



STATEMENT

BY

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BEFORE

THE ANNAPOLIS CONFERENCE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, ANNAPOLIS

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In the Name of God, the Most Gracious Most Merciful

President Bush

Prime Minister Olmert

Ministers and Representatives of Participating States

Distinguished Guests,

Peace and the Grace of God be Upon You

Allow me Mr. President to thank you in my capacity as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the sole representative of the Palestinian people, and on behalf of the Palestinian people, for inviting us to this international conference. This conference symbolizes the crystallization of the entire world's will in its march towards achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace in our region and in bringing long-anticipated justice to our country where oppression, wars, occupation and violence have prevailed in the previous decades.

Today, Your Excellency, you stress the need to make the most difficult choice—the choice of making peace and ending a dark era marked by hatred. It is an era for which the peoples of the region have paid a dear price with the lives of its youth, the future of subsequent generations and the prosperity, advancement and liberty of millions of us all.

Therefore, I thank you Mr. President. By calling this historic conference, you have sent a very clear and strong message to the peoples of the entire Middle East, who now watch with great hope as well as tremendous fear of losing yet another opportunity. The intent of your letter of invitation is not obscure: It expresses your personal commitment and the commitment of your great nation to attaching the highest priority to negotiations to achieve a long-awaited peace between both Palestinians and Israelis and the broader Arab world and Israel. We hope that this will be the culmination of your legacy for the world—a world more free of violence, persecution and fanaticism.

I must commend you, Your Excellency, on choosing this gorgeous city of Annapolis as the site for the conference. In addition to its beauty, Annapolis symbolizes liberty, the most exalted value of all. Freedom, for Palestinians is perhaps the most evocative word—the word that captures the collective hope of Palestinians and their aspiration for future generations. It is their sun and the light of their future. It is the last word of their martyrs and victims and the daily hymns of their prisoners.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Secretary Rice and her team. Without their persistence and perseverance—and without their ability to grasp all aspects of the conflict in our region—we would not have been able to gather here today. Secretary Rice took important strides in her quest to emphasize that the path to peace through negotiations is the only path— and that this path is irreversible.

I must also stress that the exceptionally broad participation of our brothers and sisters from Arab and Islamic countries, the Quartet, the G8 and the Permanent members of the United Nations, in addition to many European and Asian countries, as well as members from the Non-Alliance block and the African continent, in a conference unique in the conflict's history is a driving force that helps imbue the conference with added legitimacy. This broad participation also demonstrates strong support for Palestinian and Israeli negotiators to persevere in their quest to reach the Two-State solution, which is based on ending the occupation and establishing a sovereign State of Palestine living side by side with the State of Israel by resolving all of the permanent status issues in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the broader Arab-Israeli conflict, which will prove indispensable to forging peaceful and normal relations in the region.

I am proud of this broad Arab and Muslim contribution and the broad international participation because it shows the support of sister countries for the Palestinian people and their leadership to establish peace. Such support endorses our approach, which calls for an historic and balanced settlement that will ensure peace and security for our independent state, for Israel and for the entire region.

The Arab and Islamic presence also demonstrates that the Arab Peace Initiative was never a move without a definite goal but rather a courageous strategic choice aimed at changing the nature of relations in the region and beginning anew. This historic Arab and Islamic shift and quest for a regional peace should now be a similar willingness to engage by all as it will lead to ending the occupation in all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, as well as the Golan Heights and parts of Lebanon and as it will also lead to resolving all the other permanent status issues. Chief among these is the plight of Palestinian refugees which must be addressed holistically—that is, in its political, human, and individual dimensions in accordance with UNGA resolution 194, as emphasized in the Arab Peace Initiative, and with the participation of sister Arab countries who have borne the heavy burden of hosting the refugees for decades.

