

A Speech by President Mahmoud Abbas

Excerpts from the speech of President Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO and President of the Palestinian National Authority, delivered on the occasion of the opening session of the second Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) on February 18, 2006, in Ramallah.¹

This is a great day in the life of our Palestinian people, and of its national struggle. Today we constitutionally inaugurate our second Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), elected by our Palestinian people in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, in free and fair elections, witnessed by the entire world, through hundreds of observers, and carried out peacefully from the onset till the end.

These elections would not have been possible should any political faction or party have been excluded, or should our East Jerusalem compatriots have been prohibited to participate. I have emphasized this matter adamantly despite all pressures, and this is what occurred in reality. I see amongst you now those who represent Jerusalem, and who represent all Palestinian political factions. My congratulations go to the brothers and sisters members of the Council on the confidence bestowed upon them by the electorate, with my wishes of success in carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to them.

On this occasion, I would like to salute the Central Elections Committee and express my appreciation for its achievement of this task in a most responsible and capable manner. I would also like to express my gratitude and appreciation to the Arab and foreign election observers for their role in monitoring the elections, and I would like to particularly mention President Jimmy Carter.

Our people have proven their maturity in spirit and democratic performance through the conclusion of these legislative elections and the preceding presidential and municipal elections. The entire world should regard this fact as a certificate of eligibility to build a present and a future for our people in the modern state that our people deserve. This state will have a democratic pluralistic system, governed by the rule of law, and the spirit and ethos of this age, where each man and woman is entitled to the rights and freedoms guaranteed them by the law.

The results of our elections have led to the creation of a new political reality in which Hamas won the majority in the PLC. Therefore, it will be tasked with the formation of the new government. I expect the person forming the government to be designated, and the usual consultations regarding this issue to start. All of this will be accompanied with the election of the PLC's presiding body and the establishment of its various committees so as to be ready to receive the new government and its program, leading to granting it confidence.

I seize this opportunity to salute our first PLC that has worked under dire circumstances and has drafted a large number of laws. It has followed up and monitored as much as possible the works of the successive governments which, in turn, also deserve our appreciation for all their initiatives and achievements. We hope that the new government will continue this process and develop its performance in a manner that achieves the interests and wishes of the people who elected and who will monitor the performance of the elected parliament and the government.

I would like to address you ... to elaborate on the initial stages of our national experience with its difficulties, complexities, and achievements, a process that has been conducted by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) — the leader of this people, and the highest political reference for its committees and institutions. Our achievements would not have been possible without the insistence of the PLO on national unity, and its adoption of the most effective forms of struggle based on carefully examined and studied policies, governed by the national higher interest [sic.] for the Palestinian people, and in accordance with international resolutions.

We have foiled plans aiming at the elimination of the political identity of the Palestinian people and its national rights. The PLO was able to carry our cause to the furthest reaches of the world, to all its peoples, until

1 The entire text of the speech can be found in the **Palestine-Israel Journal's** website www.pij.org.

the doors of the United Nations opened for us. On that platform, President Yasser Arafat stood in our name, holding an olive branch, asking the entire world not to drop it. International and regional recognition of our people, the PLO, and our rights followed.

The PLO has led this important historic era despite the presence of its leader, institutions and frameworks in exile. It has confronted many harsh battles to maintain its presence, its mission, and the rights of the Palestinian people. The PLO and the Palestinian revolution could not have stayed alive nor overcome the attempts of elimination without — in addition to its obstinate military struggle — courageous political initiatives. These added momentum to the Palestinian cause and received large support both internationally and regionally. This has led to the recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and the capable spokesman of its national rights.

From this platform, which is a part of our Palestinian National Council (PNC), I emphasize the necessity of completing the dialogue among all factions and parties to activate our organization, renew its structures and frameworks, and improve its performance at all levels. We have started this dialogue a long time ago, and it is time to reach the results hoped for.

In this context, I would like to remind you of another important milestone in our national struggle: our courageous historic initiative in the 1988 session of the PNC in Algiers. This initiative entailed the declaration of the establishment of the State of Palestine in exile, and the Declaration of Independence that accompanied our recognition of Resolutions 242 and 338. This laid the foundation of our future state and defined its contours and content, and upgraded the level of international recognition. This coincided with the outbreak of the first popular uprising (intifada) in the year 1987, which decisively contributed to the adoption of our initiative. The world started to deal with our people, our cause, and our leadership, as one state to another state. This gave the Palestinian peace offensive at that time a political depth that went beyond a unilateral declaration to become an international commitment for all of those that recognized it and established full relations with the state of Palestine accordingly.

