

Abbas reaches out to Israeli public

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In an unprecedented move, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has taken the cause of peace directly to the Israeli public by taking out an advertisement, to be published Thursday in four Israeli dailies, promoting the 2002 Arab League's Peace Initiative.

"Fifty-seven Arab and Muslim countries will forge diplomatic ties and normal relations with Israel in exchange for a full peace agreement and an end to the occupation," reads the ad, which Arab sources said would appear in *Haaretz*, *Yediot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv* and *Yisrael Hayom*.

It reprints the text of the Arab initiative and is framed by flags of Arab and Muslim countries. The League's initiative calls for a full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, including from the Golan and parts of Jerusalem. It also references United Nations resolutions that allow for a return of Palestinian refugees into Israel.

Abbas felt that ordinary Israelis don't know enough about the Arab offer and wanted to approach them directly, said Abbas aide Saeb Erekat. "Not enough has been done to promote it," he said.

Erekat said it was the first time a Palestinian leader had tried to reach Israelis directly in such a fashion.

The move comes on the eve of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's final visit to Washington on Sunday and less than two weeks after Abbas stood at a Quartet meeting and pledged his support for the Annapolis process.

It also comes at the same time the Foreign Ministry has admitted that refugees remain a sticking point with the Palestinians.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said Wednesday, "Palestinians have consistently refused to acknowledge that Israel is the national state of the Jewish people and should be recognized as such, even as they are claiming the future state of Palestine as their national state. There is a problem there that needs to be sorted out."

Of the decision by the PA to place ads in the Israeli press, Palmor said it was curious that the Palestinians would choose to make use of a democratic tool that they have denied to their own people.

"It is a gesture that could never be reciprocated. Can you imagine the Palestinians allowing the Israeli government to do this?" he asked.

"This puts in a new and more intensive light the question of the asymmetry of freedom in the Middle East," he said.

MK Ahmed Tibi (UAL), who helped the PA with the ad, said that the move was not an attempt by Abbas to replace Annapolis. Both tracks could happen at once, he said. The Arab League plan was larger than Annapolis, because it offered Israel peace with all its neighbors, he said.

"We hope that it will open debate among the Israeli public," he said. The ad, he said, was also aimed at US President-elect Barack Obama who he believed, in spite of recent press denials, had viewed the plan positively when he met with Abbas during his visit here last summer. He added that the initiative had more flexibility with respect to refugees than most people were aware of.

Israel has looked favorably at the Saudi plan, an earlier version of the Arab League's 2002 initiative, which calls for a just solution to the refugee problem. But it has balked at accepting the Arab League's initiative as a basis for negotiations largely because of the refugee issue.

In the last year, as part of the Annapolis process, Israel and the Palestinians have pledged to address all core issues including refugees as part of the pursuit of a final status agreement.

In speaking about this process in front of American Jewish leaders who had gathered in Jerusalem for the final day of the United Jewish Communities General Assembly, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni admitted that the issue of refugees remained a sticking point in the pursuit of peace.

Acceptance of Palestinian refugees into Israel undermined the essential nature of a two-state solution which Israel had sought, Livni said.

The problem was not just with the Palestinians but with the larger international community which still struggled to recognize the significance of Israel as a Jewish state, Livni said.

In some parts of the world, especially in Europe, there is a "delegitimization of the state of Israel as a Jewish state." The idea that Israel is a Jewish state "is not obvious anymore," she said.

Livni said when she speaks with international leaders and asks that they recognize Israel as a Jewish state, "there are those who are willing to say so, including [US] President [George] Bush in the United Nations General Assembly. There are those who are not willing to say so."

Israel and the Jewish Diaspora community had to work together to help the rest of the world recognize the significance of Israel as a Jewish state, Livni said.

The world was ready to defend the right of Israel to exist, and had included it in its demands that Hamas must meet to gain international recognition, she noted. But the Quartet needed to add two more words: they must accept the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state.

In speaking of a two-state solution, Livni held up two of her fingers for emphasis and wiggled them as she spoke.

This is not just about democracy and independence, she said. The goal is the creation of "two nation-states, in which Israel is the Jewish state and the other [is a Palestinian] state, is the full answer to the aspirations of the Palestinians. It means that no refugees are coming to Israel," she added.