

Abusing the Arab Peace Initiative

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Global Research, October 12, 2006

12 October 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The failed Qatari mediation in the still unresolved inter-Palestinian divide was in practice an American success in turning the Arab Peace Initiative (API) into a pressure tool that further exacerbates fractures both in Arab and Palestinian ranks, less than two weeks after the U.S. aborted a move by the Arab League to revive an overdue comprehensive approach to the Arab and Palestinian – Israeli conflict on its basis through the United Nations.

The United States is now trying to find a common ground with regional powers to abuse this initiative as a regional framework for a coordinated effort vis-à-vis Iran, Syria and their Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi spheres of influence.

The API was for four years archived into oblivion on the shelves of the Arab League, rejected by Israel, ignored by the US and viewed even by its authors as an unrealistic non-starter, until it was dusted off to contain the negative unexpected outcome of the Israeli 33-day destructive war on Lebanon.

Adopted by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002, it is based on the concept of land for peace and offers Israel an unprecedented historic opportunity to enjoy normal relations with all 22 members of the Arab League in return for returning Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories it annexed during the 1967 War and agreeing to a negotiated settlement for millions of Palestinian refugees.

The fallout of the Lebanon war unmasked the impotence of Israel's overwhelming military superiority, discredited negotiations as an Arab strategy to coerce Israel into accepting just peace, confirmed the United States as a biased broker in the conflict, gave impetus and credibility to Syrian and Iranian arguments, doomed the already moribund Palestinian – Israeli peace process, which was pronounced "dead" by none other than the spokesman of the Arab League leaders Amr Moussa, created a rift in the ranks of the Arab leaders, which rendered convening an Arab summit impossible after a few years of regular meetings, revived war as a possible alternative to resolve the conflict and widened the gap between Arab rulers and their people.

Feeling threatened, the Arab League leaders decided to dust off the API and revive peace making on its basis by entrusting the mission to the United Nations Security Council. Israel's Palestinian peace partner, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), subscribed to the effort.

The U.S. and Israel swiftly snubbed the Arab move in the bud, but nonetheless perceived in it and its motives a common ground with some Arabs vis-à-vis Syria and Iran, "to recast the (regional) political landscape from the traditional one of Arabs versus Israelis ... into a Sunni vs. Shia alignment." (1)

Immediately the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, seized on the opportunity and embarked on a Middle East mission early this month to profit on the inter-Arab and inter-Palestinian divides. She gathered eight of her counterparts from eight Arab countries in Cairo .

Rice was on record that Washington 's aim was to seek an Arab alliance of "moderates" to shore up the "moderate" Palestinian camp against the "militant" Hamas-led government and its "militant" Syrian and Iranian backers, thus fuelling polarization both among Arab states and Palestinian factions by playing on what she supposed as Islamophobia and Iranophobia among them. But she was misreading the signals. Both phobias have better audience in the west.

Heralding the potential of a moderate Arab camp whose moderation credentials are only judged vis-à-vis Israel to act immoderately vis-à-vis Syria and Iran was the latest US effort to divert regional attention away from the major Israeli obstacle to regional peace and stability, contrary to what the Arab partners are hoping for.

For the U.S. to take sides would inevitably deepen Arab and Palestinian divides, which is an unwelcome policy to moderate Arabs and Palestinians alike, who do not want and could not be perceived by their people as advocating dialogue and negotiations with the Israeli occupying power but willing to go into confrontation with their compatriot political protagonists.

However the six-member GCC states, Egypt and Jordan got along with Rice, calculating that the converging common ground with the U.S. could be enough incentive for its administration to revive the Palestinian - Israeli peace process to defuse a drift toward further regional turbulence.

It was a miscalculation; how could the U.S. credibly deal with the API that it aborted at the UN Security Council less than two weeks ago? How the ruling out of Palestinians from the Rice-led nine- foreign minister Cairo meeting could credibly be perceived to be in support of Palestinian "moderates" while ruling out any Palestinian "moderate" or "militant" representation?

How could Cairo meeting bail out the Palestinians from their internal divide on the basis of an initiative that was also adopted in the absence of Palestinian representation by an Arab summit that could not afford neither to bail late leader Yasser Arafat out of his Israeli captivity to join them nor even to allow in his voice live via satellite link from his besieged headquarters in the West Bank?

