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President Mahmoud Abbas

Good evening

I would like to thank you all for your presence here tonight. I am pleased to see you all here, especially the young people who are preparing for the future. I was keen to meet you all and for you to hear what I have to say.

Meeting of President Mahmoud Abbas with Representatives of the Jewish Community in France

leaders of the Jewish community in France and Latin America. The Jewish community in France has a long and rich history. In such instances, it is important to have conferences and dialogues between the leaderships of the Jewish community internally between the leaderships of the Jewish community meeting and the leaderships of the Jewish community. No secrets. You are all here to hear my opinion according to my own understanding.

(In Hebrew - meaning)

Meeting of
President Mahmoud Abbas
with Representatives of the Jewish
Community in France
(Paris - 26-9-2010)

Good evening to you all!

I would like to start by expressing my wishes and greetings to you all," Shana Tova and Hag Sammyah".¹ I have been preparing for such a meeting for a long time now because I was keen on meeting with you to exchange opinions, and for you to hear what we want, and for us to hear what you want. I hope this encounter today is the beginning of further and wider meetings in the future that would allow communication and interaction between us because we have one common goal, namely peace. In the past I have tried and managed to hold many meetings and I met with leaders of the Jewish communities in South Africa, Canada, and Latin America. Last June, I met in Washington with all the Jewish leaders and I met few days ago with the leaders of Jewish community in New York. I will continue to engage in such meetings. Of course, we also have plans to conduct conferences and meetings between Palestinians and Israelis internally because it is the people who make peace and not the leaderships. I would like to tell you from now that this meeting and the other meetings are open and there will be no secrets. You can ask any question and you will hear our opinion according to our beliefs convictions.

¹ In Hebrew - meaning Happy New Year and happy feast.

At the beginning of this month, direct negotiations were launched between us and the Israeli side. I met with Mr. Netanyahu several times. The first meetings took place in Washington and then in Sharm Al Sheikh. Then we met at Mr. Netanyahu's house in West Jerusalem. We discussed several issues related to the negotiations. Undoubtedly, this is a very difficult issue and we should not deceive ourselves and say we are close to forging a peace agreement. Yet, the thousand-mile journey starts with one step as they say. If the will, the conviction, and the seriousness were there, we would definitely cross this journey. Currently, the peace process enjoys the full support of President Obama, the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and Senator Mitchell. It also enjoys the support of almost the whole world. I have witnessed that at the UN where I met with more than 60 officials including heads of states, ministers of foreign affairs, prime ministers, or ministers of affairs. They all believe that peace should be achieved in the Middle East between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We also believe that peace should prevail between the Syrians and the Israelis and between the Lebanese and the Israelis. This is what we call the comprehensive peace according to the Arab peace initiative that you are all well aware of. We are saying that should this peace be realized, then 57 Arab and Muslim countries will immediately recognize Israel and normalize their relations with Israel. This is an official document that has become part of the Road Map plan. The Road Map plan in turn is the UN Security Council resolution 1515. Additionally, we believe that the vast majority of the Israeli and Palestinian people want peace. You might wonder, but who are the parties that do not want peace? Certainly, peace has its enemies and there are forces that do not want peace and are placing obstacles in its path. However, there needs to be a strong

will to prevent them from achieving their dreams and hopes and to allow peace to finally prevail in the region.

The negotiations that started recently, are not starting from scratch. As you know, we had in the past rounds and rounds of meetings and discussions, the last of which were the negotiations with the government of former Prime Minister Olmert's. During these negotiations, we discussed all final status issues, and by that I mean issues related to borders, settlements, security, refugees, water, and other issues. Therefore, we are not starting from square one. We have international terms of reference that we respect. The most prominent of such terms are the UN resolutions 242 and 338, the Road Map plan, and the Oslo agreements, as well as the agreements signed after Oslo. Therefore, I don't believe we are starting from the scratch. These issues have matured and the time has come now for decisions rather than for negotiations.

