

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION

Speech by His Excellency President Mahmoud Abbas to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

6 October 2011

In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful

President Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be with you today, in this historic and venerable House, to speak to you, elected representatives of the countries of Europe, the living conscience of its friendly peoples, embodying the values of freedom, justice and human dignity.

I have come to you from Palestine, the land of peace, and the cradle of the three divine messages and I bring to you a message of peace and love from its people who have been rooted deeply in this land for thousands of years, devoted to it as their homeland, and continuing, despite the pain and suffering, their epic journey towards the noble goal of freedom and independence.

Two weeks ago, as President of the State of Palestine and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, I asked the Secretary General of the United Nations to accept the accession of the state of Palestine as a full member of the international organisation and I explained in my speech before the General Assembly the reasons for a step such as this.

Two decades have passed since the Madrid Peace Conference, and 18 years since the signing of the Oslo Agreement in Washington, which was supposed to culminate, by May 5 1999 at the latest, in a final peace agreement terminating in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state living alongside the state of Israel in peace and security.

Our Palestinian people have been waiting impatiently since that date for implementation of that agreement, but sadly in vain. How much longer must they wait?

Despite that, we have seized every opportunity to reach a solution through negotiation, we accepted unreservedly the principle of the road map, despite the observations we had about it, but we came up against the prevarication of the Israeli government to negotiate on this basis.

Then we accepted the invitation of the former US President George Bush to the Annapolis negotiations, and those negotiations achieved some progress with the acceptance of the former Israeli government, under Prime Minister Olmert, to refer to the 1967 borders based on the principle of equal value and reciprocity in exchange of territory. However, it was not long before the Israeli government changed, resulting in the cessation of negotiations once again.

When US President Barack Obama was elected, we once again began unreserved co-operation with his administration, and we agreed to all the suggestions put forward for a resumption of the negotiations, the latest of which was a round of direct negotiations which Washington initiated in September 2010 on the condition that it resulted in a peace agreement within one year.

We entered into those negotiations with an open heart, and sincere intentions, however we came up against the prevarication of the government of Mr Netanyahu to negotiate seriously on permanent status issues, insofar as they took advantage of the beginning of the negotiations to embark upon unprecedented intensification of their settlement activity in Jerusalem and other areas in the occupied West Bank.

That government refused to resume negotiations from the point at which they had ended with the former government of Mr Olmert, and insisted on returning to point zero, and refused to apply the terms of reference for the negotiations based on the decisions of international law and when its representatives sat down at the negotiation table, they refused to discuss the border issue or any permanent status issues.

With regard to security, we had reached an agreement with the former Israeli government and the former American administration, and a number of Arab parties on effective measures to preserve the security of the Palestinians and Israelis via a third-party (NATO). However Mr Netanyahu rejected all this and insisted on an unacceptable concept of security, based on expansion and colonisation, including Jerusalem and the settlement areas and lands situated to the west of the racial separation wall, in addition to the Jordan valley (i.e. more than 40% of the surface area of the occupied West Bank), and also maintaining military bases inside the West Bank, and we ask ourselves the following: if these requests are agreed to, where will the Palestinian state be?

Peace and settlement activity are incompatible and building settlements in occupied territories and housing settlers there by the occupying forces, this is a flagrant violation of international law and international humanitarian law, and a clear breach of the Geneva agreements, and the agreements between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the state of Israel.

We are convinced of the need for a halt to the settlement activity as it is one of the necessary conditions for resuming the peace process. This is not a prerequisite but an obligation laid down in the road map, and the peace process cannot go ahead if it is built solely on compliance by the Palestinians with their obligations, while Israel flouts all hers.

The settlement expansion has reached a limit representing a serious threat undermining the material foundations of a two-state solution, and since the signing of the Oslo Agreement the number of settlers has increased by 300%, and scarcely any day passes without Israel announcing plans to build thousands of new settlement units.

And what makes things more complicated is the fact that the Netanyahu government is insisting on laying down new and impossible conditions which have no basis in the terms of reference for peace or the resolutions adopted under international law, and the demand that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a "Jewish" state is an unacceptable precondition, because there is a danger that it will turn the conflict raging in our region into a destructive religious conflict, jeopardising the future of a million and a half Palestinians living in the state of Israel, removing in advance the rights of the Palestinian refugees, forming a cover for the expansionist intentions and putting an end to the opportunities for a two-state solution.

