

COMMENTARY

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A Momentous Opportunity To Embrace the Arab Peace Initiative

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The Arab Peace Initiative (API) presents an unprecedented and vital opportunity to change the course of events in the Middle East by realizing an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. At no time since the API was introduced in 2002 by Saudi Arabia has the development of events in the region converged to create a new environment, making the API more relevant than before; Israel must urgently adopt it as the basis for peace negotiations.

Israel is approaching a historic crossroads, with a general election that may usher in new leadership and end the six years of deadlock in peace negotiations under Prime Minister Netanyahu, who deepened the conflict with the Palestinians while alienating Israel's closest friend—the United States.

Unless there is new leadership in Israel and direct participation of the Arab states in the peace process, there is no hope that renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks will succeed.

There are many Israelis who contend that given the volatile conditions in the Middle East, Israel must focus on the threats it faces from Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, ISIS, and other jihadist groups, not engage again in futile peace negotiations.

Nothing is further from the truth—everything that has transpired in the past few years and the current upheaval sweeping the region point to the precise opposite.

Unfortunately, successive Israeli prime ministers have been blind to the merits of the API and have brainwashed the public about the “inherent danger” in it, instead of emphasizing its importance and far-reaching implications. Now that the regional dynamics have changed in fundamental ways, Israel must seize the opportunity.

For the first time in decades, the Sunni Arab world, especially the Gulf States, Egypt, and Jordan, views Israel as a partner in dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat. They have been sharing intelligence and coordinating on various levels should Iran reach the nuclear threshold.

Successful peace negotiations based on the API would dramatically weaken the Iran-Hezbollah axis, which threatens Israel from the north, and would put enormous pressure on Hamas to embrace the API, as it would be contrary to its interests to defy the collective Arab will. The longer the occupation persists, the more Hamas will be receptive to being armed by Hezbollah and Iran.

It will improve Israel’s international reputation, reduce its isolation, and put the onus on the Palestinians to negotiate peace in earnest.

In addition, reviving the API will allow the Palestinians to make important concessions under the Arab states’ political cover and provide Israel a comprehensive peace with the vast majority of Arab and Muslim states.

Being that Israel is in the midst of general elections, there is probably no better time for the Arab League to restate publicly that the API is still on the table and urge the Israelis to support it.

Labour party leader Isaac Herzog, who stands a good chance of forming the next Israeli government, should rise to the challenge and embrace the API.

Herzog needs to explain to the Israelis the significance of the API and why the time is right to use the API as the vehicle that will lead to comprehensive peace and security.

Herzog needs to disabuse the public of the illusion, promoted by Netanyahu, that the settlements provide secure borders; in fact, the settlements enterprise is a security liability rather than an asset. Regardless, the Arab League agreed to modify the API to reflect Israel’s security concerns through land swaps that would allow Israel to keep its three major settlement blocs.

In connection with the Palestinian right of return, which is another source of concern for the Israelis, the API calls for a “just solution” to the problem. In every set of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, it was understood by every Arab leader that only a token number of refugees can return.

Furthermore, territorial compromise by both is central to reaching a peace agreement, and those Israelis who refuse to relinquish land for the sake of peace will jeopardize Israel as a democratic and Jewish state. As David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder, stated: "Better a Jewish state on part of the land than all of the land without a state."

Herzog must also expose Netanyahu's unfounded claim that a Palestinian state will end up like Gaza. Under any circumstance, the withdrawal from the West Bank will be done under meticulous security arrangements over a period of 5-10 years in full coordination with the PA that leaves nothing to chance.

Herzog should categorically dispel the notion that the API was proposed on a "take it or leave it basis" and negotiate a peace agreement with the Palestinians based on its principles.

Both sides have been living with illusions about these issues and are imbued with the zero sum approach as if any gain by one side must be at the expense of the other. Unfortunately, the leadership on both sides has done nothing but promulgate these beliefs.

By illusion, I mean what Sigmund Freud refers to as beliefs which are held in the absence of any good grounds supporting them, because they satisfy deep-seated wishes irrespective of evidence (or the lack thereof). Since illusions answer to inner needs, having to give them up can be an extremely painful, even traumatic experience. As a result, one of the major obstacles to adopting the API has been that many Israelis are still not prepared psychologically to relinquish some of their most cherished illusions.

Israel's political leadership clung to these illusions and never understood the mindset of the Palestinians and vice versa. To be sure, few efforts have been made to bridge the cultural gap by engaging one another a mutual conciliatory interaction. Instead, they used the public stage to malign the other, further deepening the hatred and distrust rather than building new bridges.

During the election campaign, the leaders of the Labour party in particular must set their sights high and embrace the API to give Israelis the chance to live in peace, especially now when the entire region is engulfed in terrifying turmoil.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

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