

## Palestinian Social and Political Expectations

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*The speech excerpted here was given on April 11 at the Palestine Center in Washington, D.C. Subheads have been added, and some of the questions have been abridged.*

... Let me go back and talk about the transition we underwent, and the great euphoria people expressed at the passing of President Arafat, the election of President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), and the last of the convenient scapegoats for Israel and for the U.S., and as well for many Palestinians. The passing of Arafat in many ways signals the end of an era in Palestinian politics, Palestinian history, Palestinian reality: the era in which you have a strong, one-man show, an historical leader, a person of tremendous stature, charisma, who, in a sense, was given quite a lot of space to make many mistakes. But these things were always forgiven, because he played such a major role in embodying the national identity and national struggle of the Palestinian people.

Many people predicted chaos with his passing. They said, "The Palestinians will fall apart," and so on. We insisted on proving them wrong because we acted, as I said, institutionally and constitutionally. We respected the Constitution: for 60 days there was a transition period in which the institutions functioned and the speaker of the PLC, the Legislative Counsel, took over in the interim. And then we had elections, and in January, Mahmoud Abbas was elected with a clear mandate, because his program, his platform was quite clear—and he was quite consistent about this—one that is committed to nonviolent resistance and to a negotiated end to the conflict. And in a sense, the people who elected him did so in order to give this political approach a chance, in order to know that the Palestinian people are committed to ending the conflict. And of course he managed to bring about a unilateral cease-fire, so to speak, a cessation of violence by the Palestinians, while we're still waiting for a real cessation from the Israeli side. Like all cease-fires, it can function only if it's reciprocal, that is, a corresponding move on the other side.



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## A Very Tough Challenge

Now Mahmoud Abbas is facing a very tough challenge. Domestically, he has to face many issues. He has, of course, to face the legacy and undo a little of the damage, the legacy of Yasser Arafat. He has to work within institutions and in accordance with the law, in order to carry out a serious reform plan that is based on Palestinian priorities, on the basis of a homegrown authentic reform agenda. And this he has to do as a result of Palestinian needs and Palestinian pressures, not as a result of Israeli needs or American pressures. Reform was not invented in Washington or even in Tel Aviv. . . .

President Mahmoud Abbas has to carry out his reform agenda and he has to deliver to the Palestinian people. He has to show that his *modus operandi*, his commitment to a negotiated settlement and nonviolence, will produce results. This means that he needs of course a corresponding action [from the] Israelis, and of course recognition from the Americans. He also internally has to maneuver through the minefield of factional politics, while we undergo a transition from factional politics into, I hope, a multiparty, political, pluralist, democratic system. And this is going to take some time; there were lots of internal negotiations and dialogue, and so on, in order to achieve consensus among the Palestinian factions. And the elections in July will give us a more accurate assessment of the political terrain in Palestine. But right now, we are still working within factional politics. . . .

He has to build institutions; he has to hold people accountable who have been guilty or found guilty, or been accused of abusing their position and public funds and public trust, and so on. So, there are allegations now that are being pursued. And he has to reform the security. And the security system has become the major focus of the American endeavor, as well as Israeli demands, when it comes to the reform agenda. And he also has to deliver to the Palestinian people’s hope that there is a possibility of a resolution, and that there is a

partnership and a negotiating process.

Unfortunately, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. At one point, the beginning of the peace process, it was the peace process that was important—remember, in the early ’90s—and not the nation-building process, democratic institution-building, and so on. Now it’s the opposite. The Palestinians have to become Finns according to the [the Bush Administration—ed.]. We thought we would be, maybe, Swedes. But we have to deliver a perfect system of good government, with accountable institutions and so on, and we have to do it instantly and under extremely adverse conditions, particularly a very unaccountable occupation—a military occupation. We are still under occupation.

So, we have to show that we are democratic, that we can carry out serious reforms, in order to demonstrate that we are good little boys and girls and we’re worthy of being talked to. And it’s extremely difficult if you do not have a political option. Right now, everybody’s talking about reform and nation building, but we don’t see the opening. We don’t see the avenue for a serious, credible, legitimate, substantive political process that would tell the Palestinian people there is light at the end of the tunnel; there is hope that there can be an end to this occupation and there is hope for a two-state solution. And it is absolutely serious.

So Abu Mazen needs to be empowered by having, again, corresponding action and recognition that there will be a peace process. The American re-engagement has to demonstrate that there can be a serious American commitment to a negotiating process. And that if the interdependence of the nation-building process and peace-making process is recognized, they can proceed simultaneously.

