

## Do get a move on

*After a long lull, the Americans believe they can get the talks going again.*



*Illustration by David Simonds*

Barack Obama's peace envoy, George Mitchell, is back in his Middle East bailiwick after two months away, apparently hopeful he can get Israelis and Palestinians to agree to "terms of reference" that would let long-stalled negotiations resume. Both sides still balk at his draft document's latest wording. Mr Mitchell is begging Egypt, Jordan and the Saudis to help him nudge the Palestinians back to the table. There is now at least a chance they will succeed.

The Israelis say they are ready to resume talks with the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), "without preconditions". But in the same breath, Israeli officials suggest that Binyamin Netanyahu, their prime minister, may seek alternative approaches, hinting at unilateral map-making of the West Bank, perhaps even with an American wink. They even speak of a "Jordanian option", a long-discarded old favourite of Israeli hawks that would drastically water down Palestinian independence.

Mr Abbas, who is still running the Palestinian Authority despite his promise (or was it really a threat?) to step down in protest against what he sees as Israel's intransigence, is sticking to his demand for a full freeze on Israeli settlement-building, in Jerusalem as well as in the West Bank, before the talks can resume. Mr Netanyahu's announcement in November of a partial and temporary freeze, welcomed by the Americans, is still not good enough for the Palestinians. The ten-month moratorium is "far less than what was requested," says Mr Mitchell, "but more significant than any action taken by any previous government of Israel for the 40 years that the settlement [movement] has existed."

Mr Netanyahu's freeze has two aspects. Israeli soldiers recently tore down a caravan put up by settlers at Elon Moreh, a settlement in the West Bank's northern heart. In contrast, Jewish Israelis are moving unimpeded into homes they claim to own in the middle of Sheikh Jarrah, an all-Palestinian district of East Jerusalem. Recent Palestinian calls for an initial six-month freeze on settlement-building in the city's eastern part have so far fallen on deaf Israeli ears.

Mr Mitchell's proposed terms of reference for new talks would have both sides accepting the 1967 border as the basis of a final accord, with land swaps enabling Israel to annex the largest settlements closest to the old border, while the Palestinians would add equivalent tracts to their own state. The wording would let the Palestinians contend that what is envisaged is a Palestinian state recovering the equivalent acreage conquered by Israel in 1967. This dramatic breakthrough apparently occurred in private in talks between Mr Abbas and Israel's then prime

minister, Ehud Olmert, in late 2008—but nothing was signed. Israel's present negotiators stress that Mr Netanyahu has not endorsed this "100% principle". If he did, his largely right-wing government would, they argue, fall.

To soften Israeli resistance, the Mitchell draft also stresses Israel's Jewishness, the need to accept some "facts on the ground" (ie, the permanence of the largest close-to-the-line settlements), and the primacy of Israel's security. But that raises the hackles of the Palestinians, who argue that the latest wording weakens the force of the 100% principle. Harping on Israel's Jewishness is code, they say, for limiting the rights of Israel's 1.5m Arab citizens, a fifth of the total.

The Olmert-Abbas talks have gained weight as the peace process falters. The two leaders were close to agreement not only on a territorial principle that most foreign governments endorse but also on the tricky issue of Jerusalem. Mr Olmert proposed a five-party commission, comprising Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States, to administer the entire "Holy Basin", the much-disputed area that includes the Old City, what Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims the Noble Sanctuary, the Western Wall and the main Christian shrines. No single state would have sovereignty—only God.

Many prominent Palestinians are sorry such vital understandings were not nailed down. But Mr Abbas contended then and later that Mr Olmert was a lame duck, facing corruption charges and poised to resign. If and when talks resume, the Palestinians want to pick up where they left off. But Mr Netanyahu's people say that Israel's new government, elected by a right-lurching public, cannot be bound by such unsigned, unpalatable understandings.

Backed by European leaders, Mr Mitchell is urging Mr Abbas to give talks a chance. Once they get going, the envoy implies, America will press Israel to extend its moratorium. "We think that the negotiation should last no more than two years," he says. "Personally, I think it can be done in a shorter period of time." Mr Mitchell is plainly one of nature's optimists. But he is also a tough and shrewd negotiator.

**Fonte: The Economist. Disponível em: <<http://www.economist.com>>. Acesso em: 29 jan. 2010.**