while a trend of decline is evident in Arab verbal attacks on Israel since the presentation of the API.

3. Dr. Michal Yaari, The Open University

Dr. Yaari focused on the interests and political circumstances which led Saudi Arabia to propose and advance the API in 2002. In her words, the Saudi fingerprint on the September 11 attacks led to a deterioration in relations between Saudi Arabia and the USA, and caused the Americans to re-consider their continued support of the Saudis. In addition, the al-Aqsa Intifada that took place at the time increased Saudi concerns regarding the radicalization within the Arab world and the resulting instability of Arab regimes, including within their own country; thus Saudi Arabia sought ways to reduce the flames of the conflict. As a result, and

due to the understanding that the reality could not be changed solely via financial means, Saudi Arabia consolidated a new regional policy attempting to balance various strategic goals. This included retention of American support on the one hand and advancing relations with the Islamic and Arab worlds on the other. According to Yaari, from Saudi Arabia's perspective, the 2002 API was intended to lead to regional calm and stability, while at the same time minimize the external and internal challenges which the Saudi regime was facing. Attaining Israeli-Palestinian peace was a secondary aim and the Saudis assess the API's success according to its ability to moderate the conflict rather than achieve an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement. In this context, Yaari determined that the API has succeeded in advancing a substantial portion of its aims and it constitutes an important breakthrough in Arab policy; it signifies a transfer from passivity to a pro-active policy regarding the peace process. In the Arab world today, and in particular among the young generation, there is much more curiosity about Israel, desire for knowledge about and contact with it than in the past.

4. Keren Sasson, The Hebrew University

Ms. Sasson examined the presentation of the API from the organizational perspective of the Arab League. According to Sasson, previous peace initiatives – Sadat's vision and King Fahd's plan – served as the theoretical base and source of legitimacy in the formulation of the API. The regional circumstances – including the al-Aqsa Intifada, the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the legitimacy crisis of the Arab League itself and general regional turmoil – have all contributed to the understanding that existing security practices were not achieving calm and stability or strengthening the League's status within the region. The API was a historical turning point in the Arab states' attitude towards Israel. It overturned the "Three No's" (no recognition, no negotiations and no peace) which the Arab League had pronounced at the Khartoum summit in 1967. In parallel to the publication of the API and its authorization by the Arab League in 2002, the League emphasized in an additional document that the API does not constitute an alternative to direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Arab League established a follow-up committee to advance the API on the global arena: this incorporated 12 member states and was led by Qatar. The committee meets a number of times throughout the year and over time has caused various international players to respond and even endorse the API in their policy programs. Despite the change and the positive discourse which the API expresses, it remains unclear whether the Arab League will be able to force its members to implement it, on the condition that Israel will do what is expected of it in the context of the peace process.

5. Shalom Turjeman, Former Policy Advisor to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

Mr. Turjeman discussed the history of how Israel responded to the API. He noted that the phrasing of the API was consolidated by Jordan at the end of the 1990s, yet Jordan understood that it would not be able to advance this initiative alone and therefore approached Egypt, and later Saudi Arabia. The original proposal for the API was raised at the beginning of 2002 in a conversation between journalist Thomas Friedman and Saudi King Abdullah. At this stage, Israel was already required to respond to the initiative. Israel asked for additional details regarding the Saudi initiative, and received these in the form of the Arab League's decision of the same year. The API was presented at an extremely problematic time – one day after the Israeli cabinet's decision to embark on Operation Defensive Shield. Prime Minister Sharon was occupied with the battle against terror and a permanent solution seemed completely irrelevant to the situation on the ground. Sharon, and later Olmert, in

fact attributed great importance to the API; they viewed it as an asset for Israel, and thought that it should be advanced. Yet at the same time Sharon recoiled from the API because he did not believe in negotiations with Syria and a return to the 1967 borders. In addition, he was not enthusiastic about the changes which the Arab League had made to the original Saudi phrasing, yet despite this he instructed his advisors to examine whether there is room for maneuver within the API. According to Turjeman, Israel and the Arab states made contact to examine whether it would be possible to transform the API from a public idea into an axis for diplomatic debate.

