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Normalization Can Inject New Life into the Arab Peace Initiative

by [Ghaith al-Omari](#)

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Brief Analysis

With careful diplomacy, blunt discussion of national interests, and reciprocal steps on the ground, a group of like-minded Arab states could advance Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking while still preserving the API's core.

One of the criticisms leveled against the normalization deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates is that it contravenes the Saudi-drafted Arab Peace Initiative (API) adopted in 2002. In some respects this is true—the new deal departs from the all-or-nothing approach of pursuing full normalization between Israel and Arab states only after the resolution of all outstanding Palestinian (and Syrian and Lebanese) issues with Israel. Yet by tying the deal to the suspension of Israel's West Bank annexation plans, the UAE still reaffirmed the API's premise of linking normalization to Palestinian issues. And given the [steady convergence of interests](#) between Israel and some Arab states, the agreement offers an opportunity to update the API—namely, by abandoning the all-or-nothing approach in favor of a gradual, reciprocal one that accounts for Arab states' legitimate national interests while at the same time advancing Palestinian-Israeli relations.

TECTONIC SHIFTS SINCE 2002

Proposed by Crown Prince (later King) Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and adopted at the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut, the API promises Israel the “the establishment of normal relations” with all Arab states in exchange for “full withdrawal from all the Arab territories occupied since June 1967,” and a “just” and “agreed upon” solution to

the Palestinian refugee problem. At the time, the API represented a fundamental shift from the collective Arab position regarding Israel. In 1967, Arab leaders met in Sudan and defined their official position in what became known as the “three no’s of Khartoum”: no peace, no negotiations, and no recognition of Israel. The API turned away from this absolute rejection to a stance that conditioned relations on certain political outcomes. At its core, it was intended to give Israelis incentive for making progress on the Palestinian issue by leveraging their desire for regional normalization.

The API was largely ineffective at moving toward that goal for many reasons, including Israeli unwillingness to engage with the proposal, lackluster Arab promotion of the idea to the Israeli public, and rapidly deteriorating conditions on the ground during the second intifada. Yet the fundamental shift in the Arab position held despite occasional attempts to rescind the API.

In recent years, the region has undergone tectonic shifts, and any hopes of quickly resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that might have existed in 2002 have faded. Many Arab governments grew reluctant to expend political capital in what they saw as a failed process. At the same time, more pressing regional challenges pushed the Palestinian issue further down their list of priorities, including fallout from the Arab Spring, Iran’s destabilizing activities abroad, and the influence of Turkey’s Islamist-leaning government. These developments created many converging interests, leading Israel and several Arab states to pursue informal, ostensibly secret, yet widely reported cooperation. While the letter of the API remained unchanged, its all-or-nothing approach was already being eroded in practice. The UAE deal has now formalized this dynamic and, in doing so, significantly increased the potential areas of cooperation.

OPERATIONALIZING THE API

By affirming the API’s linkage between normalization and Palestinian issues, the UAE deal may light a parallel path toward gradually advancing the Palestinian-Israeli track. According to this approach, partial progress on the latter track can be met with similar-size steps between Israel and Arab countries. The list of potential partial measures with the Palestinian Authority is long, ranging from incremental advances on major diplomatic issues like settlements, to concrete steps on the ground related to Palestinian freedom of movement, economic progress, or even expanded PA jurisdiction in additional areas of the West Bank. Similarly, normalization with Arab states can take many forms short of full relations, from allowing Israelis to participate in sports, scientific, and cultural events inside their borders, to formalizing security relations or opening trade offices.

To be sure, efforts to modify the API should be approached carefully to avoid overreach. This means avoiding any attempt to formally update the initiative via the Arab League. At present, consensus cannot be reached on the matter given the deep schisms in the Arab world—opening the initiative to redrafting by the league would only invite rejectionists and turn it into a proxy arena for various regional rivalries. Instead, a group of like-minded Arab governments could develop a new approach. In 2013, for example, a delegation of seven states met with Secretary of State John Kerry and announced that the API would be modified to allow for Palestinian-Israeli land swaps—a key element of U.S. territorial proposals at the time. Although the states were understood to be speaking for the Arab League, no formal deliberations were held within that body.

Today, any such grouping would need to be anchored by Saudi Arabia, partly because the API was the late King Abdullah’s legacy, but more important because of the kingdom’s weight within the Arab world. Initially, fine-tuning and testing this approach could be entrusted to smaller, more diplomatically agile countries such as the UAE and Jordan.

PA president Mahmoud Abbas will need to be brought on board as well, at least to ensure that his government does not attempt to scuttle the effort. Given his tense relations with many Arab leaders, however, [some states may be](#)

reluctant to engage. In all likelihood, then, the United States would need to quietly encourage Arab leaders to test this approach, while also incentivizing the PA to reengage with Washington and the API framework. Europe could also signal its support by providing incentives for gradual, concrete steps between the Palestinians and Israel.

All of this would require frank Arab conversations with PA leaders emphasizing the same basic message: that the Palestinians will have opportunities for **leveraging Arab-Israel rapprochement to their advantage**, but they cannot stop the inevitable. These conversations should examine what such advantages might be, including additional incentives Arab states may be willing to give the Palestinians. Whatever details they discuss, however, Arab states should avoid traditional diplomatic niceties and make clear, in private, that although they remain committed to Palestinian rights and fundamental positions, they are no longer willing to subordinate their national interests to Palestinian diplomatic tactics.

Such an approach would promote U.S. interests as well. Providing a path for normalization that overcomes lingering reluctance among some Arab states could help advance a new regional security architecture. And **providing incentives** for gradual but concrete Palestinian-Israeli steps would serve the goal adopted by every U.S. administration since President Clinton—namely, to promote incremental progress on the ground in parallel with efforts to secure a permanent resolution.

CONCLUSION

The UAE-Israel deal has exposed the limitations of the old approach adopted by the API. Rather than abandoning this potentially useful tool, however, the parties should adopt a new approach of gradual, reciprocal moves that balance keenly felt interests on all sides. Although this would be a far cry from the API's original lofty goals, those goals have proven elusive for years, so a more modest approach stands a better chance of yielding tangible results. The two Arab states that reached individual peace deals with Israel in the past—Egypt and Jordan—have proved more effective in mediating Palestinian-Israeli disputes than states who chose not to engage, so the potential peace dividends of gradual normalization should not be underestimated.

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