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The Arab Peace Initiative (API)

A setback or new horizons?

By Walid Salem/October 2014

During the last June – August Israeli war against the Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the Palestinians inside Israel, several new proposals were presented by the different Israeli leaders regarding the API. It seemed as if the Israeli leaders had rediscovered the API after 12 years of its presentation. In this regard, proposals about it came from Lieberman, Netanyahu, Yair Lapid and his “Yesh Atid” Party colleague Yaakov Peri, and Tzipi Livni; along with former official security leaders Amos Yadlin, Youval Diskin, and Shlomo Brom.

These proposals diverge but the common thread between all of them was the call for the adoption of the API as the starting point for the solution of the conflict. However, without any need for the Israeli- Palestinian bilateral negotiations, or in other terms: no longer would it only be the Israeli – Palestinian negotiations.

The context can provide much clarity as to why these Israeli Initiatives came out in this specific time: It was in the context of the Kerry Initiative reaching a dead end by the end of April 2014, due to the Israeli rejection of his plan, followed by returning to confrontation between the two sides as Kerry himself expected to happen*. The rest of the story is known: three Israeli settlers were abducted in June, followed by incursions of the Israeli army to the West Bank cities and the clashes that followed. Then the kidnapping and the brutal killing of Mohammad Abu Khdeir, the young Palestinian from Shu’fat, a suburb in Jerusalem, followed by a “mini” Intifada in East Jerusalem and among the Palestinians who live inside Israel, and followed by the escalation around Gaza leading to a 51-day war. In other words, a new war was waged on the Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Palestinians inside Israel.

With this context of Israel bearing responsibility for causing Kerry’s failure, and

* Kerry spoke about an Intifada to emerge due to the Israeli rejection of his plan.

for the violence that erupted as a response to the failing process, Israel found itself in a position required it to present political initiatives, and in this context the Israeli ex-proposals on the API emerged.

But when looking at these proposals, one can find that they wanted to twist the neck of the API, and turn it into a position to be used for another purpose than that which it was intended for.

While the API speaks about normal relations to be created between all the Arab Countries (and later also all the Islamic ones) with Israel in case it withdrew from the Arab occupied territories of 1967, the proposal of Netanyahu as presented in his speech in the UN General Assembly spoke about bypassing Ramallah by contacting Cairo, Al Riyadh and Amman directly. Lieberman added that these Arab countries will also compose a security force that will go to Gaza and act to disarm Hamas there.

While Lieberman and Netanyahu want to have normal relations with the Arabs without Israel taking responsibility for anything or solving the conflict with the Palestinians (and Lieberman wanting to subcontract the Arabs to disarm Gaza and Hamas for the preservation of the Israeli security), the proposals of the other partners in the current Israeli government (Lapid, Yaakov Peri, Livni) spoke about the necessity of Israel to take responsibility and to initiate some acts such as: The Israeli withdrawal from the non-Israeli settled areas of the West Bank, followed by freezing settlement expansion outside the main settlement blocks, dismantling the isolated settlement posts, and then starting negotiations on the permanent status with the Palestinians (Yair Lapid's proposal presented during the last Herzilya conference).

Lapid also wanted Netanyahu to present a map clearly showing the areas that Israel wants to keep in its hand and those that Israel is ready to withdraw from. This may be the basis for negotiations with the Palestinians, which would decide the final borders between the two sides.

The role of the API in the process was presented by Lapid's colleague Yaakov Peri, who was in favour of the ceasefire on Gaza, to be followed by a regional conference to be held in Egypt, aiming to reconstruct Gaza on one hand and to create a process led by the Arab moderate countries of Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries (excluding Qatar) to disarm Hamas. Finally the regional conference would be followed by bilateral Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with the support of a "regional umbrella" that would give support to the Palestinians. Such negotiations should not have a time limit according to Peri.

On Tzipi Livni's end, she wanted the PA to return its control over Gaza, including controlling Hamas, to be followed by the resumption of the negotiations between the two sides under a regional umbrella. The proposals of Yadlin-Brom and Diskin are all about Arab countries disarming Hamas in Gaza, followed by negotiations with the regional umbrella.

