ISRAEL AND THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE

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*The Arab Peace Initiative provides the only viable framework for Israeli-Palestinian peace and sustainable regional security in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. No other peace proposal can deliver on both accounts, and no other has as many common denominators that all parties to the conflict, from the extreme left to the right, Israelis and Palestinians alike, can share.*

**Abstract**

One of the most momentous declarations to come out of the Arab world since Israel’s inception in 1948 is the Arab Peace Initiative (initially the ‘Saudi Initiative’), launched in March 2002 in Beirut, Lebanon. Given the development of events in the Middle East since it was first introduced, the Arab Peace Initiative has become even more relevant today as no other viable framework has been introduced that could remotely provide the foundation for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Moreover, the Arab Peace Initiative has the potential to tackle the extremism that has engulfed the Middle East to the detriment of both Israel and the Arab states.

Essentially, the Initiative calls on Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied since 1967, arrive at a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, and accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as the capital. I maintain that the demands made by the Arab Peace Initiative can be fully reconciled with Israel’s core requirements for peace, which are: 1) ensuring its national security and territorial integrity; 2) sustaining its Jewish national identity; 3) securing the unity of Jerusalem; and 4) establishing normal relations with the entire Arab and Muslim world.

This paper will first address the changing regional dynamic and the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative and elaborate on Israel’s reservations about the Initiative and how to allay its main principle concerns. The paper will conclude with the argument that the Arab Peace Initiative offers all parties concerned the best chance to end the most debilitating conflict that has consumed the Israelis and Palestinians for more than seven decades, and usher in a transformational era of stability, security, and peace to the entire region.

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RECONCILING ISRAEL’S CORE REQUIREMENTS FOR PEACE WITH THE ARAB PEACE INITIATIVE

**The changing regional dynamic**

The geopolitical landscape surrounding the reintroduction of the Arab Peace Initiative in 2007 at the Arab League Summit in Riyadh was entirely different from the atmosphere when it was adopted in 2002 at the League’s Beirut meeting. The convergence of developments in the Middle East—the wake of the Iraq war and efforts to withdraw US troops, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and heightened concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear ambitions and its capability to disrupt the region’s stability using its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah—have made it as critical as ever for Israel to achieve comprehensive peace and security with its neighbors.

In 2002, there was no war in Iraq, the second Intifada was raging,[[1]](#footnote-1) and Iran’s ambitions to become the region’s hegemon armed with nuclear weapons were far more muted. There was no major Sunni-Shiite clash threatening to destabilize the entire region, extreme Muslim radicalism was less developed and ardent, and the global Jihadi movement was markedly less ambitious. The situation since has dramatically worsened. To stem the tide of these ominous trends, peace with Israel has now become urgent, especially in the eyes of Sunni Arab moderates. Many are looking for ways to work with Israel, coalesce against Iran, and stifle the growth of extremism, which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict feeds into.

The election of President Barack Obama and his promise of global engagement from the U.S. was seen by many as a triumph for diplomacy and a repudiation of the unilateralism of the Bush era, particularly when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But President Obama’s hopeful rhetoric to achieve Middle East peace was met by the election of a center-right government in Israel led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and a fragmentation of the Palestinian polity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Arab Peace Initiative provides a historic opportunity to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace between Israel and all Arab states. This is particularly critical as the Initiative offers, in the words of former Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher, “Peace not only with Israel’s neighbors but all Arab states, none excluded, which has always been a key Israeli demand.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Even more, the Initiative was adopted by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in April 2002, extending the Initiative to represent the potential for peace between Israel and 57 Islamic nations across the globe. On the basis of the document and its intent, the Initiative can be reconciled with Israel’s four core requirements for making peace: 1) ensuring Israel’s national security and territorial integrity; 2) sustaining Israel’s Jewish national identity; 3) securing the unity of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital while accommodating the Palestinian demands to establish their own capital in East Jerusalem; and 4) establishing normal relations with the Arab world.

A successful breakthrough will depend on the ability of Arab and Israeli leaders to disabuse their respective communities of the notion that either side can have it all. Leaders from both sides need to cultivate a national mindset conducive to a peace agreement that will likely fall short of what the general public on either side has been led to believe is possible. Neither Israel nor the Arab states can claim to seek a real peace if they do not show the flexibility necessary to resolve some of the most intractable issues separating them. It is in this context that the Arab Peace Initiative has become so critical. The impetus to do so must lie in the mutual recognition that they now have a unique opportunity to capitalize on the changing regional and geopolitical developments and thus can achieve peace with normal relations, which has eluded them since 1948.

**The Arab Peace Initiative in principle**

It is important to note that the preamble of the Initiative contains elements that were used in past negotiations between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan, specifically, principles enunciated in UN Security Council Resolution 242.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similar negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in the early 1990s led to the Oslo Accords, which collapsed when Prime Minister Ehud Barak and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat failed to reach an agreement on the final status issues at Camp David in the summer of 2000. Israel and Syria also engaged with each other on the same “land-for-peace” basis in 1999, 2000, and again indirectly in 2008 with Turkish mediation; however, in the end they too were unable to reach agreement.

The most compelling argument for the Arab Peace Initiative, however, is not that it addresses new issues or involves solutions divergent from those agreed upon in previous frameworks. The difference between the Initiative and Oslo, Camp David, the Clinton Parameters, or the Quartet is that it has taken those issues previously discussed and included all 22 Arab states in the process, ensuring the result of reaching an agreement would include a comprehensive, regional peace. From this brief summary, it is possible to surmise that, given the increasing role of the Arab League to bolster the Palestinian Authority’s position in negotiations and support various concessions that the Palestinian must make to reach an agreement, the Arab Peace Initiative can certainly form the basis for advancing and concluding a comprehensive peace.

The Initiative begins with the following statement agreed upon by the Arab League in 2002 in Beirut:

*The Council of the League of Arab States at the Summit Level, at its 14th Ordinary Session, reaffirming the resolution taken in June 1996 at the Cairo Extra-Ordinary Arab summit that a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the strategic option of the Arab countries, to be achieved in accordance with international legality, and which would require a comparable commitment on the part of the Israeli government.*

*[The Initiative calls] for full Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab territories occupied since June 1967, in implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, reaffirmed by the Madrid Conference of 1991 and the land-for-peace principle, and Israel’s acceptance of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, in return for the establishment of normal relations in the context of a comprehensive peace with Israel.*

The document then goes on to establish the critical principle that peace is the strategic option to be achieved through negotiations, while taking into account Israel’s national security concerns. The following clause in the Initiative stating that no military solution exists is of paramount importance:

*Emanating from the conviction of the Arab countries that a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties, the council:*

*1. Requests Israel to reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well.*

Finally, to signify the dramatic shift in attitude of the Arab states that the Arab Peace Initiative represents, one has to recall the Arab League resolution adopted at the League’s Khartoum conference in September 1967, known for its infamous three No’s:[[4]](#footnote-4)

*The Arab Heads of State have agreed to unite their political efforts at the international and diplomatic level to eliminate the effects of the aggression and to ensure the withdrawal of the aggressive Israeli forces from the Arab lands which have been occupied since the aggression of June 5 [1967]. This will be done within the framework of the main principles by which the Arab States abide, namely, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it, and insistence on the rights of the Palestinian people in their own country.*

The fact that the Arab Peace Initiative, the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement in 1979, and the Israeli-Jordanian peace that was concluded in 1994, came years after the Khartoum conference, suggests that the Arab states have reached the point of no return by accepting Israel’s existence as an irrevocable fact in the midst of the Arab world.

**Israel’s reservations**

Some Israeli officials have expressed that the Initiative is not balanced because it makes no demands on the Palestinians.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, in crafting the text, the authors certainly were conscious that for such a framework to lead to a comprehensive peace, extensive negotiations would be required. Whatever concessions and expectations Israel has from the Palestinians will come as the result of negotiations. It should be noted that Israel’s principle demand, throughout the history of its contact with the Palestinians—at least since 1988 to the present—has been an end to violence as a precondition to serious negotiations. At various times in the past, Israel even negotiated with the Palestinians and with Syria while violence was raging. Israel should not be expected to negotiate under the gun, but given the volatility on the ground, Israel may choose—as the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin famously said—to “fight terrorism as if there is no peace process; pursue peace as if there is no terrorism.”