Although Israel never officially responded to the API, behind the scenes the Israeli government demanded that it constitute part of the Quartet Road Map consolidated in 2003. Later, Israel also asked representatives of various Arab countries – not only Egypt and Jordan – to visit Israel and demonstrate to the Israeli public their commitment to the API. According to Turjeman, it was important that Arab states join the negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinians at the earliest possible stage, not only towards its conclusion. This is especially evident in light of Arafat's claim that one of the reasons for the failure of the Camp David summit was the lack of Arab support. Turjeman emphasized that since the first presentation of the API, Arab countries have made it unequivocally clear that a regional breakthrough depends on progress in the Israeli-Palestinian track. Despite opinions voiced in the Israeli political system, Turjeman claimed that a regional peace arrangement cannot be reached without progress with the Palestinians. According to him, today offers a rare opportunity for improvement in Arab-Israeli relations, in light of shared interests, but the fulfillment of this opportunity is dependent on the Palestinian issue.

B. The Present Day Status of the API

The second session of the conference, chaired by Dr. Roee Kibrik of the Mitvim Institute, concentrated on the present day status of the API. The speakers were Prof. Elie Podeh, MK Ksenia Svetlova, Khader Sawaed, and Koby Huberman. The discussion in this session focused on political changes and new trends in both the region and on the Israeli-Palestinian track, alongside the place and role of the API within this changing reality. This session emphasized the missed opportunities of the past, as well as those consolidating in the present, to exploit the API in order to advance peace, normalized relations and increased regional stability.

1. Prof. Elie Podeh, The Mitvim Institute and the Hebrew University

Prof. Podeh maintained that the Israeli governments' failure to offer a systematic response to the Arab League's dramatic change of position in 2002 was a great loss and a missed opportunity. In practice, this was a rejection of the API, yet it is still not too late to change course and offer a response. He described how political changes affect Israeli leaders' attitudes towards the API. Avigdor Lieberman, for example, stated in 2009 that the API was a recipe for Israel's destruction. Yet in 2014, he declared that it is more relevant than ever. This change was a result of internal political motivation, not foreign policy considerations. In recent years, Netanyahu, too, began to advance a discourse regarding Israeli-Arab regional cooperation, but at the Aqaba summit which took place in 2016 he apparently missed an opportunity to advance the peace process within the regional framework. Netanyahu's policy goal is to move ahead with the Arab world before making progress with the Palestinians. Changes have also started to become evident in the Arab World's attitude towards the API,

in light of regional changes and the resulting interests. Thus, for example, prior to the Arab League summit in March 2017, Egypt sought to introduce changes into the language relating to the API, but the Palestinians opposed this and the phrasing remained the same. According to Podedh, anyone who understands the Arab-Israeli conflict knows that only a solution, or even substantial progress towards a solution with the Palestinians, will enable Israel to fulfill the historical opportunity it is currently facing to reshape its relations with the Arab world. The API is a tool to reach a solution with the Palestinians and not a recipe for a general regional solution. Israeli leaders must identify the existing opportunity and advance political processes, as Sadat had done in the past. This opportunity is a door which is opening, but it is also liable to close if not taken advantage of.

2. MK Ksenia Svetlova, Zionist Union

MK Svetlova emphasized the importance of the API and the possibility that it could play a significant role in molding of regional political relations. According to Svetlova, it is of great consequence that the Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, are willing to advance Israel's ties with the Middle East and this opportunity must not be missed. Svetlova highlighted that the API was first presented in the midst of a series of terror attacks in Israel and the beginning of Operation Defensive Shield. This timing was problematic and significantly reduced Israel's willingness to support or respond positively to the API. However, even though Israel did not respond officially and the political establishment refused to accept it, the very fact that the API exists and remains relevant from the perspective of the Arab League even 15 years later has begun to seep into Israeli public consciousness. Even the Prime Minister has started to integrate mentions of the API into his political statements. In Svetlova's words, the desire among certain Israeli elements to advance a regional agreement that ignores the Palestinians is not realistic and constitutes a grave mistake. The discourse concerning a regional agreement is extremely deceitful. Realizing the API must begin closer to home, with the Palestinians. Without progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the API will never come to fruition. Svetlova claimed that the API is "alive and kicking", continues to adapt to regional political developments, and is still waiting for Israel to respond to it positively.