It is no exaggeration to say, Your Excellency, that today marks a juncture in the history of our region—a juncture between two eras: The Pre-Annapolis era and its aftermath. In other words, the exceptional opportunity that the Arab, Islamic and international presence brings today coupled with overwhelming Palestinian and Israeli public opinion in support of Annapolis, must be seized in order to be a launching pad for a negotiations process. The possibilities offered by today's conference must not be wasted.

This window of opportunity might never open again and if it does, it might never claim the same consensus or momentum. Mr. President, What we face today is not only the challenge of peace but also a test of the credibility of all involved: The credibility of the United States of America, members of the Quartet, the entire international community, Israel, the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority, as well as the Arab and Islamic group. It is a test that will draw deep marks in the future of the region and the relations among its peoples on the one hand and on the international forces that care about the region's peace and security on the other.

With this outlook, we come to Annapolis today. We therefore recognize the weight of responsibility upon our shoulders and the burden that we will have to bear. We recognize, and I believe that you share our opinion, that the absence of hope and the infiltration of desperation into the hearts of peoples is what feeds extremism.

It is therefore our joint duty to allow for real hope to thrive. This way, we hope that with your full support and involvement we might achieve a complete transformation and that a genuine peace can be achieved soon, before the end of your term, Mr. President.

Tomorrow, we embark on a serious and comprehensive negotiations process on all the permanent status issues including Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements, security, and water, as well as others. We must support such negotiations with tangible and direct steps on the ground, which will be taken as proof of having embarked on an irreversible track towards a negotiated, comprehensive and full peace. Such steps must involve freezing all settlement activities including natural growth, reopening institutions in Jerusalem, removing settlement outposts, removing checkpoints, releasing prisoners and facilitating the mission of the Palestinian Authority in restoring law and order.

With all frankness and without any hesitation, I have to defend the right of my people to open their eyes to a new dawn free of occupation, settlements, apartheid walls, prisons full of prisoners, targeted assassinations, and the siege of checkpoints around villages and cities. I look forward, Your Excellency, to the day when our prisoners are free and to the day when they can assume their roles in supporting peace and building their homeland and state. It is also my duty to say that the destiny of Jerusalem is a key issue in any peace treaty we reach.

We want East Jerusalem to be our capital—a capital where we will have open relations with West Jerusalem and where we will guarantee for believers of all religions the freedom to practice their rituals and to have access to the holy sites without discrimination and in accordance with international humanitarian law.

In this context, I would like to emphasize that we will continue to carry out our responsibilities in accordance with the Roadmap in fighting lawlessness, violence and terrorism and in restoring law and order. The government of the PA is working tirelessly in extremely difficult conditions to achieve this noble cause. We do this for our own people because we must, not because it is a political requirement imposed upon us in previous accords or the Roadmap.

Our people clearly understand the difference between the threat posed by terrorism versus using terrorism as a pretext to maintain an intolerable situation.

Our civil, security and economic institutions must be given the opportunity to function and this process must be sponsored by the international community until our authority and government are able to fully assume their responsibilities. I must also stress that our determination to end occupation stems from our vision that by doing so we destroy one of the most important excuses for terrorism in our region and in the world. I say this without undermining the necessity to fight terrorism regardless of time, conditions or source because it is a danger that threatens the future of all peoples and can doom civilization and destroy its accomplishments.

Here, I would like to praise Mr. Tony Blair for his distinctive and meticulous role in building Palestinian institutions and promoting major economic projects to improve the conditions of daily life and consequently prospects of peace. He is amazing in presenting creative ideas that contribute to inspire political movement and promote security. In this regard, the role of the European Union, Japan and our Arab brothers who provide ongoing support for economic projects and institution building is also highly appreciated.

Mr. President, I want to use this opportunity to speak to every mind, heart and conscience of every Israeli citizen, based on my full recognition that without undermining the importance of international and regional backing, the determining element for making peace and sustaining it are the public opinions in Palestine and in Israel and the commitment of their legitimate leaderships.