A careful strategy must now be adopted to ensure that the progress in negotiations is greater than the damage or disruptions caused by violence. Israel and the moderate Palestinians should take confidence-building measures for a specific period of time to begin a process of reconciliation, which is more critical today than at any time in the past, before they can resume negotiations with the intent of reaching an agreement.

The split between Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, and the Fatah-led West Bank has already changed the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009 dealt Hamas and the Gazan citizens a powerful blow. Nevertheless, even though Gaza has remained under a severe international economic blockade imposed by both Israel and Egypt, and reconciliation talks between the Fatah and Hamas have not built a unified Palestinian consensus, it is clear that Hamas as a political force can no longer be ignored. In this regard, the Arab Peace Initiative could be highly useful in encouraging Hamas to accept its principles as a way of becoming part of the Arab fold, without having to directly abandon its charter that called for the destruction of Israel, as the PLO did only in the wake of the Oslo accords.

The Israeli government should accept the Initiative not only because it has an obligation to its people to explore any possibility to peacefully end the Arab-Israeli conflict, but because of the continuing and dangerously escalating regional turmoil. The document offers a renewed window of opportunity for Israel to adopt the Initiative in principle, as long as it remains consistent with its legitimate requirements for achieving peace with security. If Israel acts in this way, the international community and the Arab states in particular will be far more receptive to its national security concerns. The Netanyahu government has not yet embraced the Arab Peace Initiative; however, he did acknowledge it publicly in 2009 at a reception at the home of the Egyptian ambassador in Israel, [noting](http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechegypt230709.aspx) that Israel “valued... efforts of Arab states to advance peace initiatives... And if these offers are not final offers, then I believe that this spirit can help create an atmosphere in which a comprehensive peace is possible.”

At a May30, 2016press conference Netanyahu, reaffirmed his position by [stating](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-netanyahu-idUSKCN0YL1WQ) that “The Arab peace initiative includes positive elements that can help revive constructive negotiations with the Palestinians… We are willing to negotiate with the Arab states revisions to that initiative so that it reflects the dramatic changes in the region since 2002 but maintains the agreed goal of two states for two peoples.”

Netanyahu remains adamant about three critical points: he rejects in principle the right of return, he is opposed to a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, and he will not accept a complete withdrawal to the 1967 borders. Still, the Initiative provides the framework for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace to be backed by the US and incorporated into any US-EU brokered deal between Israel and the Arab states. Indeed, conditions on the ground have dramatically changed since 2007, and at the present, many other Israeli leaders in and outside the government came out in support of the API.

In a speech at Bar-Ilan University in September 2015, the leader of the Yesh Atid party, Yair Lapid, [stated](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.676779) “Convening a regional conference as the opening shot for a comprehensive regional arrangement is the most effective tactical and political tool for getting this process going. The framework of the discussions at this conference must be the Saudi-Arab initiative of 2002.”

On many occasions, former President Peres, who was always an ardent supporter of the Initiative, rearticulated his position, [stating](http://www.haaretz.com/news/peres-arab-peace-plan-a-serious-opening-for-real-progress-1.285452) “We cannot change the past. However, we can shape our future. This seems more feasible today in light of the Saudi proposal which evolved into an Arab peace initiative. The initiative’s portrayal of our region’s future provides hope to the people and inspires confidence in the nations.”

In a speech at the American Jewish Committee’s Global Forum on June 7, 2016, opposition leader Yitzhak Herzog [reaffirmed](http://www.timesofisrael.com/herzog-us-should-lead-new-regional-peace-effort/) the importance of the API: “While many previous attempts have failed, the paradigm is now changing in the region and the opportunity [for regional peace talks] looks increasingly possible. These Arab countries want to see Israel and the Palestinians come to a resolution as part of their own agenda, and have a direct incentive to build confidence and push the Palestinians towards compromise based on the spirit and elements of the Arab peace initiative.”

Some Israeli officials have argued that the Initiative reads and sounds like a diktat. Although the document may be interpreted in different ways, it is necessary to view it as articulating a framework for peace rather than a set of non-negotiable demands, precisely because not a single Arab state expects Israel to embrace it as-is. The preamble of the document evokes not only the non-binding UNGA Resolution 194, but also UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338. The latter two have been accepted by Israel, even using them in previous negotiations with Egypt and Jordan. Israel needs to focus on the positive aspects of the Initiative, as seems to be the case at this juncture rather than rejecting it as a whole. If Israel looked at it from this perspective, the following phrases from the Initiative neither sound nor read as a diktat:

*Peace is the strategic option of the Arab countries…*

*Request Israel to consider its policies…*

*Achieving a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon…*

*Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended…*

*Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.*

Reading the Initiative in this perspective, one could ask, what should Israel expect from the Arab states in addition to achieving its four fundamental requirements? The present document is a far cry from the Khartoum resolution, and is different from anything else that has collectively emerged from the Arab states—it represents a transformation of the Arab position. This is why the way in which one interprets the Initiative is so critical. How Israel’s leaders choose to read it will be based on their ultimate intentions. The Initiative is not structured on an all-or-nothing basis, and as long as the Israelis genuinely seek peace, they should focus—and even capitalize—on the broader scope of the document. The Initiative touches on each of Israel’s core requirements, and although the language may appear firm, it leaves significant room for negotiation. If Israel’s leadership sees this, how should it go about reconciling their five fundamental requirements with the Initiative?

**1 - Ensuring Israel’s national security**

Although the Arab Peace Initiative calls for withdrawal from all the post-1967 territories, in previous negotiations between Israel and Jordan and between Israel and the Palestinians, many creative ideas were floated, suggesting that some give-and-take is possible for reaching an agreement. The Initiative states:

*I- Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.*

Israel relates any and all discussions of territorial withdrawal to its primary concern of national security. For Israel, accepting the Initiative as stated would mean returning 100 percent of the territories captured in 1967, which from their perspective, is simply unacceptable. The Arab states’ position in this regard is that, in other words, it is not for Israel to decide unilaterally the extent of the withdrawal; rather, any adjustment of the 1967 borders will have to be negotiated and agreed upon by both parties.

Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid Al-Hussein, Jordan’s former ambassador to the UN, has noted that previous negotiations between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan were based on the same land-for-peace principle, with the 1967 line constituting the base line. As the negotiations unfold, both sides will have to show flexibility. To create secure borders based on UNSC Resolution 242, while taking into account facts on the ground (including a chain of settlements Israel will insist on incorporating into Israel proper), Israel will have to swap land equitable in size and quality in areas contiguous to the Palestinian territories, which the Arab Foreign Ministers agreed upon two years ago in a meeting in Washington DC with Secretary of State John Kerry.

Although many Israelis—and even more supporters of Israel in the United States and elsewhere—still equate these territories with national security, history has proved this linkage to be misleading. Decades of occupation have failed to enhance Israel’s security and have actually undermined it. The popular claim that the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip turned these territories into new staging grounds for violence against Israel tends not to account for the unsystematic process in which the withdrawals unfolded. Israel expected positive reinforcement and encouragement from the Palestinians and the global community for having initiated the Gaza withdrawal, which never occurred in the sustained manner Israel had hoped. The withdrawals were neither conceptualized nor executed in a method that could foster improved relations.

In addition, the withdrawal from both territories was involuntary. Southern Lebanon had become a killing field for Israelis and stirred intense public debate (more than 1,000 Israeli soldiers died during Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000). Meanwhile, the pullout from Gaza was prompted by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s recognition that Israel was increasingly facing a demographic threat. Relinquishing Gaza was a tactic to ensure that Jews would remain the majority of the public under the authority of the Israeli government. However, the failure of the Sharon government to negotiate the withdrawal and transfer authority to President Mahmoud Abbas in advance, and the failure of Abbas to seize the opportunity and consolidate his power in the evacuated territory, led to disastrous consequences.

