

Meeting of
President Mahmoud Abbas
With Board of Trustees of the Washington
Institute for Near East Policy
Ramallah, 14-11-2010

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen

We are honored to receive you here in the Palestinian territories. I hope that you will have the opportunity to see what is happening and going on here, especially after the efforts by Palestinian Authority to keep peace, and security, to make the economy flourish. I hope you can see everything here, especially at night because in the past nobody dare to go out to the streets at night. It was terrible at that time, now everything is moving very smoothly. We cooperate with the Israeli side, and we cooperate with America in order to maintain law and in order I don't wish to make a lecture but I want to add some words. It's a good opportunity to receive you and to continue our efforts, because we started our efforts about a year ago, when we held a meeting with the American Jewry in Washington, and after that in New York, then in Paris. Of course we are going to continue our efforts, maybe in march we will have a gathering in Europe for four hundred people from the Jewish people in Europe, and we will talk to them, because we want everybody to know each other, we want them to know us, to know our aims, to know our intentions. And at the same time we want help from you, because we want peace, really we want peace. And in the same time, by the beginning of next month, we will have a gathering here for one hundred and fifty Israelis, and around

50 to 70 Palestinians also to exchange views, and to talk because at the end we want to live with the Israelis in peace and security. When we talk about the cooperation here, we mean that we want to live in peace with our neighbors. What kind of peace do we want? We want our state on the 1967 borders with agreed swap and everything will be negotiated after that. All the issues will be on the table, water, refugees, what ever they are. It will be on the table to be discussed by both sides, and we have to know that the Israelis are in need for the security, and we have to do our share concerning this aim. In the past, we tried to exert our efforts in order to come to the direct talks. The last meetings were in Washington with President Obama and after that we had another meeting in Sharm El Sheikh and a third meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu in his residence in Jerusalem. Today we have some news about the settlements freeze, and now I can't make any comments on that, because until now we didn't receive any thing official from the American side. So now we are waiting until we receive some thing, and we will look at everything positively. We will continue to demand that the Palestinians should have a state in one year as President Obama promised us. I welcome you, and enjoy your lunch. During the lunch, you can ask any Questions you want. Thank you.

Q: It has been reported that you are considering other option?

The President: We told the Americans and the Israeli sides that we have options. We can talk about their options but the first option that settlement activities should be frozen for a while, one month, two months, three months, it doesn't matter, and during this period we will concentrate on two

major issues, borders and security, because I know that the Israeli side knows that, borders are very sensitive to us, and security is very sensitive to the Israelis. So if we solve these two problems, the other problems can be tackled over a period of six months, seven months, one year. Then we can put an end to the conflict and to the historical demands. I want to say here what I mean by historical demands, when we have an agreement and sign this agreement, no body from both sides I allowed to talk about historical demands enough is enough, concerning the recent American effort, I didn't receive an official proposal from the American side, so its better to take our time, to wait until we have this officially, I can't make a comment on media reports, because the media say what ever they like. I want to listen and hear from the American administration. Yesterday, I received the American Consul General Mr. Daniel Rubinstein. He told me that within a week, or so there will be something. I said OK, I didn't make any declaration or statement, because we are waiting.

Q: I would like to know if you have a message for Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The President: I think you know, as I do, that I know Prime Minister Netanyahu for a long time and we met each other, from 1996 to 1999, so we know each other and we concluded an agreement in Wie River. After that, he stepped down, or resigned I don't recall. Now he came back, I met with him in Washington, as I said, In Sharm El Sheikh and in Jerusalem more than 16 hours of talking about the future, about our intentions. I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu is the elected prime minister by the Israeli people, and I have to deal with him. Maybe now there is nothing promising from what he is saying, it's the negotiations. We will wait and we

are ready, we showed our readiness all the time to deal with the Prime Minister and his cabinet.

Q1: We're going to meeting Olmert. He submitted accounts that he submitted proposals that answered every single Palestinian demand, allegedly he went on to say that they were rejected, it might be helpful to get your version of these allegations.