As I said earlier, we engaged recently in serious negotiations during which I spent long hours with Mr. Netanyahu as we discussed in-depth important issues, the content of which I cannot address here, since we agreed to keep the discussions confidential. In other words, we agreed to keep what we said during those sessions, particularly the sessions on Jerusalem, confidential in order to protect these negotiations from the media and from those who want to sabotage them. What do we want? We want a state on the 1967 borders with reciprocal adjustments that are equal in size and value. We want the Israelis to feel secure and I agreed with Mr. Olmert that a third party, whether the NATO or any other party, would be stationed in the Palestinian territories for a long period of time until the Israelis feel confident about their

borders and security, and until we strengthen our police force that was stipulated under the Oslo agreements. The Oslo agreements stipulated that the Palestinians can have a strong police force. As for the refugees, which I believe is an important issue, the Arab Peace Initiative stipulated in one of its paragraphs that there needs to be a fair and agreed upon solution for the question of refugees. Therefore, the question of refugees is a historical question that no one can deny and should be put on the negotiations table in order to reach an agreement between the two sides. On one occasion, someone asked me at the Brookings Institution: An agreement between whom? I answered, of course an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Therefore, the questions are subject to agreement. This is what we exactly want out of negotiations. We want to realize what the Road Map plan stipulated in terms of the two-state vision. The Road Map plan provided for the establishment of an independent, geographically congruent, democratic, and viable Palestinian state that lives side by side with the state of Israel.

Currently, we have a very critical issue, namely, the issue of the ongoing settlement activities in the Palestinian territories. A while ago, an agreement was reached between the American Administration and Israel on what we call a moratorium for ten months. Apparently, the ten months elapsed yesterday, and therefore, we asked for an extension of the moratorium since Mr. Netanyahu approved the moratorium during a period when no direct negotiations were taking place. We have entered a serious phase now as we resumed direct negotiations and we are asking for the moratorium to be extended for another period of time until we are able to address the core issues. The most prominent

core issues are the borders and the security. If these two issues were addressed, the other core issues can be taken up and followed upon immediately to reach a solution. We agreed that the duration of the negotiations is for one year and I believe that one year is sufficient because as I said we have discussed the issues over and over for years now, and the time has come for taking decisions. Frankly speaking, it's either peace or settlement activities. I believe that peace is more valuable for all of us. It is more valuable for our children, grandchildren, and future generations than the construction of a settlement here and there. If we agreed on and defined the borders, and each party knew its borders, then Israel can build within its borders in the manner that it deems appropriate. However, the continuation of settlement activities is very painful to us. This is not only our opinion, for I have heard the same position from all the countries around the world. I heard it from the European Union, Russia, China, and from President Obama who spoke very frankly at the UN and said that settlement activities should be stopped. I also read a lot of articles in the Israeli newspapers, written by prominent figures inside Israel who call for a freeze of settlement activities for a period of time to give peace efforts a chance. I believe that there is no justification for the continuation of settlement activities. We are, as you might have heard, and hopefully will see in the future, fully preserving security in the West Bank. This is not what we claim, but what we heard from the Israeli side. They all say the same thing that security is well kept to prevent any terrorist operations from the West Bank. We are not doing this for the sake of Israel only. We are doing it for our people. Therefore, in the West Bank we have been living for the last four years in peace and stability and there is complete cooperation between the Palestinian and Israeli security forces in the presence of the Americans. To

