

Speech of President Mahmoud Abbas For the Opening Session of the Second Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), February 18 2006

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In the Name of God, the Gracious and Merciful

Fellow members of the second PLC;

Members of the Diplomatic Corps;

Dear guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

This is a great day in the life of our Palestinian people, and of its national struggle.

Today we constitutionally inaugurate our second 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.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From this platform, I salute our Palestinian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora.

I stress to each Palestinian that our real joy will only be complete upon the attainment of our freedom; upon the establishment of our independent state, with Jerusalem as its capital; upon the liberation of our prisoners; the day the refugee question is resolved in a just and agreed-upon manner, based on Resolution 194; the day we achieve the dream of our revolution's leader, and the builder of the first Palestinian Authority, President Yasser Arafat.

I salute the members of your council who are sitting behind Israeli bars and prisons, alongside thousands of our best. I assure them all that we will spare no effort until they are released, and until I see each member taking his place in this council, and each prisoner obtaining his rightful place in society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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.

We are looking forward to the completion of this process in according to procedures as soon as possible, because the tasks that await you are large, very large indeed. You will find from my part all the cooperation and encouragement you need, because the national interest is our first and final goal, and is above any individual or faction.

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.

Sisters and brothers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, in front of the second PLC, and as per past practice, I would like to address you: our people and the entire world, in the spirit of responsibility, clarity and honesty, 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 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 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.

This constituted a political reserve from which we still draw strength and effective international presence. Likewise, we launched political initiatives with our Arabs and Muslims brothers, expressed through balanced decisions issued in Arab and Islamic summits. These decisions have placed the national rights of the Palestinian people as the central cause of both the Muslim and Arab worlds, and in a manner that addresses the entire world with the language of the modern age. This has provided us with indispensable political and moral support at all stages of our national and political struggle.

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. No-one would have thought of us in the framework of any international or regional arrangements. 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, and we are all aware of its chapters and developments. At the same time, there were secret channels working which led to the Oslo Accords, and the mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel.

There were many unfounded rumors regarding these Accords, all of which aim at putting them in question. Most important of these was that the Oslo Accords were signed behind the backs of the Palestinian people, since the negotiations were managed in utmost secrecy. Here I would like to repeat what I said on many occasions, namely that political action in secrecy is a familiar process in all or most negotiations carried out between two conflicting parties. As for the results of the negotiations, they are definitely public and are legitimate as they were presented to representative political institutions for approval. This happened when we submitted the Accords to the legislative and executive institutions of the PLO, which discussed, voted upon, and endorsed them.

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. While Israel wanted the PLC in the beginning to be merely an administrative council devoid of any legislative, representative, or political content, we managed imposed it as a body similar in nature to a state's parliament. We have imposed elections as the means to choosing members, and we have developed its responsibility and mandate to reach what we have reached today in the Basic Law – our temporary constitution pending the endorsement of the permanent constitution of our country.

Although the achievements at the beginning of the Oslo Accords seem to be modest for some – since the Israeli pullout at the early stages did not exceed 1% - Israel has pulled out in the subsequent phases from all our cities. The peace process was expected to end the occupation from all of the occupied territories in 1967, and solve all issues of permanent status, as per the Oslo Accords, through negotiations.

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 PA's institutions and frameworks.

During this period, the racist separation Wall was built and settlement activities in the West Bank were doubled. He introduced an iron fist policy against the Palestinian people everywhere, besieging them and their President until the latter's death.

I would like here to emphasize that we are pursuing, with our friends all over the world, the reasons of the late President, our historic leader Yasser Arafat's death. We will not close this file. The issue of his passing away will remain open until the truth is out.

Ladies and gentlemen;

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 Sheikh Summits, the Camp David Summit, and finally the Road Map, and US 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 US position.

In this context, and based on the highest interests of our Palestinian people, a truce was reached which provided – for the first time – an unprecedented period of calm for at least three months. It was followed last year by another period of calm that we strive together in all seriousness to maintain so as to provide the proper environment to start the political process and the negotiation table on the basis of international legitimacy and signed agreements.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Members of the PLC,

On another issue, there is much talk in an exaggerated manner regarding the size of the administrative body of the PA, and its high financial cost. However, can we ignore that the Israeli aggression during the years of the Intifada has left devastating effects on our internal situation, both economically and administratively? It has led to queues of tens of thousands of unemployed, who were forbidden to enter Israel. The Israeli policy of collective punishment, closures, checkpoints, destruction of infrastructure, uprooting of trees and many other measures that have turned Palestinians' life into hell has led to the reduction of private sector investment in Palestine, leading to the destruction and loss of the various economic institutions.