## Bush and Sharon

Right now, we are seeing a repetition, unfortunately, of a very serious mistake made earlier [by the United States and Israel] when there was a previous cease-fire, when Abu Mazen was Prime Minister, and there was no recognition [of his efforts], there was no cooperation. We’re seeing now, again, Sharon coming to Washington with a list of grievances and gripes, and complaining and repeating the same mantra, “There is no Palestinian partner, the Palestinians cannot deliver security to Israel,” and so on. While Israel continues undermining Palestinian security, behaving like an occupying force and power, with no curbs, with no accountability. This is extremely serious, because of the interruptive plan called unilateral disengagement. And now from Crawford you will hear a lot of praise about its formulation—it is really interruptive, in order to circumvent the Road Map, with all its problems. And it is by definition unilateral. Whenever you have anything unilateral, by definition it means you are negating the other side, and you are using power politics to dictate to the other side. So unilateral disengagement that has become the key to American engagement and to Israeli political action is, in a sense, a negation of a partnership for peace, or a negotiating process based on dictating the outcome on the basis of

power by the occupiers on the occupied.

And of course, it gets rid of what Sharon calls a demographic threat and a security threat in Gaza. It gets rid of 1.3 million Palestinians, and it gets rid of the security threat there. But at the same time, he has transformed Gaza into a massive collective prison, because you are going to have Israelis controlling the air space, the territorial waters, and the land-crossing point, which means an instant transformation of Gaza into a prison, a pressure cooker that's liable to blow up, particularly if it's isolated from the rest of the world. And with Israel giving itself the right to carry out military actions, or incursions, or whatever, as it sees fit according to its security. . . .

In the meantime, Sharon is demanding payback in the West Bank. He's here to get commitment or recommitment from this Administration on his plan to expand settlements. . . .

Sharon is here with a major shopping list that's liable to really undermine the peace process and destroy the prospects of peace in the future. This is not mentioning, of course, another list of targets including Iran, and another sort of repetition of the WMD scare. . . .

Right now, we are seeing what I call the politicization of Hamas and the Islamic groups. If conditions continue to deteriorate on the ground, with the siege ongoing, with the economy destroyed, with the building of the wall, with the siege of Jerusalem, with more land confiscation and expansion of settlements, you will see a real breakdown, but you will also see the Islamization of the Palestinian political system.

Things could go either way now. And I hope that we are able to produce a genuine peace process, with impact on the ground, with applicability on the ground, capable of changing the realities and changing the dynamics, with re-engagement by the U.S., by the international community, in a way as to empower voices of peace and moderation reform in Palestine, rather than once again create another letdown and therefore generate another period of violence and revenge and pain. . . .

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## Dialogue

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. . . Q: Do you think that Mahmoud Abbas will appoint a competent, independent, special counsel to look into all issues of political, economic, and financial corruption, starting with Arafat and the PLO? And do you think that he would ever reform the security?

**Ashrawi:** It's a tall order. It's not that easy to carry out. Right now there are several people—and this to me is serious; it indicates seriousness of intent—there are people whose cases have been referred to the Attorney General. People who are working in the Finance Ministry, among others. . . .

But at least there are people who are trying, from civil society, from the government, and from the PLC. It's going to take concerted effort. But given the fact that we are still in a state of siege, given the fact that Israel still exercises power

as a military occupying force, it's going to be extremely difficult to set up a sort of pristine, pure system with an absolute rule of law and total accountability. We need to ensure that the conditions on the ground are also conducive to creating such a system, rather than conducive to establishing more power systems and more vested interests and more abuse of position, and of course facing more obstacles. The security needs to rebuild their headquarters, they need to have prisons. All of these were shelled and destroyed during the Israeli incursions.

So it's going to take time, but we don't have much time, frankly speaking. However, the intention is there, and some resistance by people who know that they will lose power. . . .

## Can Bush Be an Honest Broker?

**Q (from NBC News):** Do you see President Bush as so pro-Israeli as to not be trusted as an honest peace broker? What must President Bush do to convince you of his sincerity that he is pursuing a just peace?

**Ashrawi:** Well, inasmuch as we know that the individual, the President, makes a difference in terms of policy, but there has been a longstanding policy where the U.S. and Israel enjoy the strategic alliance, as they said. And Israel enjoyed massive funds from the U.S. They get \$3.5 billion a year, in actual cash, in addition to an equal or double that amount in actual services and preferential treatment. So, in a sense, yes.

