The Arab Peace Initiative – Can it make a difference?

Overview
The Arab Peace Initiative (API) was endorsed by the Arab League in 2002 and is a “Land for Peace” pledge that Arab nations will end all hostilities with Israel in exchange for an independent Palestinian state and an Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories captured in the 1967 War. While the API has run into obstacles such as strong skepticism regarding requirements for initiation of normalization, guarantees for Israeli security, and intentions for final disposition of Palestinian refugees, the API has the potential to play a significant role in the peace process through clarification of details for implementation and confidence-building measures.

Speakers
Toni Verstandig (Moderator) is the Director of Middle East Programs at The Aspen Institute and Executive Vice President of The S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace. She also served as the former Deputy Assistant Secretary of near Eastern Affairs, U.S. State Department.

Ambassador Thomas Pickering has over 50 years of diplomatic service, including as United States Ambassador to Israel, Jordan, the Russian Federation, India, El Salvador, Nigeria and the United Nations. He holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service.

Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein is Jordan’s Ambassador to the United States and non-resident Ambassador to Mexico. He previously served as the kingdom’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations and was elected the first president of the governing body of the International Criminal Court.

Minister Daniel Meron is the Minister for Congressional Affairs at the Embassy of Israel to the United States. He has also served as the Deputy Chief of Mission of Israel’s Embassies in Norway and Cyprus and previously, served as the Director of the Department of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs at Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Definitions
Arab Peace Initiative (API) was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and endorsed by the 22-member League of Arab States at the March 2002 summit in Beirut and later reaffirmed in 2007. The 57 countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference have also affirmed their support. API says Arab nations will end the Arab-Israeli conflict and normalize relations if Israel withdraws from all territories occupied in the 1967 War following UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, recognizes Palestine as a sovereign state, and achieves an agreed-upon solution for Palestinian refugees following UN Resolution 194.

UN Security Council Resolution 242 (issued November 22, 1967) calls upon Israel to withdraw from territories captured in the June 1967 War and for each side to respect the sovereignty and security of all states in the area.

UN Security Council Resolution 338 (adopted October 22, 1973 during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War) calls for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops in accordance with UN Resolution 242.

UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (passed December 11, 1948) Article 11 says all Palestinian refugees willing to live peacefully in Israel should be allowed to return, and those who do not return should be compensated for their losses.

Main Themes
API and the Peace Process
• The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is at a critical juncture in relationship to political stability in the region as well as principal U.S. strategic interests. Achieving a comprehensive agreement would have a positive impact on region-wide issues important to the United States, such as mitigating extremism and managing relations with Iran.
• As an inducement designed to stimulate negotiations, the API represented an important shift in the position of the Arab nations. As President Shimon Peres pointed out last year, the API departs from the position held by the Arab league since the 1967 war, which was to never recognize Israel, not negotiate, and not make peace.
Because the API creates a regional basis for peace instead of limiting the framework to a bilateral negotiation, it potentially opens the door for greater stability in the region and progress toward U.S. broader strategic goals.

Difficulties Gaining Traction

- The panelists described several factors that have inhibited the API from achieving a greater impact on the peace process. First, the API was announced in 2002 only days after a horrific suicide bombing in the Israeli city of Netanya. The modest conciliatory potential of both the initiative itself and the spirit in which it was put forward were muted by violence in the context of the Palestinian Second Intifada.
- Had there been a more targeted campaign to really explain the goals and terms of the API to the Israeli people, it had the potential to receive broader acceptance. But the Arab leaders did little to reach out to Israelis; the API was not even translated into Hebrew at the time of its announcement.
- The API only offers to a general framework for a “Land for Peace” agreement in which Arab nations normalize relations with Israel in exchange for the territories conquered in the 1967 War. Many ancillary dilemmas would still need to be resolved, such as final borders, control of Jerusalem, and Palestinian refugees.
- The refugee issue is especially difficult. The API calls for the two parties to agree upon a just solution to the refugee problem following UN Resolution 194, but many questions remain: Are family reunifications possible for family members that remained in Israel? Will there be compensation for damages and loss of property? Will refugees who left in 1948 be allowed to return? If so, in what numbers?
- The “right of return” engenders stronger opposition from Israelis than other contentious issues because it threatens the identity of Israel as a Jewish state. There have been two main responses from Israel on this issue: Either no return is possible but other trade-offs can be made, or a limited return could be considered if it does not jeopardize the Jewish majority in any way.
- There is a consciousness gap between Israeli and Palestinian points of view that causes a visceral rejection to the idea of making concessions to the other side. Prince Zeid commented the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a struggle between two traumatized societies. Devastating loss and tragedies have caused each side to act emotionally more than rationally. Israelis want to see tangible actions laid out first before they are willing to reciprocate; but the API is designed more as an inducement for negotiations, assuring normalized relations once an agreement between the two sides have been met. Within each population there will always be strong and aggressive opposition to making concessions.

Leveraging API’s Potential

- In discussing the above obstacles, the panelists also outlined a number of factors that could increase the conciliatory potential of the API. Prince Zeid pointed out how difficult it is for either side in the conflict to make any kind of conciliatory step for fear of making an un reciprocated concession. While both sides demand concrete assurances of reciprocal action from the other party before they would consider concessions, Ambassador Thomas Pickering shared from his experience that concessions can never really happen one after the other. Conciliatory actions must be simultaneous to be successful.
- Minister Daniel Meron expressed this desire for simultaneity on the Israeli side. He said Arab Nations should begin normalizing relations at the same time that Israel begins a withdrawal from the Territories, instead of waiting until the withdrawal is complete to fulfill their pledge.
- Concerning the consciousness gap between Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints and the mistrust it engenders, Minister Meron explained the strong impression Egyptian President Anwar Sadat left on the Israeli public during his historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977. The reason it is so hard for Israel to compromise, he said, is because deep distrust of the other side’s intentions overpowers any potential optimism. The API must be tangible for the Israeli people. Like Sadat’s visit, the API could wield real power if it could be translated into concrete actions. Perhaps Arab leaders could even come to Israel to promote it in person.
- Similar gestures from Israel would also have a positive effect. Validating the spirit of Resolution 194 and demonstrating sincerity in finding a just solution to the grievances of refugees would greatly increase Palestinian confidence. Knowing that the idea of any demographic change generates enormous opposition in Israel, Minister Meron commented that recognizing Israel as a Jewish state and validating Jewish ties to the land would mitigate some of that fear.
- The panelists agreed that the API has strong potential and should play a large role in eventual negotiations. The Obama Administration has been cautious, but has informally incorporated the API as a foundational principle in its Middle East policy. Toni Verstandig added that negotiators should operationalize the API through implementable actions written down in specific detail. It should then receive “conference report” follow-up to ensure progress is made.