The President: My story with Mr. Olmert had been published by President Bush. He wrote his memoirs, in a published book you can read. What did he say in the book? What I can say is that we discussed all the core issues, borders and security, refugees, water, everything. I can't claim that we came to a conclusion except in one subject, it is the security. Why? Because we proposed from the very beginning that there will be a third party. What kind of third party? At the end, we said it's a three sided talks, we asked President Bush, do you accept? He said yes. It was all discussed with General Jim Jones, and you all know who is General Jones, General Jones went to Egypt and to Jordan to ask them, and they accepted the concept. Then they concluded and closed the file and he put it on his shelf. We can't say that this is an agreement, because the principle which we agreed on since a long time, that nothing agreed until everything is agreed, but we discussed everything, we were very close, on borders, on Jerusalem, on water, on everything. I didn't reject anything. I will tell you a story and you can test it. At the end of 2008, I paid a visit to President Bush. At that time we tried to come to a conclusion about the every things, because he was preparing himself to leave the white house. He asked me: can you send a delegation to Washington on the second or the third of January, to bridge the gap on territories? I

said yes, because we were very close, in other words, there was a proposal on the swap from the Palestinian side, there was a proposal on the swap from the Israeli side, we even exchanged the maps. He showed me the maps, I gave him my maps. On the 27 of December there was the war against Gaza. Despite that, I told my colleagues to go to Washington. They approached Shalom Turjman, the director of the Prime Minister's office. We asked him, please we are going to Washington to talk about the borders and to bridge the gap between us. He said I cannot there is a war. We were the ones who are supposed not to go, but the Israel side refused to go. This opportunity had been missed. We did not reject anything at all. We exchanged all our views on everything as I described, the security and the other issues, and we did not come to a conclusion.

I will tell you a story about the borders after Annapolis, we immediately launched the talks. On borders we couldn't touch it for 2 – 3 months because we did not have a frame of reference. We were asking for something, the Israelis were asking for something, at the end, Condoleezza Rice came to us and to the Israelis at the same time to tell us: you are asking us about our concept concerning the occupied territories. We can tell you the following: we, the Americans, believe that the Occupied Territories include the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and by West Bank we mean East Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley, and the No Man's Land. Please start your talks, your negotiations accordingly. The next day we started talking on this basis. It wasn't rejected at all by Mr. Olmert, on the contrary, we started talking about what kind of swap we want. When we talked about the swap, we talked about the 1967 borders. Now everything is denied and we have to start from zero.

Q2: I'd like to pursue the threat of Gaza. We know that Gaza is not under the control of the Palestinian Authority, yet the Palestinian Authority gives it funds to support it. I'd like to know what the relationship is between Gaza and the West Bank, and what is the strategy might be for wresting control of it?

The President: You know that Hamas staged a coup d'etat? Immediately after they committed this crime, and we call it a crime, the Arab league came to a conclusion that Egypt should follow up this crisis and should find a solution for it. After one year or one year and a half, the Egyptians came with a document, and asked us to sign this document. In October 1st, 2009 they came to us and asked us to sign it on October 15th. I knew there were many people who rejected this document, but I insisted that we should sign it, and on the 15th, I signed it. Hamas refused and till now they are refusing to sign this document. Two or three days ago, there was a round of talks between us and them in Damascus, but we didn't come to any agreement. We will continue the reconciliation effort, we want reconciliation, we want the unity of our land and our people, and we will work very very hard. We know at the end if we come to any agreement between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli side, we will go to a referendum, so every Palestinian can say yes or no. Hamas is our problem and we will find a solution, we don't want it to be an excuse or pretext. You have to talk to the legitimate leadership, you have to talk to the President of the Palestinian Authority. Leave Hamas to us, and we will deal with them, at the end we will find a solution, and of course we will find a linkage between the West Bank and Gaza. You know that is stipulated in the Oslo agreement and it is not denied by the Israeli side. All the time, they are talking about

what we call the 'safe passage' so we are working on that, I hope that we will reach an agreement but we have these tracks, reconciliation is a track, negotiation is another track, our development here and security and economy is a third track. We are working on these tracks, at the same level, and make the same efforts.

Q3: I must say that you are to be congratulated about improving the economy, the security etc. It's working. I must say, it's working. I thank you for your hospitality. And thank you for your leadership. I do want to ask you a question about Israel's experience in withdrawing from Lebanon. It was problematic. There's no question about that. And I'm just curious if a withdrawal from the West Bank would not be a similar experience?