The U.S., I've always said—by no stretch of the imagination can you ever accuse the U.S. of being even-handed when it comes to the Palestinians. But now they understand that it's in their interests to curb Israeli violations, because U.S. standing, U.S. credibility, U.S. interests, U.S. influence in the region, has been undermined by Israel's behavior on the ground: the excesses, the violations, the violence, the occupation. And it is in the interest of the U.S. to have a viable peace. So there has to be a policy shift. We're not saying that now you take the side of the Palestinians and you discover that we've been very badly treated. But you understand that it is the responsibility of powers to bring about a just and viable peace that will produce stability and security, and will counter violence, extremism, fundamentalism, and even terror. Because the Palestinian cause is a very crucial, vocal cause, and it is a source of tremendous sense of injustice and pain and anger and so on in the region, and its solution will bring stability to the region, will rectify a great deal of the damage done to American standing, and will allow us to move ahead.

So we expect the American President to curb Israeli violations now, to develop, let's say, the political backbone to tell Israel, "You've gone too far," and not to fall into the trap of constantly repeating Sharon's statements and priorities and adopting the Israeli diction, to intervene to re-engage positively, to put an end to all unilateral behavior by Israel, including the settlements, the wall, lifting the siege, and creating also a climate in which there would be serious negotiations. We expect, if Dr. Rice is willing to come and engage herself personally, or to appoint a high-level envoy in addition to

William Ward, to deal with issues, not just security and economic reform, but also with a political process. That's what we expect.

## The Palestinian Elections

**Q:** You offered to tell us about the elections. I'm not asking you to predict, but . . . what do you think the new elections are likely to emphasize?

**Ashrawi:** I don't know that I can give you a detailed blueprint of the political map, but I can say that of course it is shifting. The major political faction or party is Fatah, of course, and it is undergoing its own internal restructuring in the organization, and problems, of course, because Fatah was blamed for all the problems with the Palestinian Authority. And now they've lost a great deal, in terms of their own base among the Palestinians, because it was seen as the party that adopted the political course of action, the peace plan and so on, and of course it didn't succeed. . . . Hamas was strengthened as a result, it doesn't mean that the Hamas membership increases that much. But as people who are doing something about the occupation, there was an increase in support for armed resistance for a while, which is not true now. This swelled the ranks of Hamas for a while; it went up from 8-10% earlier on, reaching almost 30%. And Fatah, which was up in the 40s, the high 40s, at one point, is down to below 30%. So there is a shift in public opinion. . . .

Fatah is in a process of internal crisis and reformulation. Part of it has a lot to do with the old guard and the new guard. The old guard, in a sense, superimposed the mentality of the occupation on nation-building, and in a sense there was a tremendous sense of resistance to this type of behavior, that we need more nation-building, accountability. And at the same time, there was a demand by the young guard to be included, not to be excluded or disenfranchised. And therefore, there is a demand for primaries and internal elections in Fatah before the July elections. The Fatah confidence congress will be held in August (elections are in July). So people are demanding at least internal elections *before* July, in order to select the most suitable candidates. This of course will help the young generation, will help the young guard more. The old guard I think, has recognized the need for a graceful exit. You've done your job; time to retire. It's not a bad thing, you know, for people to relinquish power.

So we need to make room for the young, for women, to empower the public as a whole. To own the agenda, and not to feel that they have a leadership that is exercising power on the basis of control and proprietorship, but a democratic system of government that is inclusive and that is based, as I said, on the rule of law, and that would give the young a chance to participate.

So if nothing is done between now and July, if we allow the momentum to continue, if Israel continues to build the settlements and the wall, and destroy the economy and the services of the Palestinians—I mean, you can be a genius, but under siege you cannot provide medical health services or

educational services, if you can't leave your village and your town and your city, and if your economy is destroyed. There are certain objective conditions that we need. . . .

We're trying for the elections in July, to have a list of democrats and reformers running together. So we're trying to form a sort of broad, loose coalition for a bloc of reformers and democrats in addition, because we don't believe in polarization on this. We think that we are a pluralistic society, and maybe this is a way of preparing for future party politics. But, we're willing to also help and support individuals within their own communities who run on the basis of the district constituencies.

So the Palestinian political map is still taking shape. It could go either way. But it's clear that Hamas and Jihad, having decided to enter the political arena, will have an impact. The size and the definition of that impact still remains to be seen. . . .

## America, and the Two-State Solution

**Q:** I'm a student at Georgetown Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. I wonder if you consider it a mistake that the Palestinian movement has put all its eggs in the American basket: We are counting on the U.S. to deliver the peace process. I wonder if that's a futile exercise.

There also is the question of the two-state solution. I think within about 4-5 years, the two-state solution will be dead. What is your criterion for when you would be willing to say the two-state solution is dead? . . .