We undertook to respect international law and recognised the state of Israel in accordance with a negotiated text recorded in letters exchanged between the two late leaders, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, and as far as we were concerned this matter was closed and any attempt to reopen it creates new pretexts for impeding the peace process.

Rather, it is legitimate for us to ask why Israel refuses to recognise our state, the state of Palestine, if it is really serious about accepting a two-state solution.

We have confirmed our acceptance of international law, when our national Palestinian Council was set up in 1988, with the adoption of the Palestinian peace programme which embraces a two-state solution: an independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem on

Palestinian lands which Israel occupied in June 1967, i.e. on only 22% of the historical territory of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with the state of Israel.

This difficult and painful step was aimed at achieving a historic compromise which would make it possible to bring about peace between the two peoples.

This programme has become a pillar on which the Arab peace initiative was based, embraced by the Arab League and other member states of the Islamic Co-operation Organisation. This initiative reflects the willingness of all these countries to establish normal relations with Israel as part of a comprehensive and lasting peace to ensure Israel's withdrawal from all the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories to the borders as they stood on 4 June 1967, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with full sovereignty, with its capital in East Jerusalem, finding a just and agreed solution to the refugee issue, in accordance with UN Resolution 194, and ensuring security and peace for all states and peoples in the region.

We have called and are still calling on the Israelis to seize this opportunity open to them which offers a guarantee for living in peace with the peoples of the region, and which offers them true security for themselves and their children, as it does for us and our children. Peace is what makes security, not military power and not domination and geographical expansion. It is not possible to maintain peace through power, but only through mutual understanding.

In East Jerusalem, the Palestinian inhabitants are subject to a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing, which includes the demolition of houses, the displacement of populations and the withdrawal of identity documents, including the people's elected representatives, with the aim of forcing them out of their own city; there are restrictions on their freedom to access the holy sites, and continuing excavations which threaten its foundations, quite apart from the resulting stranglehold on the city and its isolation from its Palestinian surroundings by means of the ring of settlements and walls.

The occupying power continues its incursions in areas of the Palestinian National Authority through raids and arrests; free rein has been given to the armed settler militias, who enjoy the special protection of the occupation army, attacking the defenceless Palestinian citizens, targeting their homes, schools, mosques, fields, crops and trees.

It continues to impose its intense blockade on the Gaza Strip, constituting collective sanctions on the rights of the innocent inhabitants; it continues its targeting of the Strip with assassinations, air strikes and artillery shelling, persisting with its war of aggression of three years ago, resulting in mass destruction and huge losses of life and property.

The occupying power is detaining in its prisons more than six thousand Palestinian prisoners, including 21 elected representatives from various parliamentary groupings who a few days ago announced a hunger strike in protest at their cruel and humiliating conditions of detention. We wish to see them free to be with their families, just as Gilad Shalit's family wishes to see him free to be once again with them.

Despite the Israeli obstacles, the Palestinian Authority has in recent years worked hard to implement an intensive programme aimed at promoting and strengthening a culture of peace, justice, democracy to improve the readiness of Palestinian institutions and prepare them for independence, and in accordance with the report by the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLIC) of donor states, and on the basis of the assessments of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Mission, this programme has been completely successful in upgrading the performance of the Palestinian institutions to a higher level, which is necessary for administering a successful state.

And the report confirms that Palestine has achieved, in this field, much more than many states which already enjoy full membership of the United Nations.

On the basis of these achievements, and faced with the increasing suffering of our people under the occupation, and in the light of the stalemate in the prospects for the negotiations, our only

alternative has been to turn to the international community and call on it to take action to open up new horizons for the peace process, through recognition of the state of Palestine, on the basis of the 4 June 1967 borders, and accept its accession as a full member of the United Nations.

We confirm that by submitting this request, we are not seeking to isolate Israel or delegitimize it; rather we are seeking to obtain legitimacy for our existence as a people with a right to self-determination like any other people.