us, security is a primary issue, it's a main issue. I will also tell you that whether there are negotiations or not, our security efforts will continue to protect a range of economic, social, and cultural activities that have started to emerge in our territories. The people have started to lead a normal life. A culture of peace has emerged as opposed to the culture of violence. You can imagine how difficult it is to shift people from one culture to the other particularly following the previous Uprising that you must have heard about. People have turned now to a culture of peace. Therefore, it is a valuable opportunity for us to keep the hope among our people, since the culture of peace could yield genuine peace. I hope that people will not become frustrated and ultimately desperate. I hope that things will not be overturned. I hope I will never see those days come back. I really wish that this track continues in the same pace in order to achieve peace as soon as possible. Palestinian institutions are being built, we want to prepare ourselves for a truly democratic state and we are working and trying with the Israeli side in this regard. We have stability, the economy is growing, what we really lack is the independence and the ability to live in dignity. The Palestinian people should live in dignity and when all the final status issues are resolved, we will reach a stage of ending the conflict and an end to the historical claims so that history does not pull us backwards. We want history to start on the day we sign a peace agreement. I know that the French government under the leadership of President Sarkozy gives utmost attention to this matter. President Sarkozy communicates with us and the Israeli government in order to have creative projects for peace because he feels that peace in the Middle East means also peace for France. We are all aware that extremism is not limited to one area and it has definitely reached here and other place. We do not

want this extremism to grow or prevail. We want it to shrink and retract because it affects us, affects France, Europe, and the whole world as well. Tomorrow I will meet with President Sarkozy and we will discuss all the issues. President Sarkozy is aware of our meeting today. Hopefully we will have larger meetings because it is important for us that you hear directly from us rather than hear about us. We are ready to put all the truth before you. We do not claim to own the truth but we will talk to you about everything we feel and believe in without any pretensions or delusions, because these are difficult times and the time is limited while the conditions are extremely difficult. In the world around us as you notice there are conflict areas everywhere. These conflicts will not end unless the Palestinian-Israeli and the Arab-Israeli conflicts are over. It is time for us to live in peace and stability after 62 years, 62 years is a long period and we are saying it's enough, can't we live together in peace? Of course, we can. Thank you!

Host: I forgot to introduce you to "Samy Coshnine", deputy head of the International Forum for Peace that I chair. I am trying to have a balance between men and women. I give the word now to "Arielle Shaun", chairperson of the Union of Jewish Students in France.

President Abbas: we need a balance between men and women and we should even give them more. We call them the better half, or the sweeter half.

Guest: I would like to thank you Mr. President for this meeting. We are honored to meet with you. You embody the courage for dialogue and here in France we need this model of courage. This meeting is a stage in a necessary

process of reflection and thinking for us. I think this meeting will help in the dialogue that we also want here in France over the next few months. A year ago, we were in Nablus with representatives from the Union of Jewish Students in France. One month ago, we were in Ramallah and met with Yaser Abed Rabbo. He told us that he had a feeling of hope and a sense of urgency regarding the negotiations that were resumed at the time. We noticed, as you have said, compared to last year, we noticed the process of modernization and democracy. We felt freedom on the streets of Ramallah. Of course, this has caught our attention because we do not hear a lot about that here in France, at least not within the Jewish community. Therefore, I would like to tell you first of all that we will convey this message and that whenever we visit Israel we will also visit the Palestinian territories and not only for political reasons but in order to understand what is happening and to walk in the Palestinian cities alongside those people who represent the hope.

I would like to ask you a question regarding this urgent feeling for the need to have peace that Yaser Abed Rabbo is talking about. He also said that the more the time passes, the more difficult it would be to reach a result through negotiations. What do you think of that?

President Abbas: It's true, what Yasser Abed Rabbo said is true. The more the time passes the more we miss opportunities. Yasser Abed Rabbo is among those who worked on the Geneva Initiative for peace. He follows up on the dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis. He was with us in New York, but unfortunately, he had to go back. But what he said was true. We are losing opportunities as time passes and therefore we should seize these chances. As for your testimony regarding what you

