

Could the peace dove fly again?

A more flexible Arab League is trying to bring a wider array of mediators together to revive the peace process. But not all the principals want to take part



In The wake of the Arab spring and amid a worsening crisis in Syria, the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process has languished in the background of international diplomacy. But on April 29th an Arab League delegation representing 22 countries tried to bring it back to the fore by revising the plan they first proposed over a decade ago.

Speaking after a meeting with America's secretary of state, John Kerry, the Qatari prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, who headed the delegation, conceded that, whereas the 2002 peace initiative called for Israel's complete withdrawal to pre-1967 borders, an eventual deal would probably involve minor land swaps. The Qatari statement, in the Arab League's name, thus implied that some Jewish settlements built on occupied land in the West Bank could remain part of Israel. The delegation included the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Palestine, the Arab League's secretary-general, Nabil al-Araby, plus senior Lebanese and Saudi diplomats.

Minor land swaps had already been conceded in principle in 2008 by the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in talks with Israel's then prime minister, Ehud Olmert, before negotiations broke down. But the Arab League's latest announcement marks the first real step towards reviving the peace process since Barack Obama visited Israel in March and Mr Kerry began shuttling around the region. The Americans and the Arab League hope that it may provide a ladder for Mr Abbas to climb down from his position that he will not return to the negotiating table unless Israel first stops expanding settlements.

Yet while Mr Kerry hailed the Arab League's "very big step forward", Palestinian and Israeli reactions were more guarded. The Palestinians' lead negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said the announcement was in line with the Palestinians' official position. Hamas, the Islamist group which runs Gaza, rejected it outright, saying the Arab League had no authority to make concessions on the Palestinians' behalf. Some Arab countries, resentful of thumb-sized Qatar's *démarche*, were also unenthusiastic. Jordan made no immediate comment, while Egypt said nothing had really changed.

For his part, Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, fearing that American acceptance of the Arab League's initiative would set the 1967 borders as the basis for a Palestinian state, sounded cool if not dismissive. He called for the Arab League first to recognise Israel as a

Jewish state, a demand made of neither Egypt nor Jordan before they signed their peace treaties with Israel. Other members of Mr Netanyahu's ruling coalition welcomed the concession, but argued for bigger land swaps.

Liberal Israelis condemned Mr Netanyahu for sounding as rejectionist as the Arabs had been before the tortuous peace process began. "There's an antagonistic convergence between Bibi [Mr Netanyahu] and Hamas," says Matti Steinberg, a former senior Israeli intelligence man. "He says he's against a bi-national single state, but is not ready to pay the price for two."

Although the Americans hoped that the Arab League statement and Mr Abbas's cautious acceptance of it would shunt the ball into Israel's court, Mr Netanyahu faces little domestic pressure to address it. Tzipi Livni, Israel's justice minister, who has been given the task of coordinating possible negotiations with the Palestinians, welcomed the amendment as "good news" but said Israel could not accept the Arab League's continued albeit muted insistence that Palestinian refugees and their descendants had a right to return to Israel.

Hopes that Yair Lapid, the finance minister, who heads the second-largest party in the ruling coalition, might persuade Mr Netanyahu to bid seriously for a two-state settlement have also begun to wear thin. Mr Lapid, a relative centrist, has consolidated a tactical alliance with Jewish Home, a religious party which is against establishing a Palestinian state, endorsing the call of its leader, Naftali Bennett, that any Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank be put to a referendum. Of the 22 members of Israel's cabinet, only Yaakov Peri, the science minister, who used to head the internal security service, Shin Bet, said Israel should take the Arab League's proposal seriously.

Shelly Yachimovich, leader of the opposition Labour party, who has concentrated on domestic social issues, voiced support for it, while Binyamin Ben Eliezer, a veteran Labour party member of parliament, offered to join Mr Netanyahu's government if he would accept it. "It's not the talk of the day," says Ofer Zalberg, an Israeli analyst studying the influence of settler ideology on the country's policymakers. The peace camp, which used to bring hundreds of thousands of Israelis into the streets, is nowadays barely audible.

Still, the participation of Arab League countries at an Israeli-Palestinian summit, which some diplomats hope to stage next month in Jordan's capital, Amman, or in Washington might just bring the comatose peace process back to life. Some Israelis who back a two-state settlement want to shift the format from bilateral to multinational talks, so that regional powers might lessen Israel's bargaining strength over the Palestinians. This week even China unusually seemed to join the fray (see article).

"The bilateral process launched in Oslo in 1993 has been failing for over a decade," says Assaf Sharon of Molad, a doveish new Israeli think-tank. He has recently put out a paper calling for the revival of the multilateral format under which the peace process was relaunched by the Americans in Madrid in 1991. That conference also involved the Russians and a clutch of European and Arab countries, as well as the Palestinians and Israelis. "It is time to return to Madrid," he says.

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