What is critical to understand for any framework is that the Arab states simply will not make peace without recovering most of the territories. In the end, Israelis must choose between peace and territory; they cannot have it both ways. But the Arab states, especially the Palestinian Authority, with which Israel has territorial disputes, must also remain open-minded. The 1967 lines cannot be fully restored; therefore, some give and take must occur to achieve what UN Security Council Resolution 242 calls for on both sides:

*…To live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from the threat or acts of force.*

The Arab states must not dismiss Israel’s national security concerns as a means to simply justify its expansion under the guise of secure borders. Although acquiring more land is and remains a part of Israel’s calculus, the history of the Jews has been full of persecution, expulsion, segregation, and tragedy. Israel today is threatened daily by non-state Islamic radicals such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, and most Israelis believe that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons (irrespective of the Iran deal) poses an existential threat to their country. As such, no Israeli government can take that lightly. Nonetheless, Israel must also understand, as Henry Kissinger once observed, that the attainment of absolute security by one side renders the other side absolutely insecure.

Israel is viewed as a regional superpower with a military capacity that no single Arab state or combination of states could overwhelm in the foreseeable future, lest they do so at their own peril. Thus, while Israel has legitimate national security concerns, it must not use national security as a pretext for acquiring more Arab land or maintaining the precarious status quo. The Israeli Supreme Court has on more than one occasion ordered the government to reroute sections of the barrier being constructed between Israel proper and the West Bank, particularly in the proximity of the Palestinian villages of Bil’in, Azoun, Na’alin, and the Alfei Menashe region, where it caused undue hardship to the Palestinian communities. In the Court’s opinion, there were no compelling national security concerns that justified the Israeli actions. The same is applicable to many settlements in the West Bank, which were built under the umbrella of national security, but are in fact political settlements that have absolutely no impact on Israel’s real security.

There are many critical measures that would ensure Israel’s national security concerns, and the contention that secure borders could alleviate these concerns is baseless. In the age of rockets and precision missile technology, territorial depth can no longer guarantee Israel’s security, as Hamas has been able to rain thousands of rockets on Israel, some of which have reached Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The ‘knife Intifada’ also reveals the absurdity of the argument that borders, any border, can provide air tight security. It is the occupation and the continuing expansion of the settlements that are behind these violent outbursts, and as long as the occupation persists, Israel will not know a day of rest. Thus, all security measures, however coercive, elaborate, and sophisticated, *cannot guarantee* Israel’s national security. That said, there are several security measures that Israel can take that the Palestinians and the Arab states largely accept:

**Maintaining full security cooperation with the Palestinians**:

Any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians would require substantial and comprehensive security collaboration between Israel and the Palestinian Authority that covers all security matters. For the past eight years, both sides’ internal security forces have been collaborating with one another, which has proven to be extremely effective even though it has not prevented repeated violent acts against Israeli interests and individuals.

**Preserving credible deterrence**:

Israel’s military prowess has and will continue to deter any major offensive against Israel, as the consequences of such attacks are preordained and would result in the utter devastation of any aggressor. This explains why since the crushing defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan during the 1967 Six Day War, no Arab state or sworn enemy such as Iran has dared to challenge Israel militarily. The war between Israel and Hezbollah (2006) and the three mini wars between Israel and Hamas (in 2008-9, 2012, and 2014) demonstrated time and again that while these groups can harass Israel, they will never be in a position to seriously threaten its existence.

**Maintaining nuclear capability**:

Israel’s nuclear weapons provide Israel with the ultimate weapon that not even another nuclear power, including Iran, should it eventually acquire such weapons, would dare to challenge. A nuclear deterrence has prevented not only nuclear confrontations but also conventional wars, as shown in the case of India and Pakistan and throughout the Cold War. Moreover, Israel has and continues to maintain second strike capability that no enemy can ignore, as it will invite a devastating counter attack.

**A non-aggression treaty**:

As a part of any peace agreement, Israel can demand a non-aggression treaty with all the Arab states while developing strong ties on all levels, including trade, technology, finance, and many other fields, where full collaboration and normalization of relations between the two sides can develop vested interests that neither would want to undermine.

**A regional security umbrella**:

Once a peace agreement is achieved and all security measures are in place, the United States could offer a security umbrella along the lines of what former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [proposed](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/23/world/asia/23diplo.html) in June 2009, under which all nations in the region who are at peace with Israel (and with each other) could belong, to deter outside adversaries.

**Maintaining residual forces in the Jordan valley**:

Under any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel would be able to keep—for a specified, agreed-upon period of time—residual forces along the Jordan River Valley to prevent the smuggling of weapons and infiltration of terrorists into Israel. Considerable negotiations have taken place in the past in connection with this issue, and the Palestinians seem to be willing to accept it if such Israeli forces are part and parcel of International Peacekeeping Forces led by the United States. The European Union and some Arab League states such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt should also participate.

The stationing of such a multinational force must be sanctioned by the UNSC; the mandate, length of stay, composition of forces, and equipment must all be authorized by the UNSC, where the United States enjoys veto power and as such can prevent any unilateral modification of forces and/or the mandate without the explicit authorization of the UNSC.

**A Demilitarized Palestinian state:**

The newly-established Palestinian state should be demilitarized, with its security assured by the US. Regardless of their military prowess, the Palestinians will never be in a position to challenge Israel militarily, nor will they be threatened as long as they are at peace with their neighbors. Instead of wasting hundreds of millions of dollars on military hardware, future Palestinian governments should invest in economic development, education, health care, and infrastructure, while maintaining strong economic relations with Israel from which both sides can greatly benefit.

**A peace agreement in the context of the Arab Peace Initiative:**

Finally, a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace provides Israel the ultimate national security guarantees. Indeed, no other security measures, however extensive and sophisticated, can substitute for peace. During the past few decades, it has been demonstrated that so-called secure borders cannot and will not be secure even with the most formidable military. In December 2012, Gabi Ashkenazi, the former Chief of Staff of the Israeli army, [reconfirmed](http://www.timesofisrael.com/former-idf-chief-says-israel-should-withdraw-from-west-bank-unilaterally/) the sentiments of many of his colleagues when he said: “Israel must recognize the limits of its power and cooperate with forces that support Israeli interests.” This was also aptly expressed by another top Israeli military commander, Shaul Arieli, who [said](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20130220/ml-israel-the-gatekeepers/), “We believe that peace will provide better security than anything else.” Moreover, most Israelis believe that the status quo cannot be sustained and that only peace based on a two-state solution will provide Israel with the security it needs while maintaining its national identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

To be sure, the Palestinians and Arab States must accept that Israel has legitimate security concerns, and while Israel may occasionally hype up these concerns, they must be addressed in a constructive way to ensure the sustainability of any peace agreement.

**2 - Maintaining the Jewish national identity of Israel:**

The provision in the Arab Peace Initiative that addresses the Palestinian refugee problem is viewed by Israel, both literally and figuratively, as a threat to its very existence as a Jewish state. The clause reads as follows:

*II- Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194.*

Sadly, the Arab states and the Palestinian leadership have perpetuated the demand of the “right of return,” knowing, at least since the mid-1980s, that Israel cannot accept any sizeable number of Palestinian refugees into Israel proper and still be able to sustain the Jewish national identity of its state. This explains why Israel will not accept UNGA Resolution 194, which contains the “right of return” of the Palestinian refugees to their former property in Israel. Though the API stipulates “achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem,” it is critical to note that UNSC Resolution 242, which Israel and the Palestinians accepted, supersedes 194, which is, unlike UNSC resolutions, non-binding.

The Arab states’ formal position on the right of return, as articulated in the Arab Peace Initiative, must be used as a framework for creating a solution to the refugee problem, rather than a call for an unfeasible policy. Various Palestinian and Arab officials have acknowledged during previous peace negotiations that realistically Israel cannot accept the right of return, and that the solution lies in the resettlement and/or compensation of the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians themselves also recognize that insisting on repatriation would bring any peace negotiation to a quick halt. What the Palestinians and other Arab states want is for Israel to *acknowledge* that there is a refugee problem, assume some responsibility, and demonstrate a willingness to be part of the solution, which the Olmert government began to publicly articulate near the end of its tenure in 2007 and 2008. Israel is reluctant to acknowledge the right of return even in principle, because it fears that even implicit recognition could be used in the future to revive the Palestinian refugee problem, something that Israel insists on permanently finalizing with absolutely no recourse at any time in the future.