Evaluation of the Israeli Proposals

Despite some differences between them, these official proposals were an outcome of Israel's evaluation of the new situation in the Arab region. Alongside the emergence of a block of moderate Arab countries, Israel considered itself to be sharing common threats as them from Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafi Jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaida and Da'esh (ISIS). Upon that, the Israeli point of view considered an Israeli alliance with these Arab moderate countries block to emerge, aiming to preserve the security of all. According to Israel, the API can then serve as a bridge to normal relations with the Arab countries before Israel's withdrawal from the 1967 Arab and Palestinian Occupied Territories (Lapid, Livni, and Peri), or without Israeli withdrawal at all (Netanyahu and Lieberman).

This Israeli version ignores several simple facts: The first of which is that while facing the mentioned security risks, the Arab moderate countries still also see the destabilising risk coming to them as a result of the continuation of the Israeli Occupation of the Palestinian and Arab territories, in addition to the destabilisation triggered by Israel's periodical wars on Gaza and Lebanon.

Further than that, there is still the fact that has to do with Hamas, explained by an Egyptian scholar during a meeting in Cairo last September*: "We are against Hamas when it threatens Egyptian national security, but we are completely with it when it resists the Israeli Occupation of the Palestinian 1967 territories."

Further than these points, these proposals ignore the API mechanism put forth by the Arab League, which are: Egypt and Jordan being the two exclusive Arab countries who have normal relations with Israel

*A meeting of the Palestinian-Egyptian relations, held in the premises of the Egyptian Council of Foreign Relations (ECFA) in Cairo, on 23/09/14, in cooperation with the Centre of Democracy and Community Development (CDCD) that is based in Jerusalem and directed by the author of this paper.

Thus they are tasked with such discussions and initiatives about the API and the peace process with Israel. On the other hand, the "API follow-up committee" is in charge of API's communication with the international community. The latter includes 12 Arab countries including Saudi Arabia. According to the API, the

other Arab countries beyond Egypt and Jordan will create normal relations with Israel only after Israeli withdrawal from the 1967 Arab occupied territories. Although not that well known, this point is obviously inclusive to Palestine which does not have normal diplomatic relations with Israel, like those of Egypt and Jordan due to the fact that Palestine is still under Israeli occupation.

The Operationalization of the API

Beyond these simple facts, the API operationalisation is an issue that still needs to be tackled in order for the involved parties to deal with it correctly and to achieve a better outcome of it.

The API is on one hand a text towards comprehensive peace in the region, but also it includes a process for its promotion. This process has the two mechanisms included in the previous paragraph.

Besides this, there are commendable lessons learned from the 1990's when the multilateral working groups of water and environment, security and arm control, economic development, and refugees were combined with some semblance of relations between Arab countries and Israel. Though those relations were less than full normal relations, they included the establishment of commercial or contact offices in Tel Aviv such as those created then by Morocco, Tunisia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman in Tel Aviv. The only Arab country that created full diplomatic relations with Israeli at that time was Mauritania, with Egypt and Jordan already in full normal relations respectively.

Presently all these relations are frozen, except the ones involving Egypt and Jordan with Israel. During the multi-lateral talks of 1990's, the progress in the Israeli Palestinian tracks led to those relations between the Arab countries and Israel. The breakdown of the peace process later led to a breakdown of these relations, with the freezing of the multilateral working groups at the end of 1996. Today there is lack of talk about other regional cooperation processes like those active in the 1990's, such as the MENA/Barcelona process that was sponsored by the EU.

The question of today is twofold: on the one hand, how can the API play a role on moving the Israeli-Palestinian track forward, in the time that the Syrian-Israeli and the Lebanese-Israeli tracks look to be fully paralyzed; and on the

other hand, what regional cooperation process is possible and is able to add to "providing support to the Palestinians, and giving incentives to the Israelis", as Dr. Nabil Shaath put it?*

When it comes to the political role of the API in moving the Israeli-Palestinian track forward, it is again necessary to have the roles of Egypt and Jordan as authorized by the Arab League to work with the Israeli decision makers. The other Arab countries, mainly the Gulf countries and Morocco, try to help but through back channels with unofficial former officials' and semi officials' participation. The question for these efforts' breakthrough is still dependent of course on the willingness of the Israeli government to move forward.

Still here are some of the tools to be used in order to pressure Israel to move forward: A new UN Security Council resolution that includes the API and call for holding a continuous Middle East peace conference that aims this time to find a solution, and not to re-launch a new bilateral process as it was in Madrid and Annapolis International conference held in 1991 and 2007 successively.