This political struggle bore fruit when there was an important imbalance in the international arena as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union and the start of the second Gulf war. These events necessitated a rethinking and reformulation of new equations for stability in our region. Had Palestine not been present as a recognized state, and as a PLO that embodies a strong representative political body, the world, with its new powers, would have bypassed us ... Seizing the opportunity of this presence, a political process was started and the American-Palestinian dialogue, which was a taboo for many decades, was launched. The peace process was started in Madrid ... At the same time, there were secret channels working which led to the Oslo Accords, and the mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel.

Since then, we have accepted and respected the right of any individual, group or political faction to voice its objection on the Oslo Accords. But we have not and will not accept any questioning of the Accords' legitimacy. Indeed, from the hour they were endorsed, they became a political reality to which we remain committed.

Objectively speaking, while we do not consider Oslo to have incorporated all what we want, the Accords have led to the establishment of the first Palestinian National Authority (PNA) on parts of our homeland. They have permitted the return of thousands of our people from the Diaspora and exile. They have established this Council.

I would like to remind you how the extremists in Israel mobilized, leading to the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin when we were still at the beginning of the path. In reality, it was not a mere political assassination, but an intentional attempt to halt the peace process that was spearing ahead. It was an attempt to substitute it with a different process consisting of denying the Palestinian partner, imposing unilateral solutions that are based on the logic of force, and imposing a reality with arms while continuing the expansion of settlements.

The subsequent Israeli policies followed a program and implemented measures aiming at the cancellation of the Oslo Accords. This froze the peace process, unleashed extremism, and destroyed all efforts to create a new atmosphere between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This all paved the way for the era of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who declared an open battle against the Palestinian people, and proceeded to systematically destroy the PNA's institutions and frameworks.

The Israeli government has adopted unilateralism as a substitute for negotiations. I would like to remind you that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's step to unilaterally pull out from Gaza was interpreted from our side as a surgical procedure aimed at canceling the Road Map. We accepted the Road Map as an international initiative incorporating Palestinian and Israeli commitments on the security level, and Israeli commitments regarding halting the settlement expansion; the military pullout; the convening of an international conference; the return to the negotiation table to resolve all issues of the permanent status, namely the refugees, Jerusalem, settlements, borders and water, reaching the end of the occupation; the establishment of the desired Palestinian State, and reaching a fair and just peace.

I would like to draw your attention to an objective reality that characterized the period since the assassination of the PM Rabin: namely that Israeli extremism has succeeded in drawing us to a vicious cycle of bloody action and reaction, and has created an environment in which politics and negotiation became difficult to implement in managing the conflict.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the serious attempts, at top levels, of putting an end to the deteriorating situation as a whole. These include the Sharm el-Sheikh Summits, the Camp David Summit, and finally the Road Map, and U.S. President George W. Bush's vision of the establishment of an independent, democratic, thriving Palestinian state living side by side with the State of Israel in peace and security. This is undoubtedly a historic development in the U.S. position.

From my position as elected President of the PNA and as President of the PLO, and based on my program on which I was elected, I would like to emphasize the following:

Firstly, we, as presidency and government, will continue our commitment to the negotiation process as the sole political, pragmatic, and strategic choice through which we reap the fruit of our struggle and sacrifices over the long decades. We will find practical opportunities as we wisely manage the negotiations so as to achieve our national aims that are supported by international resolutions. As we depend on the negotiation process as a political choice, we should continue to develop other forms of peaceful popular struggle. We are all required to continue activating and strengthening the role of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of our people, to lead and oversee all matters relating to its destiny including the negotiations with the Israeli side.

Secondly, the obstruction of the negotiation process and its replacement with the iron fist policy, unilateral adventures, and the continuation of the separation wall, settlement expansion, and assassinations will only lead to further deterioration, leaving peace and stability behind ... Here I would like to emphasize our full rejection of unilateralism. I urge the world, eager as it is to see peace and stability in the Middle East, and especially the Quartet and the U.S. Administration, to immediately start serious efforts towards re-activating the negotiation process. This in turn should be conducted on the basis of international legitimacy and President Bush's vision; the Arab Peace Initiative, and the agreements and understandings signed since Oslo to the Road Map.

Thirdly, the internal changes — which occurred in the aftermath of the second PLC elections — and which led to Hamas members having the majority in the PLC, should not be used to justify further aggression against our people, or as a pretext for blackmailing it. The Palestinian people should not be punished for its democratic choice that was expressed through the ballot box.

Fourthly, the process of reform within the PNA should not stop. I will continue to sponsor all reform initiatives, whether carried out by the Palestinian judiciary, as an implementation of a decision from our part, or any new initiatives in the same direction. I am determined to carry out my program, on which I was elected and mandated, and to apply the main tenets that I have hoisted to reach a stable, unified, strong, effective authority that provides security and safety to all its citizens; an Authority which has the ability to keep its commitments and protect the interests of its people; an Authority that respects the law, and commits to implementing it; an Authority whose institutions are committed to the separation of powers, particularly in terms of strengthening the judiciary, imposing the rule of law for all, with one legitimate arm, with a pluralistic system; an Authority

that lays the foundations for the establishment of our independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital ... As we are speaking of our government, I would like to remind the members of the PLC — and members of the future government — of the need to respect all signed agreements, and to work according to the national interest to end the chaos of arms. Since everybody is participating currently in the structure and framework of a national authority with all its institutions, everybody should honor the presence of one arm, i.e. the arm of legitimacy.