In any case, accepting a sizeable number of Palestinian refugees—in the tens of thousands—is not part of the solution. The Lebanese government also strongly opposes any resettlement of the nearly 400,000 Palestinian refugees presently residing in their country. As former Lebanese ambassador to the US Farid Abboud has explained,[[6]](#footnote-6) “The permanent settlement of the refugees in Lebanon will dramatically shift the demographic makeup of the Lebanese population, with ominous implications for the stability of the state”, although by now the Muslim population in Lebanon is already larger than the Christians in Lebanon’s confessional political system.

It must also be noted that most of the previously owned Palestinian land in Israel has changed so drastically under Israeli control that it is no longer recognizable to the Palestinians, and in some cases not even desirable. Instances of visits by Palestinian refugees to their former land have been documented where they were unable to recognize or identify their old properties, and thus cut their visits short. These refugees are entitled to land, compensation, and rehabilitation so that they can afford to rebuild their lives, but this ultimately must take place in the Palestinian state to be established in Gaza and the West Bank.

Although the issue of the right of return should ideally be addressed in public to prepare the Arab street for the necessary compromises, public discourse on this sensitive issue needs to start as it is a part of the reconciliation process that would eventually lead to a permanent peace agreement. This will avoid a repetition of the breakdown that occurred during the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Camp David in 2000, where the late leader of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, refused to sign on the dotted line at the eleventh hour by raising the issue of the right of return, effectively ending any chance for an agreement. The lesson from this unhappy episode has not been lost: no one knows better than the Arab states—especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, which feel directly threatened by the ongoing regional developments—that for Israel, the right of return is a nonstarter and the passage of time will make Israel’s position even harder, as the concerns over the Jewish identity of the state have become increasingly acute.

In subsequent negotiations at Taba, Egypt, in January 2001, no position papers were exchanged concerning the refugee problem, which was seen as a good sign for open-ended talks. Both sides [stated](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/taba.pdf) that a comprehensive and just solution to the issue of the Palestinian refugees is central to “a lasting and morally scrupulous peace.” Both sides also agreed to adopt the principles and references that could facilitate the adoption of an agreement. In addition, the two parties suggested that, as a basis, they should agree that a just settlement to the refugee problem be in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242. The resolution called for “Achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.” This phrase is often interpreted to mean a just solution of the refugees through resettlement and or compensation.

For the Arab states, and even more for the Palestinians, giving up the right of return is tantamount to tossing away their trump card. They simply will not show their hand before Israel indicates its willingness to accept the Arab Peace Initiative in principle. However, to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement, both sides will have to make many painful concessions. Accommodating Israel on the right of return is one of them. In fact, the most recent negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority under the auspices of the US in 2013-2014 concerning the Palestinian refugees were entirely based on the proposition that the solution must be found through resettlement and compensation. In previous negotiations, both parties agreed that 20,000 to 25,000 Palestinian refugees could return to Israel in increments of 5,000 a year under the provision of family reunification.

Regardless of how sensitive this issue may be for the Palestinians, the existence of Israel as the last refuge for the Jewish people, in the view of an overwhelming majority of Israelis, rests entirely on securing a sustainable Jewish majority within the state. Influential Palestinian scholar and activist Sari Nusseibah, former president of Al-Quds University, has recognized this in statements. In January of 2008, Jordan’s Foreign Minister at the time, Dr. Salaheddin Al-Bashir, publicly raised the issue regarding the viability of Israel’s requirement for a sustainable Jewish majority. He argued that given the birth rate of Palestinians versus Israelis—which is roughly 4 to 3—even without the influx of Palestinian refugees, the Palestinian citizens of Israel would become a majority within three or four generations. Israelis have made clear their commitment to maintaining the Jewish identity of the state. Regardless of what happens 100 years from today, the sooner the Arab states—and especially the Palestinians—accept this principle Israeli requirement, the more flexible Israel will be on many other conflicting issues, including the future of Jerusalem.

It should be noted that former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s recognition that the continued occupation of Palestinian territories is not sustainable is precisely because of the demographic threat. In 2005 Ehud Olmert, who was then serving as Deputy Prime Minister under Ariel Sharon, responded to the question of why it took this long for Likud (before the Kadima party was formed) to recognize the demographic threat. His response: “Well, it is better to recognize it now than never.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The Palestinian demand for the “right of return” must be addressed justly in part through resettlement in the future Palestinian state, compensation, and by other humanitarian efforts. In this regard, the US and the EU along with some of the Arab oil-rich states should prepare for this eventuality and raise the $15-20 billion necessary for the express purpose of resettling and/or compensating the refugees. This should be considered in light of the overall need to provide both Israel and the Palestinians with compelling incentives to resolve the refugee problem, among other difficult issues.

**3- Maintaining the unity of Jerusalem**

Regarding the future of Jerusalem, the Arab Peace Initiative states:

*III- The acceptance of the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied since June 4, 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.*

Although a majority of Israelis accept that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can end only by establishing a Palestinian state in Gaza and in most of the West Bank, no consensus has been formed among them about the future of Jerusalem and whether or not East Jerusalem should become the capital of the Palestinian state. During the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Camp David in the summer of 2000, President Clinton and Prime Minister Ehud Barak conceded that the Arab part of East Jerusalem should be the capital of the Palestinian state, as did former Prime Minister Olmert during the peace talks in 2013-2014. Though successive Israeli governments have struggled with the issue of Jerusalem, the future of the city may not be as insurmountable as it may seem.

The Jewish affinity for Jerusalem extends over millennia and represents the embodiment of Jewish existence and freedom. Judaism’s holiest shrine, the Western Wall (the remnant of the Second Temple), is at the heart of Jerusalem’s Old City. Prior to 1967, the Western Wall was inaccessible to Israelis as it was on the Jordanian side of the divided city between Israel’s independence in 1948 and the Six Day War in June 1967. The reunification of West Jerusalem with the Old City is celebrated as an unprecedented moment in the history of the young state. Today, no Israeli government could survive politically should it publicly *contemplate* ***physically*** *dividing the city*.

For the Arabs, Jerusalem is equally sacred; two of the holiest Muslim shrines, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are also in the Old City, and many Muslim educational institutions are in East Jerusalem. At the Taba negotiations, both sides accepted the principle of control over their own respective holy sites. According to this principle, Israel’s sovereignty over the Western Wall would be recognized, yet a dispute remained over the delineation of the area covered by the Western Wall. There are several other issues over which the two sides continue to disagree, but there was a shred of sentiment that an amicable solution would eventually be found.

Since more than 250,000 Palestinians live in East Jerusalem, and no artificial separation or wall can be erected that can effectively isolate the interdispersed Arab and Jewish communities from each other, both sides favored maintaining the unity of the city. The Israelis suggested the establishment of an open city whose geographical scope encompasses the Old City of Jerusalem plus the area defined as the Holy Basin. Conversely, while the Palestinian side was also in favor of an open city, they insisted that continuity and contiguity be preserved. The Palestinians emphasized that an open city would only be acceptable if its geographical scope encompasses the full municipal borders of both East and West Jerusalem. While both sides have held fast to their positions, many feel that the reality on the ground will ultimately fashion a mutually accepted formula.

The solution to Jerusalem therefore requires the *institutionalization of the realities on the ground*: Jewish neighborhoods should be under Jewish sovereignty, Palestinian neighborhoods under Palestinian sovereignty, and the holy shrines should be administered in an independent manner by the appropriate faiths. In this way, rather than creating contiguous land masses divided by a network of walls and tunnels—an impossible proposition—the city would represent the quintessential Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and coexistence. In an interview with [*Haaretz*](http://www.haaretz.com/barak-to-haaretz-israel-ready-to-cede-parts-of-jerusalem-in-peace-deal-1.311356), Ehud Barak, who was the Israeli Defense Minister and subsequently became Prime Minister, let it be known that Israel has plans for dividing Jerusalem. “West Jerusalem and 12 Jewish neighborhoods [east of the city] that are home to 200,000 [Israeli] residents will be ours. The Arab neighborhoods in which close to a quarter million Palestinian live will be theirs. There will be a special regime in place along with agreed upon arrangements in the Old City, the Mount of Olives and the City of David.”