The ostensibly Palestinian-gearred Cairo meeting could not camouflage its regional agenda. The API, was put now on the table not to revive the peace process but to be thrown in the face of Syria and Iran as a direct response to Iran's rejection of Israel's existence, although it was originally a genuine Arab peace endeavor dictated by Arab impotence to stand up to Israeli military superiority.

On this backdrop the Qatari mediation in the inter-Palestinian divide floundered, because it redirected the API from a peace offensive against Israel into a pressure tool to help enforce the Israeli preconditions.

In less than a month the Qatari foreign minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem Al-Thani failed on

two Arab missions, the first foiled by the U.S. at the U.N. Security Council and the second aborted because of the U.S. in Gaza.

Resolving the inter-Palestinian crisis is a prerequisite to jumpstart the U.S.-envisioned camp of Arab moderates because without a Palestinian blessing no such camp could kick off due to the centrality of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict to regional stability.

The Qatari involvement was blessed and hailed by the 8+1 camp and beforehand perceived as an additional pressure on Hamas irrespective of Qatar 's well-intentioned motives. Any simple logical analysis would easily conclude that Doha 's mediation has weighed in on Hamas. The Qatari proposals boil down to being a US version of the API that was adapted to sell the Israeli dictates to Hamas in Arab packing.

Any Arab involvement to resolve the Palestinian crisis is doomed if based on an agenda adverse to Syria and Iran , particularly if this involvement is suspiciously backed by the US strategic ally of Israel .

The Americans, the Arab moderates, the Qataris and the “moderate” Palestinian camp knew this beforehand and were very well aware that Hamas won't be forthcoming and won't buy the Israeli conditions camouflaged in Arab mediation.

Neither Hamas nor Palestinians are in short memory not to remember that the central committee of Fatah, the four-decade leader of the PLO and at the time the ruling party of PLO offshoot, the Palestinian Authority, issued a statement describing the API as another “stab” against the struggle of the Palestinian people. Is it too much now for Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haneya, of Hamas, to reject it as “problematic!”

The initiative does not address: (1) the nature of the envisioned Palestinian state or the level of its militarization, (2) the use of water resources, (3) access to Jerusalem and its holy sites as well as access to other holy sites within the territory of the British Mandate of Palestine or access between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, (4) the fate of more than 160 Israeli colonies home to more than 450.000 illegal Jewish settlers in the envisioned Palestinian state, (5) the borders and the border controls between Israel and the Palestinian state, and (6) the fate of Palestinian prisoners.

More importantly the API doesn't address the nature of the “just solution” to the refugee problem, the hard core of the Palestine Question, although it refers to the UN General Assembly non-binding resolution 194 — rejected by Israel and ignored by the U.S. for 59 years — and makes this solution subject to negotiations, thus compromising the “Right of Return” for more than half the Palestinian people.

The “moderate” side in the Palestinian divide complicates the controversy further by President Mahmoud Abbas' repeated statements on reaching “a just and agreed upon solution for the problem.” The “agreed upon” formula reveals willingness to compromise, which is worrying to refugees.

If the Palestinian – Israeli unofficial Geneva Accord or Initiative is the indicator then the “agreed upon solution” as an approach would compromise not only the Palestinian Right of Return but also the status of Jerusalem .

The accord gives the refugees six options of which only one grants them the choice to allow a marginal number a symbolic return to Israel , thus converging with the comatose former

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vision of turning the West Bank into world's largest refugee camp, which is to be called a Palestinian state. The accord also cedes to Israel 85 percent of eastern Jerusalem , which the Jewish state occupied in 1967.

Fortunately Israel rejected the initiative, but unfortunately the PLO never officially rejected the accord which was co-authored by none other than a member of its executive committee.

How could anyone blame Hamas for insisting on alternative terms of reference other than the terms which the PLO was coerced to accept when an Israeli academic and author, like Tanya Reinhart, decides to quit as emeritus professor at Tel Aviv University and "return" to Australia in protest against Israel's handling of the Palestinian issue after condemning its government for lying to the world by using arguments about Israel's right to exist as a cover for grabbing land and resources from the Palestinian people.

"Palestinians should not have to pay the price of the Holocaust," she said, adding that Israel is imprisoning "a whole nation." (2)

If Israeli immigrants into Palestine have the luxury of opting to leave Israel and return home when things turn unbearable for them to stay, the Palestinian people have no other choice but to stay.

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Notes

(1) Frida Ghitis, <http://worldpoliticswatch.com>, Oct 10, 2006. (2) The Age Online, Oct. 10, 2006.

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