have seen in the West Bank, it is a testimony that we take pride in. This is what pushed us to invite all politicians to come and see for themselves the reality on the ground. I will tell you this frankly that the IDF officers and security personnel have been, for a while now, visiting the West Bank alone without security details and they wear their military uniforms and people know them. They move freely in the West Bank and this is happening for the first time. Of course, this is evidence to two things, first that security does prevail there, and second, that the culture among the people is that these are our neighbors. Every day actually on the roads- since Israeli and Palestinian sites are close - we find Israelis who lost their way into Palestinian cities, a woman, a child, a man or a soldier who lost their way. We ask them, what are you doing here? They say, we don't know, we don't know where to go. We immediately call the Israeli side and tell them that we have an Israeli citizen who lost his/her way and we hand them over within five minutes. This is the prevailing situation in the West Bank. We support the dialogue but I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we started this dialogue more than 30 years ago. We had a direct dialogue before Toledo, we conducted them in Romania and in Budapest. In Toledo, this man was one of those who joined us in 1988 for that meeting. We had prominent figures from Israel and others from outside Israel. The famous singer Safo was also with us and she sang Arabic songs for us during the meetings. We want to revive these meetings, more and more, not only meetings for socializing but also political meetings because we have many questions that we want to ask and I am sure the same applies to you. Who is going to answer these questions? It definitely won't be the media because the media, with all due respect, misleads the people sometimes. Therefore, we want to say, please hear things from us rather than hear things about us.

Guest: I would like to thank you Mr. President. I and my friends are very happy to be here and to listen to you. You are fulfilling a hope that we have expressed several times in the past for such meetings to be held. I am here not as a politician, or as a journalist or a French Jew belonging to the Jewish community, I am here as a firm supporter for peace and as an advocate for peace. For a long period of time I have contributed to, or attended discussions. At one point, these discussions were not desirable, or we were recommended against taking part in them. These meetings were secret. I have two questions, if you allow me Mr. President. You said that it was premature to say your opinion of Netanyahu but after those long hours of negotiations in West Jerusalem, do you trust Netanyahu? This is my first question. What is your opinion regarding President Obama's commitment, and to what extent is he ready to go? Weren't you surprised that Europe that helps the Palestinians was not part of these negotiations? Another observation- or the second question- you said that you need one year of negotiations. What is missing now that the negotiations have started for some time? If the settlers continued to , with or without the consent of Netanyahu, build settlements, would you suspend the negotiations? And to what extent are you ready to go for the negotiations to achieve their intended goals?

President Abbas: Mr. Netanyahu represents the interests of the Israeli people. He knows what he wants and what he doesn't. As a politician who is responsible for his people or for a cause, he cannot accept to be subject to the settlers' positions who are only concerned with their own interests. He can stop these settlers and he has done that in the past. When the American Vice President came to visit Jerusalem and was faced with some difficult positions, Netanyahu

ordered the settlers and those who were engaged in construction activities to stop and so they stopped. As the prime minister of Israel, he can take the tough decision and I don't think that stopping settlement activities is difficult. I don't think so. After some time we will make tough decisions for the sake of peace, if we cannot take such a decision as to stop settlement activities, then how can we take decisions regarding peace in general? Therefore we need the will and the courage. This is my answer to your first question.

As for President Obama, we feel that he is really devoted and committed to peace. We asked him to invite Europe because Europe has its weight. Europe knows us more than the U.S., and Europe is affected more by what happens with us than the U.S. Europe also helps us like the US, and therefore, Europe should have been invited. But I don't have the power of decision in this matter. I cannot impose who should come to Washington. If the meeting were to be held in Ramallah, I would have invited them all. I would have also invited the Russians.

True, we said one year to give ourselves the space and time, but believe me, we can reach an agreement in one month. But if we had said we will be able to conclude an agreement in one month, and then we failed, people will be frustrated and feel desperate. We are talking to you frankly and we can tell you what our positions are on all final status issues. We can give you that in writing even, but what is preventing me from doing that is that we agreed to keep our negotiations confidential and I respect the word 'confidential' as agreed. But I want to prove to you that I have full proposal for every final status issue including the ending of the conflict, which is even more important than the final status issues, because

if we solved all the issues but fell short of saying that this is the end of the conflict, we will go back five years down the line to disagreement. Thank you.