Inevitably, however, there will be some Israelis who will continue to live in areas that would fall under Palestinian control and some Palestinians will continue to reside in Israeli-controlled neighborhoods. By their own choice, these Israelis and Palestinians would become permanent residents in their current places of residence but citizens of their respective countries where they can exercise their political rights to vote and be elected.

Creating such a formula where the city will be politically – rather than physically – divided demands one central component: strong and sound internal security cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. As long as both sides agree on security arrangements – for example, what happens if a crime is committed in one sovereign area and the criminal flees to the other? –joint efforts to administer necessary municipal services would be simple to arrange should Israel's chief concern, security, be effectively addressed. Indeed, two municipalities will exist—one governs the Israeli-controlled area, while the other controls the Palestinian zone. A joint commission will be created to address issues of common concerns and do so in a spirit of cooperation.

To be sure, many Israelis and Palestinians envision Jerusalem becoming a microcosm of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence; thus, once other difficult issues are resolved, a solution to the future of Jerusalem may not be as elusive as some skeptics argue. Although no agreement has been reached regarding the political line that would separate East from West Jerusalem, it is important to note that during these negotiations at Taba, the Israeli side accepted that the City of Jerusalem be the capital of the two states: Yerushalaim, capital of Israel, and Al-Quds, capital of the state of Palestine.

Finally, it should be emphatically noted that there will be no Israeli-Palestinian peace unless Jerusalem becomes the capital of the two states. On this sensitive issue, the whole Arab world is in unison.

**4 – The Israeli settlements**

The issue of building and expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank is one of the major obstacles to peace, as it is connected to both final borders and the fate of the Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The Israelis and Palestinians view the settlements enterprise from a completely different perspective that defines their strategic objectives and is becoming increasingly irreconcilable every time Israel announces the building of new housing units. As the Palestinians see it, if the current negotiations are in fact aimed at reaching a peace accord based on a two-state solution, the continued settlement activity and their very existence throughout the West Bank stand in total contradiction to that objective. Consequently, this will inevitably deprive them of establishing a state of their own on the same territory.

Since the Oslo signing of the Declaration of Principles in September 1993, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank has grown more than nearly seven fold, from [110,066](http://peacenow.org.il/eng/OsloSummary) to over 700,000 [today](http://www.btselem.org/settlements/statistics), including in East Jerusalem, where thousands of new housing units are continuously being built. Physically, settlement construction confiscates land bit by painstaking bit and sends a clear message: Israel does not accept the Palestinians’ right to establish an independent state of their own.

The Palestinians point to the relentless efforts of successive Israeli (especially right-wing) governments to expand the settlements by following the mantra of the late extreme rightist Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in the mid- to late-1980s, who fiercely promoted the idea that Israel should settle one million Jews in the West Bank, creating an irreversible fact that no one can change.

Prime Minister Netanyahu remains adamant about Israel’s right to maintain a considerable presence in the West Bank, justified from his perspective by a number of unadulterated facts. First, Netanyahu insists that the Jews have a historical affinity to the entire “land of Israel” as envisioned by the Zionist movement, and unlike his predecessors, Ehud Olmert, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Barak, ideologically he does not view the West Bank as an occupied territory (which he refers to by its Hebrew name, Judea and Samaria). Thus, he maintains that the West Bank should not be off-limits to Jewish inhabitants.

Second, Netanyahu and many Israelis with strong religious convictions uphold the view that the land has been bequeathed to the Jews, who have a biblical right to live in it. Zealous settlers deeply believe they are pursuing God’s mission and that the Almighty is testing their resolve, tenacity, and willingness to make any sacrifice before He grants them the Promised Land in perpetuity. Religiously committed Israelis need no evidence to justify their convictions, as they place the building and expansion of settlements as the singular historic opportunity that will restore Jewish birthright to their homeland.

Third, Netanyahu has consistently linked the settlements to Israel’s national security, which an increasing number of Israelis accept at face value. He has repeatedly claimed that Israel cannot accept “indefensible borders” based on the 1967 lines and highlights that Israel would be only nine miles wide if it were to relinquish much of its presence in the West Bank. Fourth, the more practical motivation behind the settlements, however, is the desire of many Israelis, with the encouragement of the government, to live in affordable and spacious housing in a clean environment with easy access to urban centers. To attract more settlers, successive governments have and continue to subsidize housing, schools, security, and many other services.

As a consequence, these four factors led to the expansion of the settlements and the rise of the settlement movement as a formidable political force fully entrenched in the body politic of the country. Over time it has acquired a near de facto veto power over policies affecting the future disposition of the West Bank.

The settler movement is not a small group of criminals and vandals who are out to burn or daub inflammatory graffiti on the walls of Palestinian mosques or vandalize Israeli military bases, albeit many such incidents have occurred. This is a movement on which successive coalition governments came to rely on to engender wide political support. That said, continued settlement construction will increase the divide between Israelis who seek an end to the conflict with the Palestinians, and hard-core ideologues like Netanyahu, who deny the evidence that the settlements burden ordinary Israelis that must pay for it through a high cost of living and lack of affordable housing.

It is true that the uprooting of a significant number of settlers will be the most divisive issue that Israel will face. But then, no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is possible without evacuating many of the 80 settlements scattered across the West Bank inhabited by more than 540,000 settlers. These settlers can be resettled in the three blocks of settlements along the 1967 border (consisting of 43 settlements in which more than 300,000 settlers reside), which will, by agreement with the Palestinians, likely become part of Israel proper in an equitable land swap.

To resolve the issue of settlements, Israel must understand that it cannot continue to build new and expand current settlements and still claim that it is seeking a two state solution. A viable Palestinian state and the settlement enterprise are contradictory in principle. That said, the settlements have also created certain facts on the ground that the Palestinians must take into full consideration. No Israeli government, regardless of its political leaning, will evacuate any settlement along the 1967 borders, nor any of the settlements in East Jerusalem. That said, there are several other settlements, including Ariel, which is located 12 kilometers inside the West Bank, for which a creative solution will eventually be found. One must not however rule out the possibility that some settlements may stay under Palestinian jurisdiction while its residents remain citizens of Israel, just as many Palestinians will continue to reside in Israel, even following the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In the final analysis, both sides must accept the fact that *the interdispersement of the Israeli and Palestinian population is simply inevitable;* the two populations are inextricably linked and only a peace of reconciliation based on a two state solution, and good and trusting neighborly relations will ultimately serve the national aspiration of both peoples.

**5- Normalizing relations with the Arab states**

The Arab Peace Initiative (API) is clear on normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab states and ending once and for all violence in any form. One of the central pillars of the API is the recognition that an Israeli-Palestinian peace must be in the context of a comprehensive Arab Israeli peace, without which Israel is not likely to make the necessary concessions to the Palestinians without full Arab support of all peace provisions. In this regard, the language in the Arab Peace Initiative is clear:

*I- Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region.*

*II- Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.*

Although a comprehensive peace with the Arab states and a total cessation of hostilities is a prerequisite in reaching an agreement with the Palestinians, Israel seeks to translate the peace with the Arab states into a people-to-people peace, in which ordinary Arabs and Israelis develop a vested interest in the process and are motivated to preserve and protect it.

Israel’s concerns over the exact nature of the peace it is looking for are based on its perception of the political realities within the individual Arab states and the prevailing volatile environment of the Middle East. Israel’s insistence on people-to-people peace emanates from its experiences with Egypt and Jordan. Although their governments greatly value the peace accord with Israel, the peace has generally left ordinary Egyptians and Jordanians cold because the peace agreements have not changed their lives perceptibly for the better.[[8]](#footnote-8) The lack of a vested interest in peace by the general public in these two countries is particularly worrisome for most Israelis because of the existence of constituencies of Islamic radicals in Egypt and Jordan, who oppose peace with Israel as well as its right to exist.