The President: Before Prime Minister Sharon decided to withdraw or leave the Gaza Strip, I asked him many times, please do it with us, coordinate it with us, let us know. He refused to tell us anything even the date of the withdrawal. He didn't talk about it, and he left Gaza at that time. The situation in Gaza at that time was deteriorating, and Hamas at that time was growing and growing. By the way, this withdrawal was a unilateral action. He did the same in Lebanon. We told them, it will be a mutual agreement between us and you, you try us for three years and there was no single incident, nothing happened, and it is not a secret. We pursued, heavy handed policy on security, and we succeeded to keep security, law, and order, everywhere in the West Bank, or at least in the territories which are under our control, because there are some territories that are not under our control and sometimes there were some incidents here and there. And by the way, when we were in Washington, two incidents took

place in Hebron and Ramallah in the area C, and after 8 hours, we put our hands on everything, on those who committed this crime, on the weapons and everything, after 8 hours, while this territory is not under our control. Now we ask, and I talked for a long time with the Prime Minister, please try us, and you already tried us. We can keep our word, because we believe in peace. If you came here 4 years ago, you will never hear a word about peace, because the culture of war, the culture of the Intifada, the culture of violence prevailed. Now we changed the culture from war, from of violence, from intifada, and armed intifada, to peace. So we are doing our job, we are doing our share. Let us try, but if you will say, ok we left Lebanon and we left Gaza and who will give us any guarantee, we will give you the guarantee, you try us. The West Bank is 6000 km same and you have the ability to do everything but let us try. If you don't want, you will keep your occupation, it is up to you, keep the occupation, either it will be apartheid, or it will be one state. We are not seeking the one state, we are not talking about a one state solution, we want our entity, we want our independent state to live beside Israel. But if you don't want, and every day you are working unilaterally on the settlements. And by the way, when we talked about the Security Council Prime Minister Netanyahu said the Palestinians shouldn't go unilaterally to the Security Council. We are talking now about the future, but everyday he is doing unilateral actions in our territories, it is occupied territories. Give us a chance to negotiate and to demarcate the borders and after that, you can build in your territories and we will control our territories. So here we are, try us, and you already tried us. As the Israelis about security in the West Bank, you will have the answer from everybody, from all the military, from the politicians, from everybody. And you can ask the Americans, you can ask the Europeans. In the past, there was some chaos here, but now nothing.

We don't want to miss this opportunity, because at the end, we don't want our people are to despair. Now our security service for instance, all our institutions in the authority are working very hard on security, because they believe that there is a hope, and that they will have an independent state. If they are disappointed, I don't know what will happen.

Q4: Mr. President, thank you for your generous hospitality. We are grateful to you for your hospitality. You've said we want an end to conflict and an end to claims and a demilitarized state. Second, which is most of all controversial areas? It's controversial in Israel, too. I represent myself here. I want you to know how certain words used by the Israeli right could mean when you say the following. "If the Israelis want to call themselves the Zionist empire, that's their business. We recognize the state of Israel." They will use your words to say that you will not say Israel is a nation state for the Jewish people with equal rights for all of its' citizens because you does not believe in that. When you don't explain why you won't do it the Jewish right or the Israeli people doubt your motives. Do you not want to say it for three reasons: A, this means you will discriminate against Israeli Arabs, the statement would be equal rights for all its' citizens. B, it will be used to undermine the refugee issue as a final status issue...or C, it is a bargaining chip, given the Israelis have more chips than you do, and you are putting this in your pocket till the end of negotiations? Your answer is utilized by sections in Israel and America to say at the end of the day, he doesn't really accept the Jews here as a collective soul. So please explain why you have reservations at this point. Without answering truthfully, twists are put on your words.