3. Khader Sawaed, The Mitvim Institute and Haifa University

Mr. Sawaed discussed the possibility of Israeli-Arab cooperation in light of the API. He emphasized that for most Arab states, peace with Israel holds great potential for cooperation. They view the relations between Israel and Jordan as a possible model for them. Today, most communications between Israel and the Arab world (the majority of which concerns security and economics) are conducted under the cover of secrecy, a result of the Arab countries' absolute commitment, since 1948, to help solve the Palestinian issue. This commitment is not expected to disappear. Although the Arab states are not democratic, no Arab leader can market to his people the idea that peace with Israel is possible or even permissible in the absence of progress with the Palestinians. Sawaed highlighted that former US Secretary of State John Kerry's last speech before leaving his office, which outlined parameters for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict received support in Arab countries, even though Kerry spoke of a demilitarized Palestinian state, land swap, opposed the physical division of Jerusalem, and mentioned the need for some degree of naturalization of the refugees in the Arab states. In Sawaed's words, this approach demonstrates the general willingness of Arab countries to adapt the outline of the conflict's solution to regional and international developments, as is expressed in the Egyptian attempt

to change the Arab League's reference to the API. This attempt was halted by the Palestinians, who increasingly fear that the Arab states are somewhat retreating from their obligation that an Israeli-Palestinian agreement must precede cooperation with Israel.

4. Koby Huberman, Israeli Regional Initiative

Mr. Huberman emphasized that the API was a historical and dramatic change. However, it is not a practical policy plan but rather a directional one. According to him, the Israeli government should have responded favorably to the historic offer presented by the Arab world. When it failed to do so, the Israeli Regional Initiative, a civil society organization, provided a positive response instead. The Arab world, for its part, failed to market the API successfully. Despite the importance and innovation contained within the API, the Arab world was not able to transform it into something acceptable to Israel. According to Huberman, making the API a political reality depends on four factors: shared Israeli-Arab interests, a new international architecture to advance the peace process, political will among the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships, and the ripening of regional conditions.

Huberman claimed that clarity regarding the nature of an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement is needed from the outset of the negotiation process. This process should not focus only on advancing the two state solution but also on promoting comprehensive economic interfaces between Israel and the Arab world. It will be an extended process of establishing normalized relations, a reality which cannot be achieved overnight. Achieving this requires a new and different diplomacy, the formation of which necessitates time and prolonged discussions with new partners. The regional track will help to ensure that this is realized, without offering an alternative to the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track. In Huberman's words, the Israeli public accepts this approach. While 60 percent of the Israeli public supports an arrangement based on the two state solution, 75 percent favor a solution which would also include a regional package deal. To realize this, a new international paradigm is needed: President al-Sisi, Prime Minister Netanyahu, President Putin and President Trump are the key actors. They should lead their countries and others in this direction. Europe does not understand the required paradigmatic change and therefore is less relevant to the peace process at this stage. In conclusion, Huberman claimed that today there is increased willingness among various elements in the Arab world to communicate with Israel, but if Israel will insist on revealing its relations with the Arab world, this will cause the failure of attempts to advance cooperation via covert channels.

C. Future Policy Directions

The third session of the conference, chaired by Prof. Arie Kacowicz of the Hebrew University, focused on the relevance of the API for future efforts to advance peace. Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian speakers participated in this session: Celine Touboul, Walid Salem, Dr. Nimrod Goren, and Dr. Abdullah Swalha. They discussed the challenges, opportunities and geo-political trends that will affect the ability of the API to serve as a more effective incentive for peace.

1. Celine Touboul, Economic Cooperation Foundation

According to Ms. Touboul, the main question is whether the API can play a role in efforts to renew the peace talks. Today, there is growing understanding that the region's states need to play a central part in the peace process. This outlook was expressed in the first meeting

between Trump and Netanyahu, and suits the goals of other regional elements, particularly Egypt. In this context, the API is still the most relevant option, both as a framework for a regional approach, and as guidelines for an Israeli-Palestinian peace arrangement. Yet, according to Touboul, the API is currently a vision rather than a clear policy program. The Arab League must play a more active role in offering incentives to the parties involved in the conflict in order to advance a resolution. The API is not an "all or nothing" proposal but rather serves as the basis for a process that will include at once both regional and Israeli-Palestinian tracks. The API is meaningless without progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Touboul argued that the potential of the API is at present limited due to a lack of enthusiasm for it outside the Arab League and negative developments on the ground. In order to advance a regional arrangement, Israel must strengthen its commitment to the two state solution, proving its obligation with real steps, including a freeze on building in the settlements. Touboul claimed that Egypt can play a major role in advancing regional security and the peace process. However, she argued that we should not expect Egypt to pressure Israel to advance in the peace process, because foremost on Egypt's present agenda regarding relations with Israel is tackling joint security threats.