Given the political volatility within several Arab states and the absence—from the Israeli perspective—of any legitimate succession process, the Israelis argue that Israel stands to take a considerable risk in making peace with current Arab leaders should an Islamic radical group assume power in the future; The rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza offer vivid examples of what can transpire. Israel will insist on absolutely normalized relations that should translate to open trade, cultural exchanges, tourism, investments, development projects, etc. These confidence-building measures will take time to create, but the process of reconciliation will have to begin before the negotiations get underway in earnest.

To promote such a positive situation, the Arab states need to demonstrate that they have the capacity and the political will to rein in extremist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, should they refuse to heed the collective Arab will. Thus far, several Arab states have not only refused to impede the activities of such groups, they have actually supported their violent resistance to Israel. More recently, however, many of the Arab states—especially Egypt—have shown strong moderate leadership in the wake of the most recent Gaza incursion in 2014.

Hamas’ repeated violent encounters with Israel have taught Hamas that Israel is here to stay. While Hamas does not publicly acknowledge this basic reality, they recognize that they must find a formula that would allow them to come to terms with Israel’s existence without losing face. This is where the API can play a critical role, as it contains many common denominators over which Israel and Hamas could find common ground.

The Arab Peace Initiative can address Israel’s core requirements and reconcile them with its basic premise. Both sides need to understand that the near-total erosion of trust and the continued existence of Muslim radicals and Israeli right-wing elements—each adamantly resisting any solution that requires major concessions to the other—will make any negotiation extraordinarily difficult. In this context, it ought to be clarified that although no symmetry exists between Muslim radicals and right-wing Israeli elements, there are Israeli groups as committed to “greater Israel” as there are Muslim radical groups committed to eliminating Israel.

From the Israeli perspective, Israeli right-wing extremists may appear different than Islamic radicals because they seemingly rarely resort to armed violence. But domestic extremist groups have used every means in their power to torpedo efforts to exchange territory for peace, even if that peace is genuine. The assassination of late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli should not be dismissed as an aberration. Most recently, radical settler youth have regularly damaged Palestinian property and farmland in the West Bank and attacked Israeli military posts. Whether the conviction of these Israeli extremists emanates from their belief that the Arab states will never make real peace with Israel, or from a belief that the land of Israel has been bequeathed to the Jews by providence, a pullout from the West Bank will undoubtedly have a far greater emotional and psychological impact on the Israeli public than the withdrawal from Gaza precipitated. Israel’s extremist right-wing elements will undoubtedly continue to capitalize on the public’s anxieties and encourage resistance to peacemaking efforts, potentially in violent forms.

**Syria is no longer a key to a comprehensive peace**

Until five years ago, Syria was a key player in any comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unfortunately, since the eruption of the civil war and the potential disintegration of the country, a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace will have to exclude Syria, at least at this juncture. Indeed, no one can predict with certainty what Syria’s fate will be in years to come. Thus, the clause in the API that relates to the Golan Heights (*Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights, to the June 4, 1967 lines as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon*)is not applicable at this point. Israel has already withdrawn from Lebanese territory, and a solution to the conflict with Syria over the Golan Heights will have to await a resolution to Syria’s civil war and the defeat of ISIS. This should not prevent any of the Arab states from forging peace with Israel conditioned upon peace between Israel and the Palestinians. After all, both Egypt and Jordan have established peace with Israel while an Israeli-Palestinian peace remains absent.

**The United States and the EU must reassess their position**

President Obama came into office with great promise, and quickly made efforts to mend America’s relationship with the Arab world. After appointing George Mitchell as special envoy for Middle East peace, addressing the Arab world from Cairo, and reaching out to nations like Syria that had been neglected during the Bush years, expectations were high that he would be able to achieve a breakthrough. While President Obama has spoken favorably of the API, he has not yet turned it into a workable policy with US backing. Advancing the Initiative could add much needed momentum to the process.

It is at this strategic time, when major shifts are occurring in Iran, Iraq, and throughout the region, that the US and the EU should strongly endorse and encourage the Arab League to advance the Arab Peace Initiative—especially given the increasing participation of the Arab states in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Washington must keep in mind that because the Initiative is an Arab—not American or European—document, it has practical advantages. For obvious reasons, the Arab masses will relate much more positively to any peace proposal arising out of the Arab world than they would to the Road Map, Geneva Initiative, or Clinton Parameters, which were received with a high degree of skepticism.

While the Arab Peace Initiative has garnered a certain amount of traction from political and peacekeeping organizations, it must now provide the main framework for peace. The Road Map, while officially introduced in 2003 by the Quartet (the United States, United Nations, European Union, and Russia), failed to produce any progress and by now has become a relic of the past with no bearing on any future peace negotiations. Interestingly enough, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was appointed by the Quartet to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, recently spoke in favor of the API, [stating](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.721337) during a May 2016 conference in London that:

Provided the Israeli government is ready to commit to a discussion around the Arab peace initiative ... it would be possible to have some steps of normalization along the way to give confidence to this process. With the new leadership in the region today that is possible. A lot will depend on the response of the Israeli government to President Sisi’s initiative and to the Arab peace initiative, and to whatever steps the Israelis are ready to take.

Indeed, at this point, it is long overdue that an Arab-Israeli peace treaty is borne of and implemented by the governments and peoples directly affected by the process. The essential difference between the Road Map and the API is the fact that the latter comes from the very states that will bear the responsibility of its implementation or failure. The inclusion of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Qatar, among the US and several members of the EU is *sine qua non* to reaching an Israeli-Palestinian peace, which fits perfectly with the French Initiative.

During [remarks](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160603_03_en.htm) by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at a Ministerial Meeting on the Middle East Peace Process on June 3rd, 2016, she said:

“We are in good relations with all the key actors of the region, starting from the countries that produced what is still the most interesting basis for the peace negotiations which is the Arab Peace Initiative on which even recently we heard some openings, some interesting openings, from the Israeli side.”

The API has given far more breathing room for negotiations with a final status in sight: the creation of a viable Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem and the security of normal relations for a safer Israel. The issues of refugees, settlements, and violence are all dealt with in an authoritative manner, but with an understanding that each step must be worked out between both parties, and step one does not need to be achieved in order for step two to begin.

**Conclusions**

While no Arab state or any other major power should expect Israel to compromise appreciably on its four requirements, Israel too must come to grips with the reality that occupation is not sustainable and must be ended if it truly wants a comprehensive and lasting peace. As Morocco’s former Ambassador to the US Aziz Mekouar has stated: “Israel must choose between continuing occupation and a state of constant belligerency or making peace and raising its flag in 22 Arab capitals…I do not have to tell you the implications of what that could mean to Israel’s future developments and the entire region…it is nothing less than a revolutionary transformation.” Similarly, Jordan’s King Abdullah has stated that “Israel will be able to establish diplomatic relations with 55 Arab and Muslim states, now imagine the implications of this prospect.” But for this to happen, both sides must show a far greater sense of urgency to act. Algerian Ambassador Amine Kherbi has noted that: “This time the Arab states are very serious, Israel must not miss this opportunity by default, simply doing nothing about it, we are all eager to end this debilitating conflict.”

The deteriorating conditions in the region will continue to evolve and are bound to unravel into something even more chaotic and catastrophic if action is not taken. This raises a serious concern that if the conditions on the ground do not change for the better within a few years, neither the Arab states nor Israel will be able to rein them in. In an op-ed in late January 2009 in the [Financial Times](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a11a77b0-e8ef-11dd-a4d0-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz4CWbszpKU) aptly titled “Saudi Arabia’s patience is running out,” Prince Turki Al Faisal wrote, “Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Saudi foreign minister, told the UN Security Council that if there was no just settlement, ‘we will turn our backs on you.’” King Abdullah spoke for the Arab and Muslim world when he said at the Arab summit in Kuwait that although the Arab Peace Initiative was on the table, it would not remain there for long.” It is extremely important that Israel and the US both acknowledge that the cooperation that has been shown from leading Arab states will not be open ended, should this impasse continue on.

