



Gilead Sher

A Regional Hope?

THE REVOLUTIONARY TURBULENCE SWEEPING aside decades-old regimes and political structures in the Arab world is naturally causing profound concern in the West. It's the oil, of course, but also the chilling thought that perhaps Islamic fundamentalism will prevail and a laudable struggle for civil liberties will ultimately yield fanatical, extremist regimes.

Yet, paradoxically, despite these fears, the earthquake in the Arab world presents Israel with a unique opportunity to ensure its Jewish, Zionist and democratic identity and to secure its future in the region. A vehicle, tailor-made for the task, already exists: It is the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API), the only peace proposal with a clear regional dimension.

The API was endorsed unanimously by the Arab League at the Beirut Summit in March 2002 and constituted a major strategic shift from the notorious three noes of Khartoum: no peace, no negotiation and no recognition of Israel. For the first time, the Arab leaders tacitly recognized Israel's existence and offered a plan to negotiate peace. Yet this remarkable development in the Arab world's approach to Israel was largely ignored and often dismissed as mere post 9/11 Saudi public relations.

Since then, the API has been ignored by successive Israeli governments, thus repeatedly slighting the Arab leaders who proposed it. Indeed, nine years later, Arab ministers are saying the API "will not remain on the table for much longer."

Now is the time for Israel to acknowledge the API's relevance for regional stabilization, and to state unequivocally that it could serve as a framework for further negotiations. Israel should also go one step further and alleviate Arab concerns by saying that it does not expect the API to be modified and that it is ready for talks that focus on the details of its phased implementation.

The API's text comprises fewer words than this article. In essence, the Arab League states that – subject to a series of acts and agreements – it would consider the Arab-Israeli conflict ended, and that all its member states would enter into peace agreements with Israel, based on full diplomatic ties and underpinned by regional security arrangements.

True, Israelis familiar with the API's text are troubled by several key issues. Unlike UN Security Council Resolution 242, which calls for "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," the API explicitly refers to "all territories." However, the deliberate omission of the term 'unconditional' withdrawal pro-

vides an opening for negotiations on the final boundaries.

More disturbing is the explicit reference to UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which implies that Israel may be required to resettle in its territory millions of Palestinian refugees. Here again, however, the wording, which calls for an 'agreed upon' and 'just solution' of the refugee issue, suggests that negotiation is possible.

Finally, the API is silent on a host of substantive issues such as process, implementation, timelines, phases, linkages and so on. Without these the parties will find it difficult to make confidence-building moves or to win approval for such a far-ranging peacemaking effort from their own constituencies.

The US should lead the process, starting by launching a conference attended by all the relevant parties and overseeing an ongoing set of negotiations. It is safe to assume that the tradeoffs a broader regional process engenders will prove significantly more attractive than anything a limited bilateral process could provide.

Israel and the Arab states would need to agree on benchmarks for

phased implementation of the API. For example, an Israeli-Palestinian territorial agreement on borders and settlements, bolstered by solid security arrangements for both Israel and the demilitarized nascent Palestinian state and a strong international presence, would be a very important benchmark.

Under a binding process of talks within the framework of the API, the Arab states should be prepared to provide a clear outline of the kind of peace they intend to conclude and to assure Israel that they have no intention of changing the character of the Jewish state. The only way they can do this is to tell their people that under no agreement will a return of refugees to Israel be countenanced.

Time is running out for those, like me, who want to secure a Jewish and democratic Israel within recognized boundaries alongside a demilitarized Palestinian state. For those of us who would like to secure a "peace for generations," a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel is imperative. In the absence of political leadership and given the stalemate on the Israeli-Palestinian track, putting the API on the table as an operational blueprint could well be the way forward. ●

Attorney Gilead Sher, former prime minister Ehud Barak's chief of staff and one of Israel's chief negotiators at the Camp David summit in July 2000 and the ensuing Taba talks in January 2001, is the author of "The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999-2001: Within Reach."



AVI KATZ