2. Walid Salem, Center for Democracy and Community Development

Mr. Salem emphasized that the API offers Israel normalized relations not only with the Arab states but also with the Muslim world. He drew attention to the fact that the existing translations of the API to English and Hebrew are not formal ones, and that they omit a quote from the Quran which provides the API with religious legitimization. According to Salem, in order to utilize the API to advance the peace process in an optimal manner, it is necessary to understand its operating mechanism. The Arab League appointed Jordan and Egypt – and no other country – to conduct official talks with Israel regarding the API, while a League follow-up committee is responsible for its advancement vis-à-vis the international community. The Arab League as a body encourages coordination and cooperation among the Arab states. It is not able nor is it required to conduct negotiations with Israel concerning the API. Salem called for Israel to refrain from asking for changes in the API because certain forces within the Arab world will embrace this and lead the API in a different direction, which was not Israel's original intention.

Salem argued that the Palestinians cooperate with the API due to their desire for progress in the negotiation process with Israel. The internal problems that Abbas is facing is a result of a lack of progress in the peace process. He also mentioned that at the 2007 Arab League summit, the Arab countries increased their level of commitment to advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and this remains high on their agenda. The entire regional process must be dependent on progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, which will be achieved through direct negotiations. The Arab countries will advance towards establishing relations with Israel only following progress in the talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Therefore, any regional peace initiative which does not include the Palestinians can be expected to fail. In contrast, if some progress will be made on the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track, the Arab states can adopt steps to improve relations with Israel, as happened in the 1990s (when the progress between Israel and the Palestinians enabled, among other things, the opening of diplomatic representations in Tel Aviv).

3. Dr. Nimrod Goren, The Mitvim Institute

Dr. Goren argued that in spite of the time which has passed since its first presentation, the API is still relevant. This is particularly true in light of the intensified discourse concerning a regional initiative and the international community's increasing involvement with regard to incentives for peace. Yet public opinion surveys reveal that the Israeli public's familiarity with the API is very low and therefore significant effort is required to further public awareness of its existence and importance. According to Goren, it is necessary to update the documents and programs that serve as the basis for discussion of the peace process, among them also the API: these documents were published more than a decade ago, when the conflict's situation and regional conditions differed greatly. Kerry's last speech, for example, updated the parameters laid out by President Clinton in 2000. In this regard, in order to make the API an effective incentive for peace it is necessary to explain its reference to Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights – in light of the present war in Syria, does this remain a condition for implementing the API? What will Israel receive from the Arab world if it will reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians but not with Syria? Moreover, in light of regional changes and the inability of a number of Arab states to function properly, it is important to make clear which Arab states can realize the API practically and what will constitute the stages of implementation. In this way, the reward that the Arab League promises Israel will become more attractive and feasible in Israeli eyes. Goren explained that the addition of these explanations will not weaken the Palestinian negotiating position. Rather the Palestinians have an interest in the API remaining on the table and Israel perceiving it as both relevant and significant. In his words, the API can help to strengthen players that support peace in the Israeli political system, those who seek to challenge the present leadership.

The API emphasizes that regional cooperation does not necessarily have to be conducted behind the scenes or focus on security issues – as in the current situation. It offers hope for a comprehensive change in Israel's relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds, which will lead to open relations and cooperation in a range of areas. However, Goren highlighted that realizing this opportunity requires significant progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Finally, Goren called for the international community to implement its program of consolidating a package of broad incentives conducive to helping achieve peace. Such a package can include the API, the European proposal for a Special Privileged Partnership with Israel and the future Palestinian state, and the American security guarantees included in Gen, John Allen's plan. This requires the creation of a new international mechanism which will include the players relevant to these incentives – Americans, Europeans, and Arab – and that will be tasked with upgrading each incentive and consolidating them as a package.