The previously described situation has led to the PNA alone having to carry this burden. It has become, due to these circumstances, responsible for solving endless problems. Foremost among these was the absorption of the unemployed, especially the thousands of new university graduates who are unable to find employment opportunities in view of the weakness of the private sector and its incapacity to absorb them. This matter has turned the PNA, irrespective of its intentions, into the largest employer. This has led by necessity to the large bureaucracy, with ministries and institutions bloated with civil servants.

As you are all aware, this situation has burdened the budget, and we have increasingly become dependent on foreign aid. This made fulfilling the public sector requirements, in terms of salaries and other running expenses, a process that requires from every Palestinian government to constantly mobilize so as to secure funding from our Arab brothers and the international community.

While there were mistakes and excesses in the past, we still must remember the achievements in terms of institution building, and reconstruction in all fields, particularly education and health. The previous governments started – under the direction and supervision of the PLC – a comprehensive reform process aimed at correcting this exceptional situation financially through rationalizing the public sector, and lightening the burden on the budget. Despite the challenges that face this process, especially the continuation of the Israeli measures and the resulting difficult economic situation, considerable progress has been recorded. The upcoming government has – out of a sense of national responsibility – to continue this effort.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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.

Anybody who thinks that these kinds of policies would force our people to hoist the white flag and to give up is mistaken. He does not know the reality of this people, its faith, determination and perseverance towards obtaining its full rights. 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 US 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. The leadership of this people, and I personally, refuse this blackmail. I ask everyone to abandon it.

Forth, 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. We hope to see this state as a qualitative addition to the list of countries in the region; an addition that carries out its commitments in a credible manner, and which enjoys its rights based on justice. We do not want more than what we are entitled to by international law.

As we have carried out free and transparent elections, we yearn towards seeing a government that faces the challenges and performs its tasks efficiently and capably. 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.

Fifth, 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.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to dwell on one of the most important aspects of our experience within the PA, namely security.

As experience in the last ten years has shown, our performance on security is the backbone on which depends the future of national project.

Security means securing the citizens and the entire community, securing life in all its aspects. It means the security of all those who live on our land, and the implementation of our international commitments. We all have the responsibility of confronting the aspects of chaos that reign in some of our cities, such as looting, armed attacks, kidnapping of our foreign friends and Arab brothers who live on our land and who are among us to offer support and cooperation.

I will not permit, and the government should not permit it either, the continuation of this disgraceful phenomenon. Firm and effective measures should be taken to put an end to it. No irresponsible person will be allowed to manipulate the highest of ideals to justify the most deplorable attacks against citizens and their property or against guests and diplomatic missions.

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.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Members of the PLC,

The tasks and burdens are many. The education sector requires rapid development, by *building schools, institutions, and universities* than are capable of keeping up with intellectual and social progress. 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. It is necessary for creating a healthy atmosphere that contributes to development, progress and modernization for our society and people. 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. In addition, there is the need to care for the disabled and injured, families of martyrs and prisoners, the young unemployed and poor families. Indeed, we cannot forget that the large majority of our people are living under the poverty line.

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 realize, and so do you, the extent of the dangers that threaten the city of Jerusalem and its residents. I urge the Muslim and Arab worlds and the Christian world to lend a helping hand to Palestinians in Jerusalem, to provide means for their steadfastness so that they remain there. We will try our utmost to provide the means for our people to remain in Jerusalem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In your name, I would like to present my greetings, appreciation and gratitude to all our brothers in the Arab countries, to our brothers in the Muslim world, and to our friends in the entire world, peoples and governments, for their support, help, and recognition of our Palestinian people.

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 – with its latest attack targeting the Jordan Valley area to isolate it from the remainder of the Palestinian lands in the West Bank – 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 a unilateral solutions is over. Attempting to determine the future of our people through cantonization, reservations, the tearing-up of the West Bank, land grab in the Jordan Valley, the separation of Jerusalem, and the consolidation of settlement blocks will close the window for a solution between us.

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. We are awaiting the Israeli government to determine its direction and make its decision in this regard. Our decision is to be completely ready to start permanent status negotiations immediately.

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.

Thank you.