Other tools also include all of the European Union and European countries' economic and political pressures, work of the Quartet and the USA to put pressure, to recognise the state of Palestine, and work on the ground in concrete plans to build it. In addition, the Arabs can also contribute to this process based on the new status of Egypt which is once more playing a leading role in the Arab World. Egypt can also pressure to move the ongoing Cairo talks, after the Gaza war, from focusing on Gaza, to focus on the ways to solve all the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

* During an API meeting organised by CDCD and allowed by Dr. Shaath in June 2013 in Amman.

The Palestinian leadership bear a big responsibility, starting with promoting civil nonviolent resistance, diplomatic resistance, and initiating roles to be played by Egypt, Jordan and the API follow-up committee. Initiate a UN Security Council resolution that includes the API in addition to recognising

Palestine as a state. This is in addition to all the components of Abu Mazen's new plan after the war on Gaza*, and the creation of the international coalition of states who recognize Palestine.

The huge work to be done with the Israeli society about the API and peace is still of the utmost importance. The Palestinians' role in this includes the communications with all of the groupings in the Israeli society and in all levels, in addition to the inclusion of Israelis in the Palestinian nonviolence struggle to end occupation.

Finally, on the political role of API in the Israeli-Palestinian track, one can notice that among the several Israeli proposals presented above, the only one that is ready to freeze settlement expansion as a starting point to negotiations is the one of Yair Lapid's and his "Yesh Atid" Party. Thus this necessitates an intensive communication with this essential Party in the current Israeli government, being the only one that accepts the Palestinian demand regarding settlement freezing before any negotiations.

On the regional cooperation issue, the API can provide regional cooperation projects with Israel the moment that the current Israeli government shows readiness to move forward in peace. But until then regional cooperation with the other Arab countries will be kept as an Arab promise that will be fulfilled only after Israel's withdrawal from the 1967 war occupied territories. This position was expressed over and over again in the Saudi-Palestinian meeting organised by CDCD(Cairo, 21/09/14), and the Palestinian-Egyptian one (Cairo, 23/09/14).

* Abu Mazen's plan includes as steps: 1) Trying to get American approval of 1967 borders as the borders of Palestine followed by negotiations. 2) If failed, getting a UNSC resolution that gives a date for the independence of Palestine. 3) If failed, UNGA resolution/s, joining ICC and other international organisations, cases against Israel, and meeting of Geneva Conventions signature countries to put Palestine under international protection.

Conclusion

It seems that the Arab Peace Initiative succeeded to get new ground in the light of the latest developments in the region.

In Israel, after the war against Gaza, all the Israeli political spectrums started talking about the API and making initiatives that claim to be based on it. Despite that, most of these initiatives do not represent the requirements that enable them to meet the minimum demands for the resumption of serious negotiations (except the one of Yair Lapid's who accepts settlement freezing), but it is still valid that they now see merit in the API, and not in any other proposal for peace.

This development in itself opens the door for the Arabs to focus on the API more, by creating a good response to the Israeli proposals, and clarifying that getting to normal relations between Israel and the Arab countries will happen only after achieving an Israeli Palestinian peace, and that a full regional cooperation beyond the regional cooperation with Egypt and Jordan is also subject to Israeli withdrawal from all the Palestinian and the Arab occupied territories by Israel.

The API, then, is gaining new horizons. Now the new leadership in Egypt is taking it as a banner for regaining the leadership role in the region and President Sisi focused on it in his opening speech in the conference of October 12th about the reconstruction of Gaza. The Arab countries are still all behind it, the international community see more merit in activating the roles of Egypt and Jordan in support of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and the roles of the Gulf countries in supporting the negotiations through back channels without starting regional cooperation projects in the time being with Israel, which will be understood by the Israeli government, if started now, as an acceptance of normalization before withdrawal, leading Israel to do what it did in the 1990's multilateral groups when focused on normalization without withdrawal.

The 1990's experience also gives lessons that official normal relations are the reward that will be given later; giving them now before withdrawal will lead Israel to abstain from withdrawing. The same is correct regarding the direct security cooperation with Israel by the Arab countries, to be postponed also to a later stage after the Israeli withdrawal.

The current war against Da'esh in the region also represents an opportunity to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in order to end the conditions that create more extremism in the region.

The way out, then, is: create more international support for the API in order to make it the basis of a new negotiations process with a multilateral sponsorship, starting by bringing the Israeli government to compliance with the international well, and ending with a comprehensive peace for the region.

The ways and tools to bring Israel to compliance are well known and presented hereinbefore. It is time for the Arabs, Europe, the USA and the world to practise them.