4. Dr. Abdullah Swalha, The Center for Israel Studies in Jordan

Dr. Swalha called for the investment of greater efforts in increasing Israeli support for the API. According to Swalha, most Israeli citizens are not aware of its meaning and how it can be useful. In order to change this, efforts are required also on the part of the Arab League. The new geopolitical climate in the Middle East has generated potential for greater cooperation between Israel and the Arab states, first and foremost against shared enemies such as the Islamic State and Iranian dominance in the region. Successful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians will enable the realization of this regional opportunity; today the Arab states have a greater interest than in the past in contributing to its progress. According to Swalha, the Arab Quartet – which includes Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – must play a more central role, instead of the Quartet

(comprised of the USA, EU, UN, and Russia), which has proven to be unsuccessful. The Arab countries may have a higher chance of achieving success. They can provide the Palestinians with legitimacy and approval for compromises and, at the same time, promise Israel an improvement in its regional and global status.

Despite the growing cooperation between Israel and Arab states, peace between Israel and the Palestinians is a prerequisite for normalized relations. However, Swalha claimed that there is no need to argue about which should come first – peace or regional cooperation. Rather, it is necessary to begin advancing both in parallel as soon as possible. According to his argument, closer relations between Israel and the Arab world will help Israel and the Palestinians advance towards peace. Swalha spoke about the deep psychological component of the Israeli-Arab conflict and noted that in order to advance peace it is vital to build trust between Israeli and Arab citizens and to prepare both sides for compromises. This can be achieved through education for peace, meetings between civil society activists, and students and faculty exchanges. Such efforts can genuinely help to advance peace.

D. Diplomatic Perspectives

The final session of the conference, chaired by Amir Tibon of *Ha'aretz*, presented the perspectives of senior diplomats regarding the API. Participants from the EU, UN and Turkey participated in this session: H.E. Mark Gallagher, H.E. Nikolay Mladenov, and H.E. Kemal Ökem. They emphasized the importance of the API as well as its relevancy against the background of the stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

1. H.E. Mark Gallagher, Chargé d'Affaires of the EU Delegation to Israel

H.E. Gallagher described the API as a historic proposal; its potential for advancing peace remains as yet unexploited. In his words, the API is still relevant and it is not an "all or nothing" proposal. Among its strong points are the nuances regarding disputed issues, first and foremost the refugee issue. Gallagher perceives great value in dialogue with the Arab world concerning the API. He argued that it endows the Arab world with the possibility to become a real partner to each of the parties involved in the conflict, moving beyond the role of mediator. At the same time, Gallagher emphasized that while the API constitutes a good basis for bilateral Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, it cannot serve as an alternative or a regional bypass for the Israeli-Palestinian track. Gallagher also noted the importance of proposing further incentives for peace, among them the EU's offer to upgrade relations with Israel and the future Palestinian state to a Special Privileged Partnership following a peace agreement. Alongside the EU's desire to help advance the peace process and continue acting as a mediator in its progress, Gallagher highlighted the EU's opposition to processes which make peace less likely, for example continued building in the settlements, Israeli proposals for the annexation of territories, and the law for the regulation of settlements.

2. H.E. Nikolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process

H.E. Mladenov described the API as a vision for peace, a foundation for negotiations, and an opportunity to deal with some of the most central challenges which the region faces. He portrayed the radicalization in Israeli and Palestinian public opinion during recent years, highlighting the critical need to fight the trends of instability on the ground: among these are building in the settlements, violence and incitement, as well as the divisions on the Palestinian side. Israeli building in the settlements during recent months does not fit with the

Israeli government's declarations concerning its commitment to peace. Both rhetoric and policy must change in order to ensure that actions and words are in accordance. Mladenov expressed opposition to calls from Israeli right wing elements to annex Ma'ale Adumim. According to his argument, such an annexation is in violation of international law and contradicts previous Israeli commitments. Moreover, it is liable to cause outbreaks of violence. Only full resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts will allow normalization of relations between Israel and its neighbors. This will reduce radicalization in the region and improve the security situation of both Israel and the Palestinians. In the meantime, both sides must halt the negative trends on the ground, rebuild their mutual trust, and establish conditions which can enable progress towards a future agreement. On the Israeli side, this will include a policy change – enabling physical and economic Palestinian development in Area C and the development of national Palestinian Authority institutions and its ability to govern in areas A and B. The Palestinians must focus on developing infrastructure and establishing institutions. Mladenov determined that a regional approach cannot serve as an alternative to direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians. However, in his opinion, trust-building steps between the parties to the conflict, with regional backing, will improve the chances of successful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Thus, the API can serve as a basis for negotiations and create opportunities for Israel and the Arab states to face regional challenges together, in this way also contributing to the peace process.