**Ashrawi:** Well, unfortunately the U.S. is a power that you cannot ignore in the region. Don't we all wish that the U.S. were even-handed, that it would understand the need to play a more objective or even-handed role in peacemaking? Don't we wish that the Quartet [U.S., Russia, European Union, United Nations] would develop a will of its own and decide that it's going to take matters into its own hands and work with us on a peace process?

Now, there's no such thing in our process as a unilateral solution, because that means we are going to have a solution by the occupier, a power solution, which is gradually taking place. That's unilateralism. The imposition of the will of the powerful on the weak, and the imbalance of occupier and occupied coming into full fruition. And therefore, they will do whatever they want, unchecked. There's no such thing as a bilateral solution, because again you have an imbalance of power and it means that Israel would use its force, use its power against the Palestinians—which it has been using for a long time—to build more settlements, take more land, inflict more pain.

So the solution is by definition multilateral, because we rely on the law, UN resolutions, international humanitarian law. These are our protections. . . .

Right now the U.S. is the major player, whether we like it or not. We have to be realistic. When we go to the European Union, they tell us, "We will not work at cross purposes with the U.S. We will not oppose the U.S." They always take their

cue from the U.S. They are willing to act politically only within the domain as defined by the U.S. So whether you like it or not, no matter how much you try to empower the Europeans, tell them, "You are more powerful than you think you are, we need you to act"; they've been relegated to the role of signing checks for development, and so on, but not taking serious political decisions. Even the UN knows that. The gatekeepers have been Israel and the U.S. through the peace process. . . .

If we had the luxury to pick and choose who the superpower is, or who can bring about peace, then we certainly would pick a more friendly superpower. But since this is the way things are, we have to be engaged, we have to engage the U.S. at all levels. You cannot just say: "I'm going to boycott the U.S. They're biased, they don't like us, they're being nasty, they're supporting Israel with money, with weapons, with everything, so we're going to disqualify them." We cannot. We have to engage them constantly at all levels, from grassroots organizations, to think-tanks, to the media, to Congress, to the Administration, in order to create joint discourse, and of course to activate public opinion.

I think American public opinion once it understands more, is more fair, it's more even-handed than what they give it credit for, particularly the Representatives on the Hill, who start making decisions on international policy, regardless of their own constituents. But everywhere I go, the American public is quite receptive, quite positive, quite glad, and we have to activate that, and influence American decision-making.

We cannot boycott the U.S. Maybe we need to educate them. Maybe we need a road map to the U.S. Administration, so that it will understand what is needed, in the region. I mean, they adopted the neo-con agenda of exporting the democratic revolution: that's what's wrong with the Arab world, right? They forgot about the occupation! That got them in serious trouble. So maybe they will learn by mistakes; maybe we should be there also to help. . . .

As far as the two-state solution, when shall we say it is dead, I don't know. I still think that things like physical things, like the wall, and even settlements, can be removed. I still believe so, if there's the political will to do so. I still think that there has to be intervention to stop Israeli violations. . . . I think the binational state is not a political option. It's not a political program. How am I going to get Israeli counterparts beyond the few people who have de-zionized their ideologies to abandon Zionism and say, "Okay, we want a binational state, not a purely Jewish or predominantly Jewish state in Palestine." How are you going to tell the Palestinians, "You don't need your own state now? You don't need self-determination and sovereignty and freedom? Now, let's work so that you will work for one state"—which means we're going to condemn the Palestinians to living under occupation, as second- or third-class citizens, with no rights whatsoever, for a long time, which means again that the process of redevelopment and regression will run its course in Palestine. Which

means that the Israeli occupation and Sharon will steal more land, more water. And of course, since he is not an innocent bystander, will effect even more and more emigration, brain drain, and expulsion in Palestine.

One reason he wanted to get rid of Gaza is to get rid of the demographic threat. So if we follow his logic that the Palestinians are a demographic threat, which to me is inherently racist, or that the Palestinian woman's womb is the ultimate ticking time bomb, which is also sexist—if you follow that logic, then it means we enter into a mad competition as to who's going to have more children. But of course, they have the power, and they're the ones who are going to make life impossible for us. Get rid of maximum demography while annexing maximum geography, and they will render the so-called binational solution inoperable, because there is no democracy.

What's going to happen is, you are going to see the outcome, the de facto outcome of no peace, no two-state solution, is an apartheid state, where you have pockets of Palestinians in reservations isolated from each other with no rights. Maybe connected, as Sharon likes to say, by engineering means, overhead bridges, underground tunnels, and so on. Really isolated, disconnected, degenerating from a nation with a national identity, institutions, and so on, into population centers that are losing their education and health standards, and so on, and becoming just a repressed minority, easily swallowed within the belly of Israel, frankly speaking. . . .

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