The President: When you asked me in Washington, I think you asked the question, I said it is up to you, it is your concern, you can tell yourself whatever you like. In 1993, on the 9th of September, we signed a mutual agreement between the PLO and late Prime Minister Rabin. It reads as following: we recognize Israel's right to live and exist. This is the exact text that was brought from the Israeli side by the Foreign Minister of Norway on the other side, Rabin said Israel recognizes the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and that he will negotiate with it accordingly. Its enough, this is exactly what you want, this is exactly what we want, and we signed it. Now from time to time, after that, they asked us to eliminate some articles in our Covenant, the PLO charter, which is calling for destruction Israel. We said ok. From 1996 we convened the PNC – the Palestine National Council – and we eliminated the articles. In 1998, Netanyahu insisted that we should do it again, or else he will not sign the agreement on Wye River. President Clinton said you have to do it, and I will come to Gaza to attend this session of the PNC, and we did it again. So I don't want from time to time to come with an issue, a new issue here and there. Now, in the past nobody mentioned this question, the Jewish state, but it is up to you to go to the United Nations, to go to everybody, to tell them now we will change our name from this to that, it is up to you, it is not up to us, and I gave examples, when you concluded the peace treaty with Jordan and Egypt you didn't ask this question. So it is up to you to do it.

Why should I do it? There is no reason, because every other month you will bring something with you, now we are talking about 6 core issues, its only six as stipulated in Oslo, borders, security, Jerusalem, refugees, water, and settlements. That is it, let us concentrate on this, to work on it, to solve this problem.

When we sign an agreement on these six issues, of course at the end we want the prisoners to be released. There should be no prisoners, no remaining issues, no outstanding issues, but it is not one of the core issues. We are asking for it from time to time. When we sign, nobody is allowed to come after one month and ask for new things.

End of conflict means the conflict will be over not only between the Palestinians and the Israelis, because if the Israelis withdraw from the Golan Heights, and I think this is very easy, and put the shab'a Farms under the United Nations it will be over. According to the Arab Peace Initiative, I think all of you read it, and the Arab and Muslim countries will recognize Israel and will raise its flag in their capital, so there will be no conflict.

Q5: But what about end of conflict, end of claim, the demilitarized state?

The President: Now, I will tell you something, we comply completely with the agreements between us and the Israelis. Mr. Netanyahu used to say that the Palestinians should fulfill their commitments. We fulfilled everything provided for in the mutual agreements and in the international plans. Allow me to go back to our commitments in Oslo. In Oslo they said that the Palestinian Authority should have a strong police force, we complied. Who will testify to that? I leave it to the Americans. I will accept what the Israeli side means by a strong police force.

We are ready to accept a third party as we agreed with Olmert, and Bush, King Abdallah, and President Mubarak, to prevent any kind of actions committed against Israel for a certain period of time, which means 10 or 15 years. The

number doesn't matter, the location doesn't matter, to assure the Israelis that they are safe. But also, as I said in Washington, we cannot accept any Israeli whether he is Muslim, or Durzi, or Christian, or Jew. But if the third party includes Jews from the US or Europe, then of course yes, if the leaders of these troops is a Jew, why not, because we are not against Jews, we are against the occupation by Israel.

Q8: I'd like to ask you what is going on under your leadership here in the Palestinian territory in order to improve the environment for peace. I know on your left is the head of the Palestine TV that has an important role to play in teaching peace and showing peace. What progress is being made to improve the culture of peace and to fight incitement? You, yourself, said it was important to fight incitement on both sides – Israeli and Palestinian. What remains in terms of incitement among Palestinians that you believe needs to be fought?

The President: I acknowledge that there is incitement here. I will not talk about the Israeli side. I am not talking about Rabi Ovadia Yousef and others. I will not talk about anyone in the Israeli side, but I will say that we have incitement. In 1998, in Wye River, one of the agreements we signed was about incitement, and at that time we agreed that we have to establish a trilateral committee, from the American side, from the Palestinian side, and from the Israeli side, to deal with all kinds of incitement, from both sides. We said many times, please, let us re-launch, let us revive this committee away from the negotiations, we are not talking about negotiations. We are talking only about incitement. You complain that there is incitement from the Palestinian side, and I acknowledge, but come to the table to say this, and at the end we will solve all kinds of incitement.

Comment the President by Israeli on restrictive measure on freedom of movement.

Concerning the free move of the ordinary people from one place to another, it is clear they suffer a great deal. I will talk about myself. I am not allowed to leave Ramallah, to go outside Ramallah, without a permission from the Israeli side, I have to submit an application 24 hours at least to the Israeli side to tell them that I am leaving tomorrow or the day after, and seek permission for the people who will accompany me, and give the details of the cars I will use. Sometimes they put a veto on some of my people who are accompanying me and I accept because I don't want to make any problems with the Israelis. Why? Because this is not our intention, this is not our aim, our aim is to reach peace. But I am asking myself some questions, till when will we wait? Till when? Now for more than 62 years I am a refugee, which means that there is a conflict, and I extend my hand, to put an end to the conflict and to the historical demands. Please try to solve these core issues, because I am afraid that we will miss this opportunity, I am afraid, thank you.