3. Kemal Ökem, Ambassador of Turkey to Israel

H.E. Ökem described the API as a revolutionary proposal connecting the Israeli-Palestinian, Arab and international arenas. It provides a further dimension to the two state solution and clearly outlines the Arab League's vision of the future. Israel chose not to present a vision or its own peace initiative; this was an unfortunate and missed opportunity. The Israeli leadership satisfied itself with comments and criticism of the API, but refrained from responding to it officially. In Ökem's words, it is important that Israel outlines its own principles for peace, either as a response to the API or as an independent initiative. The fact that the API did not receive any Israeli response at the time of its presentation was also influenced by the political climate of the period and proximity to the September 11 terror attacks. Israel likewise viewed the API as an "all or nothing" proposal rather than a real opportunity. However, it does not necessarily need to be a missed opportunity. Indeed, the API continues to be relevant. It remains on the negotiating table, provides a useful framework for advancing the peace process, and can still be realized. Regional involvement in the peace process and the granting of a formal role in the process to the Arab League can assist Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and peacebuilding efforts. Nevertheless, regional efforts and involvement cannot be a substitute to direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. In this context, Ökem emphasized that Turkey is an important regional partner; even though the country is not a member of the Arab League it is interested in helping the parties reach a just and sustainable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

E. Keynote Address by MK Tzipi Livni, Zionist Union

According to MK Livni, the API was a historic opportunity, although until now Israel has refused to acknowledge that. The Initiative is of great significance and it is in both Israeli and Palestinian interests for it to remain on the table. In 2002, the Arab world informed Israel that once it had reached a peace agreement with the Palestinians, the Arab states would establish normalized relations with Israel, without additional conditions. Before achieving

peace with the Palestinians, it will be impossible to establish such relations with Arab States. Livni related that as Foreign Minister she met with representatives of the Arab states on many occasions to discuss the API. She travelled to Cairo with an Israeli delegation in order to meet and discuss advancing the API with the follow-up committee established by the Arab League. At this meeting, Livni asked whether the Arab League considered the initiative open to negotiations or the document must be accepted or rejected as it stands. The answer from the Arab side was clear: the API was open to discussion. It included the Arab positions and it was subsequently necessary for Israel to present its stance. Livni also asked whether Israel could negotiate with the Arab states regarding the API but received a negative reply to this question. The Arab counterparts emphasized that Israel must negotiate with the Palestinians. According to Livni, it is thus possible to conclude that the Arab world will support any agreement which the Palestinians will reach with Israel, even if it exceeds the principles presented in the API. She claimed that this is highly significant, because any Palestinian leader willing to take dramatic steps in the negotiations with Israel will necessarily receive support for this from the Arab world.

Support from the Arab world is not only important for the Palestinians but also for Israel. According to Livni, a peace agreement with the Palestinians will not solve everything immediately. Elements such as Hamas are expected to oppose it and terror attacks are likely to continue. Yet, an agreement with the Palestinians will accord Israel a strategic change in its relations with the entire Arab world; the Palestinians alone cannot grant Israel this extremely important reward. This will help the Israeli leadership advance a pro-peace approach and to take decisions in this direction. Livni argued that the present Israeli government desires peace with the Arabs but not with the Palestinians. According to her, Israeli politicians like to provide an unrealistic narrative according to which it is possible to advance regional peace with the Arab world, as though the Palestinians do not exist. However, they themselves are aware that the conflict with the Palestinians imposes a low glass ceiling on relations with Israel's Arab neighbors. In order to really achieve peace with the Arab world, Israel must reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Israeli leaders need to say this directly to the public and not scatter empty promises.

Livni claims that Israel must negotiate on two different tracks: direct talks with the Palestinians and comprehensive talks with the Arab world. There is currently an opportunity for this, in light of Trump's desire to advance an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, and due to the interests shared by Israel and the Arab states vis-à-vis Iran and the Islamic State. However, it is important to remember that Arab leaders cannot improve relations with Israel – even if they want to do so – as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues. Public opinion in the Arab world deems this unacceptable. The government must not allow the regional opportunity which exists today to pass. Israel needs to talk to the Arab world and offer a serious and positive response to the API, although without accepting all its conditions. Israel must decide what it wants and then find a way to overcome the difficulties and obstacles on the way to this goal. It must not refrain from action and indeed, in light of the regional instability, Israel has a greater interest in making progress towards peace.