I would like to begin by saying that in spite of our differences over some of the most difficult issues in the Conflict, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has shown a desire for peace that I felt during our bilateral meetings. This desire for peace has genuinely contributed to our reaching this important step that we inaugurate today. Mr. Prime Minister, I would like to continue working closely with you until we are able to complete this historic long-awaited mission together. It is essential that each one of us uses his weight, experience and determination to overcome the difficulties that will face us and to bridge the gaps between our two positions so that we can achieve a resolution. This is how we will end occupation and long years of suffering for our refugees; this is how we will ensure neighborly relations, economic cooperation and people-to-people relations, all of which are the strongest guarantees for a sustainable peace.

I would also like to speak to the citizens of Israel on this exceptional occasion to tell them: Our neighbors on this small piece of land, neither you nor we are begging for peace from one another. Peace is a common interest of yours and ours. Peace and freedom are our rights just as peace and security are your rights and ours.

It is time that the cycle of bloodshed, violence and occupation end. It is time to look into the future with confidence and hope.

It is time for this aching land that is called the land of love and peace to live up to its name. Peace is not impossible if we have the will and the good intentions and when each side realizes its rights.

He who says that making peace between Palestinians and Israelis is impossible wants only to prolong the duration of conflict and to propel it into the abyss of the unknown. This unknown is unfortunately very known to us: it is more decades of bloodshed, after which we will not arrive to a solution different from what is offered today—the contours and the essence of which is known to each one of us. The continuation of the conflict might also lead to the death of the idea of peace in our minds, hearts and consciousness. Peace is possible. It requires, however, a common effort to achieve it and to sustain it. Today we extend our hands to you as equals and the world is our witness and support. We must not lose this opportunity that might never be repeated. Let us make the peace of the brave and guard it for the sake of both our children and yours.

To our friends all over the world: members of the Quartet, participants in this conference, and other countries and nations who are not present here today who supported us in the past and who continue to be willing to help us, I would like to tell you that our people will not forget your support under the most difficult conditions. We are looking forward to your continued political presence with us after the conference is over to ensure the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations process achieves its goals. We hope that the work of this conference will be enhanced by the success of the Paris Economic conference that will be held in a few weeks.

The continuation of the negotiations and their success is the real key to changing the face of the entire region. The Almighty God says in the Holy Quran: O Ye who believe! Come all of you into peace and follow not the footsteps of the devil. He is an open enemy for you. Al-Baqra 208

And if they incline to peace, incline also to it, and trust in Allah. He is the hearer, the knower. Al-Anfal 61

I also would like to recall what President John F. Kennedy said: “Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.”

To my Palestinian people, to all Palestinians in Gaza, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the refugee camps in the Diaspora, I would like to share these words with you:



I recognize that each and every one of you has their personal pain and special tragedy stemming from this conflict and years of al-Nakbeh and bitter occupation. Do not lose confidence or hope. The entire world is extending their hands to us to help end the years of our everlasting Nakbeh. The world is trying to help us end the historic injustice that was inflicted on our two peoples. We will be ready as individuals and as a people to overcome the pain and tragedy when we reach a settlement that will give us rights that are equal to people elsewhere on this world: the rights to independence and self-determination.

And to Palestinian mothers who are awaiting the return of their jailed sons; to the children who are dreaming of a new life and a prosperous and more peaceful future; to our brave prisoners and to all of my sons and daughters wherever you are: Have faith in tomorrow and the future because an independent Palestine is coming. This is the promise of the entire world to you today. Trust that the dawn is coming.

To my people and family in the Gaza Strip: You are in my heart and the hours of darkness will vanish before your determination does and our determination to the unity of our people in the West Bank and Gaza as a unified and unbreakable geographic and political entity will overcome.

Your suffering will end. Justice and peace will prevail.

Mr. President, I would like to end with a quote from President Abraham Lincoln, which he wrote during one of the most difficult moments in American history: "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to do all that we may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Thank you Mr. President and Peace and blessings of God be upon you.