

Abu Mazen to Israel: "Let's discuss the end of the conflict", 24 March 2006

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The Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) I met with on Wednesday in the Muqata, in Ramallah, was different from the person I met back in the days when Yasser Arafat cast a giant shadow over his surroundings. Shortly after rebuffing an attempt by Hamas to emasculate the political agenda of the PLO Executive, the 71-year-old chairman looked fresh, self-confident and even assertive.

The look of the chairman's bureau has also changed. The bleary-eyed policemen in the faded uniforms who were sprawled on field beds have disappeared. They have been replaced by officials in attractive suits, who tread quietly across new carpets stretching out between shiny white walls. What remains of the man who was the symbol of a nation for a generation are a few portraits and scaffolding on his grave.

Palestinian commentators maintain that Abu Mazen's status was never so firm as it is now. Everyone - Fatah, Hamas, the Americans, the Europeans and even a few Israelis - understand that, battered though he is, he is the final obstacle to ultimate chaos. Abu Mazen understands that his fate - and even more, the fate of his nation - depends decisively on the vote of the millions of the Palestinians' neighbors who will go to the polls next Tuesday.

"I have been studying you and the Zionist movement for 36 years," he says, "and I think I understand your mentality and know what you expect from us." Apparently the chairman has understood that if a Palestinian leader wants to square accounts with an Israeli leader, he would do well to wish him success in the elections or, at least, to say a good word or two about his party. He is clearly weighing every word carefully, so that the message that "there is a partner" that he wants to convey to the Israeli public will not immediately become a right-wing election slogan. He is counting on the discerning to understand.

"You are going into very important elections," Abu Mazen says. "We are in a historic period, in which we must decide whether we will move toward peace and a better future for our children. I can promise that you have a partner for this peace. On the day after the elections you will find us ready to sit in negotiations with no prior conditions. The leadership of both peoples and also of the international community has a supreme responsibility to exploit this opportunity. It may be the last hope to accord the two peoples their right to live in security and stability. The coming generations will not forgive us if we let it slip by.

"If I am not a partner, ask yourselves who is a partner. I am one of those who signed the Oslo agreement and was a patron of the negotiations that were conducted prior to it in secret for eight months. I supported, and I continue to support, a clear peace plan, based on the legitimacy of international law, to which we all agreed, and on the road map. I have called ceaselessly for a hudna [cease-fire] in order to enable the continuation of negotiations, and I achieved a period of calm when I was prime minister.

"I have often swum against the current, but when our public hears from Israel that there is no Palestinian partner - that is something that I cannot explain. For example, in the matter of the prison in Jericho, when I call on all the Palestinian organizations to respect the agreements we signed, I am asked why the Israelis kidnapped the prisoners, contrary to our agreement with the Americans? What I am supposed to answer?

"I will remind you that on the day I was elected, there were attacks on Gaza and already then, one of your senior army personnel said that there is no partner for negotiations. I am afraid that Israel does not want negotiations and has found itself the excuse that it has no partner."

What partner are we talking about after the victory of Hamas, an organization that refuses to recognize agreements or to hold peace talks?

Abu Mazen: "That is the price of democracy. The Palestinian people elected this government, but the PLO Executive and all the organizations stated that they reject the Hamas platform.

Fatah made mistakes in a few places, and the election system helped Hamas win. But 51 percent of the Palestinians support Fatah's political plan. I prefer to moderate Hamas and not to push it to extremes. You have undoubtedly noticed that they are still not in the government. [Abu Mazen is determined to postpone the swearing-in of the government until after the Arab League summit meeting in Khartoum next Tuesday, in the hope of obtaining support for his policy on the basis of the resolutions of the March 2002 Beirut summit - A.E.]

"The negotiations with Israel will be conducted by the PLO's negotiations unit, on the basis of international legitimacy and the Arab [Saudi] initiative. I am unreservedly committed to the road map, to which you [Israel] appended 14 reservations. If we reach an agreement, I will be the one to sign it. If needed, I will put it to a referendum. I received 62 percent in the elections, in which I condemned violence outspokenly. I am certain that I will also succeed in getting a majority for a peace agreement."

But you have not been able to restore order domestically and, above all, to unite the security units and disarm the militants, as you pledged.