Our aim is to delegitimize the occupation, settlement activities and apartheid policies. We can also confirm that this step of ours is not a substitute for negotiations, but a positive factor in creating the serious constructive negotiation conditions to bring about fruitful results, and we reconfirm here today our readiness to return to the negotiating table in accordance with a clear reference to international legitimacy and on the basis of a complete cessation of settlement activities.

This explains our positive position on the latest Quartet statement, which redefined the terms of reference for the peace process, especially the two-state principle on the basis of the 1967 borders, and reconfirmed the obligations of both parties under the road map. Israel's compliance with these requests will open the way for a resumption of the peace process.

Today 128 member states of the United Nations have recognised the state of Palestine on the basis of the 4 June 1967 borders, and we are proud that 17 of them are Council of Europe member states. Palestine has diplomatic relations with 24 other Council of Europe member states and many of these countries, especially those belonging to the European Union, have confirmed their willingness to recognise the state of Palestine at the appropriate time. We say to you in all sincerity: now is the appropriate time and we appreciate the resolution adopted recently by the European Parliament in this connection and call for it to be implemented.

We also very much appreciate and are proud of the resolution adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly this past Tuesday calling on the six Council of Europe member states which are members of the Security Council to support Palestine's request to become a full member of the United Nations.

Europe has invested a great deal of effort and money in supporting the construction of Palestinian institutions and has given our people considerable aid which it will remember with gratitude and appreciation. Recognition of the state of Palestine and support for its efforts to become a member of the United Nations is a means of protecting its achievements thanks to those efforts and that investment, and it is also a means of strengthening the position of Europe and its leading role in promoting the peace process.

Today we are living in the era of the Arab spring, and we can see the courage of the Arab peoples, expressing their desire for freedom, democracy and social justice. We Palestinians have always been at the heart of the movement of Arab peoples aspiring to freedom, and we have always been committed to democratic traditions, respecting pluralism and the freedom of opinion and expression, and this has long been a source of pride for us and a source of inspiration for our brothers from other Arab nations. Today we are at the heart of the Arab spring: we say that the hour of the Palestinian spring has struck.

And if the essence of the Arab spring was the people's desire for freedom, then the essence of the Palestinian spring is to become free of the occupation and achieve freedom and independence, security and stability, and peace in the region.

The promise of our spring was demonstrated by the wonderful sight of hundreds of thousands of people coming out onto the streets of the towns and villages of Palestine and in the Diaspora refugee camps expressing in one voice their wish for Palestine to become state No. 194 of the United Nations, and this movement remained peaceful and civilised, despite Israeli attempts at provocation. We today confirm our determination to maintain the peaceful nature of our movement by the people, because we reject violence, and we reject terrorism in all its forms,

especially state terrorism, and the terrorism of armed settlers. We shall disappoint their hopes of pushing us towards extremism.

Our people will continue their peaceful resistance against the occupation and settlement activities and against the racial separation wall, providing in this way an inspiring model of the power of defenceless people to confront bullets, tear-gas bombs and bulldozers.

The world which celebrated the Arab spring today stands before a test of its credibility: will this celebration stop at the borders of Palestine? Or will it manage to overcome double standards and open its arms to embrace the Palestinian spring? Will it allow Israel to remain a state above the law and above accountability? Will it allow it to continue to reject the resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly and the International Court of Justice and violate international law? Our people are waiting for the answer and part of this answer lies with you, elected representatives of the people of Europe. Our people urge you to live up to your responsibilities.

In the midst of this relentless struggle for independence, we shall continue to exert every possible effort to build up our society, consolidate our democratic institutions, and get our house in order. However, we shall strive to protect what has already been achieved in this regard and build on it.

We are particularly proud of the fact that in recent years we have been able to eradicate illiteracy almost totally in Palestine. Our people have helped build up many countries of the world, a people that venerates science, culture and creativity, and we have made valuable progress in extending the education infrastructure at all levels in our country: we now have 49 universities and institutes catering for 5% of the total population, and this work will be pursued so as to provide education opportunities for all our children.