It is heartening to note that as late as June 3rd,during the international conference initiated by the French government, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir reiterated the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative when he [stated](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4811659,00.html):

“The Arab initiative from 2002 is the best proposal for the resolution of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. I hope wisdom prevails in Israel. The Arab peace initiative has all the elements for a final settlement. It is on the table and a solid basis for resolving this long- standing dispute. It provides Israel with a lot of incentives and it's incumbent on the Israelis to accept that.”

To be sure, the Arab states simply cannot wait for Israel to act, especially when time is against Israel. They must demonstrate to their own masses that their leaders have made a strategic choice for peace, while simultaneously assuring the Israeli public of their commitment to peace. This would pressure any Israeli government to take some action, beginning with process of reconciliation. The Israelis remember very well late President Anwar Al-Sadat’s offer of peace with Egypt in exchange for the territories captured in 1967. Sadat traveled to Jerusalem before receiving any assurance that Israel would concede even a single inch of territory. He journeyed there because he wanted to demonstrate his commitment to peace. This, more than anything else, persuaded the Israeli public to fully support the Camp David negotiations in 1979, which led to peace between the two nations and Israel’s total withdrawal from Egyptian territories.

The Arab League has played an increasingly helpful role in supporting Mahmoud Abbas’ entrance into indirect and direct negotiations with Israel, but they can do much more. Imagine the effect on Israelis if Saudi Arabia’s King Salman or Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Al-Jubeir traveled to Jerusalem to worship at Islam’s third holiest shrine and while there addressed the Israeli Knesset on the merits of the Initiative. Imagine the shift in Israeli public opinion if the public sees Arab officials other than Jordanians or Egyptians (as designated by the Arab League to pursue the Initiative with Israel) meeting with their Israeli counterparts inside or outside of Israel. Such overtures would not suggest acceptance of the Israeli position or the endorsement of its policies. That is, they would not signify that the Arab world recognizes Israel’s borders or Jerusalem as its capital or the settlements as legitimate. What they would signify is that the Arab world accepts Israel as a state, and is thus willing to translate a declaration of principles into a peace process.

When President Sadat addressed the Israeli Parliament he made absolutely clear the price Israel had to pay for peace. He was cheered and hailed by the vast majority of Israelis as a courageous, visionary, and trustworthy leader. Now, 30 years later, Egypt remains at peace with Israel. The Arab League courageously put forth the Arab Peace Initiative, a document that would have been unthinkable without Sadat’s historic journey. How do the Saudis expect their Initiative to provide the basis for Arab-Israeli peacemaking if they continue to refuse even a handshake with an Israeli official? Although a host of issues separate Israel from the Arab states, Israel’s distrust remains the underlining factor as long as there are radical Arab groups and Islamic states such as Iran that openly avow and actively seek its destruction.

Israel may be accused of paranoia regarding its national security, but how do the Arab states intend to address this paranoia when Israelis measure their national security in existential terms? Efforts to persuade Israel to embrace the Initiative must include concrete and transparent steps that clearly demonstrate a real change in the conflict’s dynamic, as the Israeli public sees it. “Public” is the key word here. The Arab states seeking peace must be unequivocal in their readiness to interact with Israel. They must appeal directly to the Israeli public, which despite its factional nature, agrees on the terms for real peace. If the Arab states do not want this Initiative to meet the fate of other frameworks for peace, then they must change their strategy.

Israel must realize that accepting the Arab Peace Initiative is not a sign of weakness. Israel has never been stronger militarily or economically than it is today. This is precisely why it can accept the Initiative by openly stating its four core principles, which no Israeli government can give away and no serious Arab interlocutor can deny. And it is why, rather than rejecting certain aspects of the Initiative, the Israeli government should make its core requirements abundantly clear and use the document’s positive elements to find a way to negotiate over the other aspects. By stating its four core requirements, Israel would be giving nothing away. In fact, the Arab states will have to concede in many areas to meet those requirements, and if they fail to reach an agreement, Israel can stand its ground.

Any commitment to negotiate a peace agreement based on the general principles of the Arab Peace Initiative is arguably a high-risk game. From the Israeli perspective, the occupied territories are vitally linked to national security, and the Jewish identity of the state is directly related to the kind of solution brought to the Palestinian refugee problem. For these reasons, no one should expect Israel to lay down its arms even after a comprehensive peace agreement has been achieved. Indeed, the geopolitical and security conditions in the Middle East will remain precarious for many years, especially because of Iran’s ambitions to become a regional hegemon armed with nuclear weapons.

This prospect concerns not only Israel, which would require it to maintain its military superiority for the foreseeable future, but also the Sunni Arab states, which are extremely concerned over Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear arsenals in spite of the Iran deal. Moreover, any Israeli government, regardless of its political orientation, must also be able to envision the endgame with some certainty before it can initiate such a commitment, which is why Israel needs to establish at the outset its core requirements, and also why the Arab states must be prepared to deal with them in good faith. All Arab states, not only Egypt and Jordan, must demonstrate that their Initiative is genuine and that they are ready to engage the Israelis.

Israel must take advantage of the ways that the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, and the changing situation in Iran, have substantially altered the political and security landscape in the Middle East, posing a serious challenge to the region’s old geopolitical order. Because of Iran’s regional ambitions and potential threat to both the Sunni Arab states and Israel, it creates the possibility of an alliance of necessity. The Arab Peace Initiative is designed principally to change the region’s new political atmosphere in a central way, by ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. The confluence of events offers Israel and the Arab states a historic opportunity that they cannot afford to miss.

**Appendix 1**

**The Arab Peace Initiative**

The Council of the League of Arab States at the Summit Level, at its 14th Ordinary Session,

•Reaffirms the resolution taken in June 1996 at the Cairo extraordinary Arab summit that a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the strategic option of the Arab countries, to be achieved in accordance with international legality, and which would require a comparable commitment on the part of the Israeli government.

•Having listened to the statement made by his royal highness Prince Abdullah Bin Abdullaziz, the crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in which his highness presented his initiative, calling for full Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab territories occupied since June 1967, in implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, reaffirmed by the Madrid Conference of 1991 and the land for peace principle, and Israel’s acceptance of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, in return for the establishment of normal relations in the context of a comprehensive peace with Israel.

•Emanating from the conviction of the Arab countries that a military solution to the conflict will not achieve peace or provide security for the parties, the council:

1. Requests Israel to reconsider its policies and declare that a just peace is its strategic option as well.

2. Further calls upon Israel to affirm:

a. Full Israeli withdrawal from all the territories occupied since 1967, including the Syrian Golan Heights to the lines of June 4, 1967 as well as the remaining occupied Lebanese territories in the south of Lebanon.

b. Achievement of a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem to be agreed upon in accordance with U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194.

c. The acceptance of the establishment of a Sovereign Independent Palestinian State on the Palestinian territories occupied since the 4th of June 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza strip, with east Jerusalem as its capital.

3. Consequently, the Arab countries affirm the following:

a. Consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and enter into a peace agreement with Israel, and provide security for all the states of the region.

b. Establish normal relations with Israel in the context of this comprehensive peace.

4. Assures the rejection of all forms of Palestinian patriation which conflict with the special circumstances of the Arab host countries.

5. Calls upon the government of Israel and all Israelis to accept this initiative in order to safeguard the prospects for peace and stop the further shedding of blood, enabling the Arab Countries and Israel to live in peace and good neighborliness and provide future generations with security, stability, and prosperity.

6. Invites the international community and all countries and organizations to support this initiative.

7. Requests the chairman of the summit to form a special committee composed of some of its concerned member states and the secretary general of the League of Arab States to pursue the necessary contacts to gain support for this initiative at all levels, particularly from the United Nations, the security council, the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the Muslim States and the European Union.