Fifthly, I would like to reiterate a fact which has always been the protective shield of our revolution, the PLO, and the PNA; namely, we will not be led into any axis of any sort. As Palestinians, we are proud of the depth of our Arab and Muslim belonging; we are proud of our uniting and unifying role therein, just as we are proud of everybody standing by us, by our rights, by the justice of our cause, while respecting our independent national decision.

Allow me to dwell on one of the most important aspects of our experience within the PNA, namely security. Security means ... the security of all those who live on our land, and the implementation of our international commitments ... Achieving security requires giving the security establishment all the attention it needs to enable it to perform its role, including equipping and training. The Israeli side, along with the Quartet members, should facilitate the delivery of arms and equipment to the security forces. It is also important to continue the process of restructuring the forces in accordance with the Basic Law. In this context, we will work in a serious and determined manner to activate the work of the National Security Council, so that it can play its role in drawing security policies and directing the work of the security forces.

The tasks and burdens are many. The education sector requires rapid development ... Modern education, based on the requirements of development, the need to open up to the world, the tenets of free thinking and creativity, and the ethos of resisting chauvinism is the safety valve for raising new generations... In addition, there are other sectors: health, economy, industry, agricultural, commerce, culture, sports, tourism, and the environment, all of which require the continuation and development of what we want towards the creation of a free, advanced society and a new, hopeful, forward-looking Palestinian person.

Building a state and a society that qualify as modern and progressive requires us all to safeguard the achievements obtained by women in the Palestinian society, and to prevent any undermining of their role. The Palestinian woman has struggled, resisted occupation, and stood fast on her land alongside men. She was an equal to men in martyrdom and imprisonment, and she must be an equal to him in all rights, just as she was an equal in all duties.

I would like to emphasize the need to protect public and individual freedoms in accordance with the law. These cannot be undermined under any pretext. These include the freedom of expression, belonging, and other freedoms, including the freedom of civil society institutions.

Another issue that I would like to remind you all of relates to the social and national fabric of our Palestinian people. Muslims and Christians of Palestine are equal citizens in front of the law. We are committed to provide, protect and care for all the Muslim and Christian shrines. We will not allow any group to start ethnic disturbances. Palestine is the cradle of monotheistic religions; it is the land of Al-Aqsa, and the land of the Nativity Church and the Holy Sepulcher.

This leads me to the issue of Jerusalem, the beating heart of Palestine. I would like to assert in front of you, and in front of the entire world, especially the Israelis, that the current measures undertaken to isolate the city, expel its citizens in what is a form of ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Christians and Muslims alike, and the insistence to Judaize the city, along with the other Israeli measures that contradict international law, will not be legitimate, and will not be a matter accepted by any Palestinian citizen. The Israeli obstinacy regarding Jerusalem and its future will prevent the achievement of our desired goal, namely a just peace between the states of Palestine and Israel.

I address myself to the Israelis, especially that they are on the verge of parliamentary elections. I guarantee to them that the path to security can only pass through a just peace. We are confident that there is no military solution to the conflict. Negotiations between us as equal partners should put a long-due end to the cycle of violence.

I tell them in all honesty and clarity that the continuation of occupation and settlement expansion ... that checkpoints, arbitrary killings, the separation wall, and arrests will only lead to hatred, despair and continued conflict. Let us together make peace today before tomorrow. Let us live in two neighboring states. Let us educate our children the culture of life, not the culture of death. Let us teach them that the free man is the one who defends the freedom of the other and that he who loves God, loves mankind.

I would like to stress, in particular, that the era of unilateral solutions is over... There is a Palestinian partner who is ready to sit at the negotiation table with an Israeli partner so as to reach a solution that is based on international legitimacy, the Arab Peace Initiative, and the Road Map, a solution that is based on respecting all previous agreements and commitments. We want a just solution that guarantees the fulfillment of peace, not a unilateral, partial, or temporary solution that will kill the chance for peace, nor a state with provisional borders. I assure the world that we strongly believe that justice prevails over force. We will have the same perseverance in attaining our rights and desire for peace. The entire world should bear its responsibility to make this dream come true... peace in the Holy Land... Peace in the land of Peace.

*This is an unofficial translation of the speech delivered in Arabic. It has not been modified by the **Palestine-Israel Journal**.*