Guest: Mr. President, you said that on each side there are enemies of peace. On the Israeli side those are known, they are the supporters of settlement activities. They do not identify themselves as enemies of peace, they say, peace and settlements, however, the "and" here renders the peace void of its core meaning. To strengthen their argument, they say we do not have a partner, but they do not want to have a partner. Jean Pierre Cabage posed a question to you related to this issue and I would like to stress this question. The moratorium regarding settlement activities will elapse. Are you going to leave the negotiations if it was not extended? Or have you found a solution that allows you some kind of compromise in terms of continuing the negotiations? I would like to add two more questions related to the enemies of peace on the Arab side. We know that in some Arab countries, particularly in Lebanon, the refugees are living under very vulnerable conditions. They were not integrated in the society and therefore they demand in a radical manner the fulfillment of their right to return. Hasn't the time arrived for Palestinians to focus on integrating the refugees in the Arab countries where they live because their humanitarian conditions are disastrous? This is a scandal and an explosive political issue. Secondly, regarding the enemies of peace on the Arab side, we have talked about Hamas and I will not go back to this issue, but you said with great sincerity that Hamas represents Iranian politics. What about Iran today and its diplomatic initiative. Turkey has entered this diplomatic game and Turkey wants to have a leading role in the Arab and Muslim worlds. However, unlike

Egypt, Turkey does not want to contain the extremists, but rather supports them and we are seeing some aspects of an emerging Turkish-Iranian alliance to a certain extent. Does such an alliance or axis constitute an obstacle to peace? Of course, I should add to that the Iranian nuclear threat. What can we do regarding the Iranian or Turkish-Iranian interference in the Palestinian question?

President Abbas: Regarding the nuclear weapons, our declared and public position has always been that we want to see a Middle East that is free of nuclear weapons. When someone talks about eliminating the state of Israel, we say that the Middle East will be lacking one country. We want to see the establishment of a Palestinian state but not the elimination of another existing state. You talked about the Arab world, but Turkey and Iran are not part of the Arab world, they are part of the Muslim world. I believe there is a huge difference between Turkey and Iran. Turkey's positions are still good in my view. Turkey, as you remember, was a mediator between Israel and Syria. We demand that the Israeli-Syrian track be revived under Turkish sponsorship. This is a proof that Turkey has engaged in this issue, and should be encouraged to be further involved in the peace process.

Guest: and thus we can have Turkey distance itself from Iran?

President Abbas: we believe that Turkey's position is not bad, it can actually be a good thing. Iran on the other hand is a different issue, in terms of nuclear weapons and interference. We even had some controversy with Iran that reached the media. As for Lebanon, our relations with the Lebanese government have been very good over the past

five years. I used to ask the Lebanese government to grant Palestinians their civic rights to live a normal life in Lebanon and we had some limited success in this regard. The Lebanese government decided to grant the Palestinians some of these rights. The Lebanese parliament approved that as well. Two days ago, I met with the Lebanese president at the UN and thanked him for this step and told him that I was hoping for more in order to improve the situation of Palestinians there as they are living under miserable conditions. In the 21st century, no one can imagine the type of life that Palestinians lead in Lebanon. Therefore, we always work on that through our good relations with the Lebanese government. You know that in the past there were many problems related to the weapons- Palestinians have weapons- but we believed that the Palestinian weapons should be under the Lebanese control because we live on Lebanese soil and the Lebanese government has sovereignty over its soil, and we should respect that. Therefore, things are improving between us.

As for settlement activities, I told Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Obama that I cannot continue with the negotiations if settlement activities continued, because frankly, there is no logic, or justification, or reason for that. It is not possible to continue with settlement activities while we are negotiating. It is not acceptable or justified to say that we fear that the government will collapse if we stopped settlement activities. If Mr. Netanyahu talks about opposition then I will tell him that one of the Palestinian factions has left the PLO over negotiations and within my own party- Fatah- 49% of the members are against me. We don't fear the opposition, because opposition is expected and is natural. There is opposition and there are enemies of peace but we should not run after them. I would not for example look at statements

by Ovadia Yousef and say, look what the rabbis are saying about us. He said things about us but we did not respond with one single word. There is another rabbi who said that we were germs and snakes and that we should be killed. I will not fall into this trap of responding to these statements because I want to reach peace.