Q7: Don't you think that the Prime Minister Netanyahu is changing?

Everyone sees you Mr. President, the leader who wants peace for his people. And there are doubts and suspicions but I accept Nabil's point there's some real issues on the ground. There are issues. There's an occupation and I want to be honest about it. But would you agree Mr. President, that when Netanyahu gets up at the White House and says these sentences. I want an historic sharing of the land with you. And we know the significance of these words. The Likud, for decades, was against the historic sharing of the land. For them

to say a two state solution – this was the organizing principle of Likud – they were against it (the two state solutions) and if he takes down 11 of the 44 major checkpoints, he has come a distance? I don't agree with Netanyahu on many points, but I do want to say in his defense that where he was coming from. For him to say what he said in Washington, at the ceremony with President Obama, is a real change and I close my eyes and I thought I was listening to Yitzhak Rabin. And I miss Rabin very much. I just wrote an article on his 15th anniversary. I knew Rabin well and even though I have my disagreements with Netanyahu, I don't hide them, I do think to be fair to Israel, Israel deserves some credit, in terms of from where its' leadership has come from, that it now, supports a two state solution. You know it can talk about historic sharing. Richard Nixon frankly went to China. Only some one from the Right (wing) made this breakthrough. And for Netanyahu to say it publicly, that's it. That's the consensus of Israel. There will always be a few people against it. And they are being powerful. But he can carry 70% of Israel, so I do think while we can point to the shortcomings, wouldn't you agree, Mr. President, that there has been a shift in tone, two states, historical sharing of land, we have a partner. All these years, Netanyahu has said there has been no partner, you know this. You read the Israeli press very carefully. For him to say that, that is a signal to his people back home, that something has changed and I'm just wondering how we can do more, conditioning of the public, because as a leadership you are saying tough things to your own people. Netanyahu is telling his own people we have to share the land. And there will be two states. We have a partner. We cannot say that we don't have a partner. This just means something. What do you think about what Netanyahu has done? And how do you see the role of leadership in conditioning not just the other, but your own?

The President: I agree with you that there are many changes in the attitude of Prime Minister Netanyahu, if we make a comparison between the beginning and now. I believe that there is a change, but he should go along the way to the happy end that we are looking for on both sides. I don't think that his coalition and these settlements are more precious than peace, peace is the most precious things that we can give to our generation, give to our children and grandchildren. Now when Netanyahu says that he is afraid that the coalition will collapse, we can change the coalition if it is the real problem, he can change it because we have a noble aim which is peace, and peace will not wait for me or for him, and nobody knows who will be out, either myself or himself. I don't know, but now it is the opportunity. All the states around the world are looking for peace, are pushing us for peace, so let us remove everything from the way except one goal, how to achieve peace. We are ready to engage, give us the opportunity, freeze the settlements for 2 months or 3 months. What will happen? What will happen for Lieberman? Nothing will happen. We remember Rabin, and what he at the end achieved, he is a man of peace, he is a leader, but unfortunately he was killed. Now if we want to look for the future of our people, for the future of the region as a whole, peace is the only aim and should be the only issue on the table, nothing else.

Finally, I highly appreciate your visit to us. We are determined to continue our mutual talks everywhere at any time. When they told me that David and some of his colleagues are coming here, I said with pleasure at anytime, and we will continue. As I said, Yasser is in charge of the conferences between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We did it before, I did it by the way in the 1970s, I used to meet with Jews in the 1970s and at that time everybody criticized me, but

at that time I had a vision that without talking with our neighbors, we will not achieve peace. We have to talk with them, we have to challenge each other peacefully, and now in the end we have, and we will continue. Please if you have an opportunity to visit some other Palestinian cities, please do it because you will see law and order, and you will see hope. The message everybody is looking for peace. Please convey to Prime Minister Netanyahu. Don't make us despair. We want peace. Thank you very much.