"You sabotaged every chance we had to rehabilitate the security units. When I asked Israel to allow us to bring in arms, we were told to take them from the Mafia and from smugglers. No self-respecting government behaves like that. Israel and the Americans did not accede to any of my requests, and I found myself in a confrontation with the Tanzim [militia] with empty hands. Even the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, asked Ariel Sharon if he wants us to fight the armed militants with stones.

"I am your neighbor and it is up to you to help me so that I can fulfill my commitments. It is time you treated us like human beings. Where did you ever hear of an army entering territory that is under the control of another army, and forcing the soldiers to strip in front of the whole world? That is a sure way to strip me and our security units of all influence. We have a proverb that says that you can't throw someone in the water and expect him to come out dry."

A large portion of the Israeli public will go to the polls in order to vote for Ehud Olmert's unilateral plan. What's wrong with that?

"Olmert's plan may bring about a 10-year hudna and a state with temporary borders. But it will not bring you peace. Plans like that leave the problem open, but do not resolve it. We saw what happens when the end of the conflict is postponed. I cannot promise you what will happen in the coming generations. According to Oslo, we were supposed to reach a final-status agreement by May 1999, and we saw what happened. Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, Shimon Peres lost the elections and Benjamin Netanyahu destroyed everything. I am proposing to you to sit now and discuss the end of the conflict. I proposed to Peres and the Americans to open a back channel of talks, far from the spotlight. And I am convinced that within less than a year, we will be able to sign an agreement."

Can you offer the Israelis a two-state solution without the Palestinians' right of return to Israel?

"Our solution is based on the Beirut declaration of 2002, which was the biggest gift Israel received since its establishment. It has special importance because its origin is Saudi Arabia, the land of the Islamic holy places, and because all the Arab states and all the Muslim states at the conference declared their readiness for normalization with Israel after the occupation of the territories ends. Seventy percent of you supported the initiative, and it is a pity that it was shunted aside.

"As regards the refugees, Israel cannot disavow this problem morally and judicially. At Camp David both the Israeli delegation and the American delegation agreed that action is needed to find a solution. Give me reason why we should not sit at the table and continue the effort to find a settlement on the basis of the five options proposed to the refugees by President Bill Clinton in his blueprint, and on the basis of the Arab League declaration, according to which

the solution must be just and agreed, on the basis of United Nations [General Assembly] Resolution 194."

Are you ready to say that the solution of the refugee problem has to be agreed to by Israel?

"Definitely, but I want to remind you that it was Ehud Barak who stated, at Camp David, that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. I propose that we sit and discuss the refugee issue like every other issue, which was raised in the Clinton blueprint or discussed at Taba. The negotiations were disrupted in September 2000 in the wake of Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount and the violent intifada that erupted after that. I did not stop calling for a cessation of the violence and I will not cease extending my hand in peace, even if this causes my downfall. But you are the strong side and it is in your hands to end the conflict.

"We must come to the negotiating table in good faith and with a genuine and true desire to resolve the conflict. I have to put myself in your shoes and you will put yourselves in my shoes. When each side understands the rights of the other, there is a chance that we will reach a solution. It will not happen if you ambush me in the corner in order to grab a slice here and a slice there. I accept the right of every Israeli citizen to live in security and within agreed borders, which are the borders of 1967. I know well the meaning of life in a situation of unstable security. On the other hand, we, too, have the right to live in an independent state in the 1967 borders, without fences, without settlements and without military attacks. You should know that not a day passes without a funeral here, without people being wounded and without arrests."

Will you agree to a territorial swap that will make it possible for Israel to retain some of the settlements?

"I do not rule it out. In the negotiations each side will present its requests. It will all be done according to international law. For years you said there is no Palestinian people and we refused to recognize Israel's existence. President Bush said that a viable Palestinian state with territorial contiguity has to be established alongside Israel. Translate that into facts on the ground."

Do you agree with the view that the withdrawal from Gaza played into the hands of Hamas?

"In the first stage we decided not to relate at all to the unilateral withdrawal, but I decided to change our position and announced that we were ready to coordinate the withdrawal. We gave our word that the settlers and the army would leave unharmed, and we kept our word. Since you left, the total closure you have imposed on the Gaza Strip has brought about real hunger and growing chaos there. Naturally this situation does not serve the forces that are striving for a two-state settlement. And I, as you know, do not believe in a one-state solution."