**Appendix 2**

**United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194**

11 Dec 1948

VOLUMES 1-2: 1947-1974

I. FROM MANDATE TO INDEPENDENCE

13. Creation of a Conciliation Commission, General Assembly

Resolution 194 (III), 11 December 1948:

*The third session of the General Assembly refused to accept any decision altering the Partition Resolution of the preceding year, nor did it decide on ways of its implementation. Instead, it decided to set up a United Nations Conciliation Commission, reiterated the decision on internationalization of Jerusalem, and laid down several principles on the refugee question. Text of Resolution 194 (III) follows:*

*The General Assembly,*

Having considered further the situation in Palestine,

1. Expresses its deep appreciation of the progress achieved through the good offices of the late United Nations Mediator in promoting a peaceful adjustment of the future situation of Palestine, for which cause he sacrificed his life; and Extends its thanks to the Acting Mediator and his staff for their continued efforts and devotion to duty in Palestine;

2. Establishes a Conciliation Commission consisting of three States Members of the United Nations which shall have the following functions:

(a) To assume, in so far as it considers necessary in existing circumstances, the functions given to the United Nations Mediator on Palestine by the resolution of the General Assembly of 14 May 1948;

(b) To carry out the specific functions and directives given to it by the present resolution and such additional functions and directives as may be given to it by the General Assembly or by the Security Council;

(c) To undertake, upon the request of the Security Council, any of the functions now assigned to the United Nations Mediator on Palestine or to the United Nations Truce Commission by resolutions of the Security Council; upon such request to the Conciliation Commission by the Security Council with respect to all the remaining functions of the United Nations Mediator on Palestine under Security Council resolutions, the office of the Mediator shall be terminated;

3. Decides that a Committee of the Assembly, consisting of China, France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, shall present, before the end of the first part of the present session of the General Assembly, for the approval of the Assembly, a proposal concerning the names of the three States which will constitute the Conciliation Commission;

4. Requests the Commission to begin its functions at once, with a view to the establishment of contact between the parties themselves and the Commission at the earliest possible date;

5. Calls upon the Governments and authorities concerned to extend the scope of the negotiations provided for in the Security Council’s resolution of 16 November 1948 and to seek agreement by negotiations conducted either with the Conciliation Commission or directly with a view to the final settlement of all questions outstanding between them;

6. Instructs the Conciliation Commission to take steps to assist the Government and authorities concerned to achieve a final settlement of all questions outstanding between them;

7. Resolves that the Holy Places - including Nazareth - religious buildings and sites in Palestine should be protected and free access to them assured, in accordance with existing rights and historical practice that arrangements to this end should be under effective United Nations supervision; that the United Nations Conciliation Commission, in presenting to the fourth regular session of the General Assembly its detailed proposal for a permanent international regime for the territory of Jerusalem, should include recommendations concerning the Holy Places in that territory; that with regard to the Holy Places in the rest of Palestine the Commission should call upon the political authorities of the areas concerned to give appropriate formal guarantees as to the protection of the Holy Places and access to them; and that these undertakings should be presented to the General Assembly for approval;

8. Resolves that, in view of its association with three world religions, the Jerusalem area, including the present municipality of Jerusalem plus the surrounding villages and towns, the most Eastern of which shall be Abu Dis; the most Southern, Bethlehem; the most Western, Ein Karim (including also the built-up area of Motsa); and the most Northern, Shu’fat, should be accorded special and separate treatment from the rest of Palestine and should be placed under effective United Nations control;

Requests the Security Council to take further steps to ensure the demilitarization of Jerusalem at the earliest possible date; Instructs the Conciliation Commission to present to the fourth regular session of the General Assembly detailed proposals for a permanent international regime for the Jerusalem area which will provide for the maximum local autonomy for distinctive groups consistent with the special international status of the Jerusalem area;

The Conciliation Commission is authorized to appoint a United Nations representative who shall cooperate with the local authorities with respect to the interim administration of the Jerusalem area;

9. Resolves that, pending agreement on more detailed arrangements among the Governments and authorities concerned, the freest possible access to Jerusalem by road, rail or air should be accorded to all inhabitants of Palestine;

Instructs the Conciliation Commission to report immediately to the Security Council, for appropriate action by that organ, any attempt by any party to impede such access;

10. Instructs the Conciliation Commission to seek arrangements among the Governments and authorities concerned which will facilitate the economic development of the area, including arrangements for access to ports and airfields and the use of transportation and communication facilities;

11. Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or inequity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible;

Instructs the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation, and to maintain close relations with the Director of the United Nations Relief for Pales- tine Refugees and, through him, with the appropriate organs and agencies of the United Nations;

12. Authorizes the Conciliation Commission to appoint such subsidiary bodies and to employ such technical experts, acting under its authority, as it may find necessary for the effective discharge of its functions and responsibilities under the present resolution;

The Conciliation Commission will have its official headquarters at Jerusalem. The authorities responsible for maintaining order in Jerusalem will be responsible for taking all measures necessary to ensure the security of the Commission. The Secretary-General will provide a limited number of guards for the protection of the staff and premises of the Commission;

13. Instructs the Conciliation Commission to render progress re- ports periodically to the Secretary-General for transmission to the Security Council and to the Members of the United Nations;

14. Calls upon all Governments and authorities concerned to cooperate with the Conciliation Commission and to take all possible steps to assist in the implementation of the present resolution;

15. Requests the Secretary-General to provide the necessary staff and facilities and to make appropriate arrangements to pro- vide the necessary funds required in carrying out the terms of the present resolution.

**Appendix 3**

**United Nations Security Council Resolution 242**

November 22, 1967

*Following the June ‘67, Six-Day War, the situation in the Middle East was discussed by the UN General Assembly, which referred the issue to the Security Council. After lengthy discussion, a final draft for a Security Council resolution was presented by the British Ambassador, Lord Caradon, on November 22, 1967. It was adopted on the same day.*

*This resolution, numbered 242, established provisions and principles which, it was hoped, would lead to a solution of the conflict. Resolution 242 was to become the cornerstone of Middle East diplomatic efforts in the coming decades.*

The Security Council,

Expressing its continuing concern with the grave situation in the Middle East,

Emphasizing the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace, in which every State in the area can live in security,

Emphasizing further that all Member States in their acceptance of the Charter of the United Nations have undertaken a commitment to act in accordance with Article 2 of the Charter,

1. Affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles:

• Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

• Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force;

2. Affirms further the necessity

• For guaranteeing freedom of navigation through international waterways in the area;

• For achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem;

• For guaranteeing the territorial inviolability and political independence of every State in the area, through measures including the establishment of demilitarized zones;

3. Requests the Secretary General to designate a Special Representative to proceed to the Middle East to establish and maintain contacts with the States concerned in order to promote agreement and assist efforts to achieve a peaceful and accepted settlement in accordance with the provisions and principles in this resolution;

4. Requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on the progress of the efforts of the Special Representative as soon as possible.

**Appendix 4**

**United Nations Security Council Resolution 338**

October 22, 1973

*In the later stages of the Yom Kippur War -- after Israel repulsed the Syrian attack on the Golan Heights and established a bridgehead on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal -- international efforts to stop the fighting were intensified. US Secretary of State Kissinger flew to Moscow on October 20, and, together with the Soviet Government, the US proposed a ceasefire resolution in the UN Security Council. The Council met on 21 October at the urgent request of both the US and the USSR, and by 14 votes to none, adopted the following resolution:*

The Security Council,

1. Calls upon all parties to present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately, no later than 12 hours after the moment of the adoption of this decision, in the positions after the moment of the adoption of this decision, in the positions they now occupy;

2. Calls upon all parties concerned to start immediately after the cease-fire the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) in all of its parts;

3. Decides that, immediately and concurrently with the cease-fire, negotiations start between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.

1. The second Intifada started in September 2000 in the wake of a visit by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount and the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations at Camp David. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Said in a meeting I had with him in Washington, DC on August 6th, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These negotiations led to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979, and Israel and Jordan in 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The Khartoum Resolutions”, September 1, 1967 (http://www.cfr.org/world/khartoum-resolution/p14841?breadcrumb=%2Fpublication%2Fpublication\_list%3Ftype%3Dessential\_document%26page%3D69). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Top officials in the Israeli National Security Council, in consultation with the Prime Minister, expressed these sentiments in a conversation with me in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In a personal conversation with the Ambassador in May 2007 in Washington, DC. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In a conversation during Olmert’s visit to New York in the fall of 2005, while he was serving as Deputy Prime Minister under Ariel Sharon. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In a conversation with Egypt’s Foreign Minister Abu al-Gheit in Cairo, June 2006, he insisted that open-ended relations between Israel and Egypt will be possible only after a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)