Thanks to the appreciated support we have received from the Arab and friendly countries, especially the countries of Europe, we have implemented a number of infrastructure projects, focusing in particular on developing the health services and with special attention to rural and marginalised areas. We have worked and shall continue to work on strengthening judicial authority, the rule of law and maintaining the security and dignity of our citizens.

We have made great strides in the field of women's participation in public life and in decision-making bodies, the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, and in local authority institutions. In this connection, we signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in order to achieve full gender equality.

We have developed a system for monitoring, accountability and administrative and financial reform with the aim of establishing transparency, integrity and good governance, striving to align ourselves with the highest international standards in this field.

In building up our national authority and laying the foundations of our future state, we have chosen the parliamentary democratic system, based on respect for pluralism, equality between citizens, women and men, the rule of law, and protection of freedoms and human rights, and despite the difficulties and external interference and restrictions of the occupation which has placed obstacles and mines on our path to democracy, we have resolved to pursue our commitment to the democratic option, to protecting freedom of organisation and party and trade union work, to strengthening the role of civil society institutions, to protecting freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of publishing and the press and to protecting individual and collective freedoms.

Our success in signing the national reconciliation agreement in Cairo on 4 May last constituted a major step towards ending the divisions which had split the unity of our national institutions and had inflicted serious damage on our cause. The essence of this agreement is the formation of a transitional government from among independent national figures which is preparing to run presidential, parliamentary and local elections by May 2012 at the latest.

The reconciliation agreement is a positive achievement for the peace process and not the opposite, and is indispensable for protecting and strengthening Palestinian democracy.

What unites Palestinians and Europeans goes beyond links between geographical neighbours on the two shores of the Mediterranean, and goes further than mere trading relations or human interconnections or what has been the result of thousands of years of cultural interaction.

Above all, what unites us are the joint values to which our peoples are committed, the values of freedom, brotherhood, equality and justice between all human beings, which the peoples of Europe have championed for centuries, and for which today the Arab peoples, and first and foremost the Palestinians, are struggling.

We look with admiration at what Europe has achieved in the field of establishing the foundations of pluralist democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and we look forward to being able to benefit from your experience in this area, so as to develop our own fledgling democracy of which we are very proud. And we look with admiration at this ancient city of Strasbourg which was the site of conflict between the countries of Europe and has become today the centre of the institutions of a united Europe and support for peace.

And in this context, I cannot but express my pride at the partnership agreement which Salim al-Za'nun, Speaker of the Palestinian National Council, signed two days ago, which granted the National Council, the parliament of the Palestinian people in the homeland and the Diaspora, partner for democracy status with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and we are particularly proud that Palestine, after Morocco, is among the first Arab countries to be granted this status, which will have the most positive effect in strengthening the bonds of friendship and joint co-operation between our peoples and in encouraging the path towards democracy in our Arab region.

I would like to express to you the gratitude of the Palestinian people for the generous support they have received from the countries of Europe to help them build their economy and institutions, and we hope that this role will be strengthened still further through the political role played by Europe in promoting the peace process in our region.

We have always stressed that we want our European friends to be players and not only payers.

United Nations Resolution 181 adopted in 1947 announced the setting up of two states, one state, Israel, has come into existence, but the other, Palestine, has not yet seen the light of day. We have come here to ask for this light for our state. This is our legitimate right guaranteed to us by international law. But this does not mean that it is a substitute for negotiations, rather it confirms the necessity of negotiations in order to reach a solution regarding borders, security, refugees, water, settlements, Jerusalem, freeing the prisoners, and also an end to the conflict in accordance with the substance of the Arab peace initiative, to ensure that Israel can live in an ocean of peace that includes all Arabs and Muslims.

We wish to live like other peoples, in freedom and dignity and we are not seeking to isolate anyone. We wish to protect both the Palestinian and Israeli people from this occupation and colonisation which are destroying the future of both peoples. They have to choose between colonisation and peace. We have chosen peace.

You supported the Arab spring which was seeking democracy and freedom. Now the Palestinian spring has arrived asking for freedom and an end to the occupation. We deserve your support. We place our trust in you and are confident that you will not abandon us and leave us all on our own.

We are depending on you.

Thank you.