

Palestinian President Abbas calls for international support and Israel partnership

Palestinian President Abbas asked for Europe's help to avoid the region "slipping into the abyss" in a speech to MEPs on Tuesday. He called for dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians based on "international law, the Road Map and partnership". He warned against unilateral Israeli steps saying "it will destroy any remaining hopes of peace". He also underlined that despite the recent Palestinian elections, the Basic Law of the Palestinian Authority still maintains the President's power over peace negotiations.

Summary of President Abbas' speech

Abbas: there is a Palestinian partner for peace with Israel

The President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, addressed MEPs in a formal sitting on Tuesday. He stressed that there was a Palestinian partner for peace with Israel, and rejected unilateral solutions to the border question. He also called the new Palestinian government to "be given the chance to adapt to the basic requirements of the international community."

President Borrell welcomed Mahmoud Abbas to the plenary, thanking him for returning to Strasbourg so quickly after his abortive visit in March. *"You have been in the eye of the storm in the Middle East at a decisive time for Palestinians and for the people of Israel, which will also have an impact on the whole region and the EU."* He said the whole Parliament wanted to help foster a viable peace process: *"If we don't do the right thing, we run the risk of seeing the world enter a period of wars of religion, which could plunge the Middle East into chaos."*

Mr Borrell stressed that President Abbas had been actively seeking a peaceful two-state solution since the 1970s, before many of his people were ready to accept it. *"No-one could harbour the slightest doubt of your commitment to peace and willingness to negotiate. Your legitimacy is clear from your election."*

The EP President said Europe fully respected the results of January's legislative elections, even though these had caused serious concerns in the international community. *"That community is starting to realise the dangers of cutting off aid. The Quartet meeting this week gave the EU responsibility for finding a mechanism for aid to the territories at least to keep public services running."* He noted that the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly had warned of the chaos that could result if aid was cut off. The EU, he said, was the only body capable of talking to all parties at the same time. He told Mr Abbas: *"You are the umbilical cord linking to the path of peace."*

Mr Abbas took the floor, saying: *"When I speak to you today, I convey the message of the Palestinian people to representatives of nations in a continent with whom we share a permanent neighbourhood on the shores of the old sea, and a history of continued, varied and interlinked relationships. We also share common objectives for a future of strengthened relations built across the waters of the Mediterranean with bridges that will promote cooperation and partnership in various fields, for innovative and fruitful interactions, and for a fertile dialogue between ancient civilizations that gives greater importance to human values, rejects extremist views, strengthens our historical neighbourhood and contributes to the creation of peace, prosperity and progress Mediterranean area."*

Mr Abbas noted that yesterday (Monday, 15 May) the Palestinian people commemorated the 58th anniversary of the "Palestinian Nakba" in 1948 which represented the historical injustice when *"we the Palestinian people, were uprooted from our land, forced into a diaspora, most of us were displaced and became refugees, and our firm national rights were denied."*

"Despite the horror of the historical injustice inflicted upon our people, we were able to formulate a realistic policy to restore the rights of our people to self-determination. At early stages, European capitals were places where secret and public meetings between PLO officials and Israeli activists from the peace camp took place. It was a European capital, Oslo, that hosted the first official contacts between the PLO and the Israeli government and the initial signature of the first agreement in history between the two sides in 1993 before its official signing in Washington that same year."

When the Palestine National Council approved in 1988 the Palestinian peace initiative and accepted United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, it offered an opportunity to achieve a historical reconciliation. I must honestly say that this was not easy for our people. But as a leadership, and I recall here the role of our historical leader Yasser ARAFAT, it took courage to put forward a peace formula that enjoyed the support of our people on the basis of establishing a Palestinian state on 22 per cent of the land of historical Palestine, which represents the land occupied by Israel in 1967. Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, we continued our intensive search for peace. We repeatedly emphasised that the core of the process must be based on the principle of "partnership", a partnership committed to agreement and to the resolution of problems imposed by a legacy of a long, bitter and bloody conflict, a partnership that understands the legitimate concerns of the other and lays the foundations for a new and different future between Palestinians and Israelis."

The severest blow to the peace process, which was supposed to have reached its final stages within a few short years, was handed by the Israeli rejection of the logic of partnership and its insistence on practicing destructive policies, specifically of building settlements, constructing walls and confiscating land to create facts on the ground that prejudice the outcome of negotiations. The abandonment of commitments and agreements and the rejection of international patronage have become a main feature of Israel's policy, and have resulted in the lack of momentum in the peace process and the shaking of peoples' belief in its utility. This policy has developed in recent years to the level of attempting to completely destroy the Palestinian National Authority and its institutions, and to the systematic destruction of our basic infrastructure, which your countries contributed to developing."

For our part, and despite the state of frustration and suffering of a size and severity, I trust you realise and appreciate - those of you who have witnessed it closely - we were careful not to allow our national struggle to be diverted from its course and to protect its conformity with international law. We rejected and condemned all attacks against civilians and rejected terrorism in all its forms. We emphasised the importance of sanctifying a culture of peace, and the peaceful and popular nature of resisting occupation."

Sixteen months ago, the occupied Palestinian territory observed presidential elections after the death of late President ARAFAT, in which I ran with a clear platform: to declare a truce and emphasise adherence to negotiations as a way to resolve the conflict, to adopt a policy of reform in various fields, to strengthen democratic performance, to achieve a period of calm to foster security, and to promote the rule of law."

I am proud that the Palestinian people greatly entrusted me. Our work started immediately, with the agreement of all groups and factions, on a tahdia that provided for the first time in years an almost complete halt in armed attacks by Palestinians. But our Israeli counterpart responded with the continued destruction of the apartheid wall in the West Bank that divides our territories into scattered cantons, with continued assassinations, arrests and military incursions in our towns, villages and refugee camps, with tightening and suffocating sieges, and with the rejection of agreements and understandings, including the understanding reached in Sharm al-Sheikh after the presidential elections. In spite of all this, we engaged Israel's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, ensured its smooth and calm implementation, and provided our ability to assume our own security responsibilities, especially in the border areas where monitors from the European Union assist us to ensure the proper functioning of the first border crossing in history that is fully administered by Palestinians."

Frustration at Israeli policies

The frustration created by the practices of the Israeli occupation and the absence of a positive outlook for the peace process formed the background for the legislative elections that took place last January. The entire world witnessed how the transfer of power was smoothly implemented, and how we established the foundations and the tradition of a democratic process that we have no choice but to follow. We emphasise again that democracy remains without soul in the absence of people's freedom and the continued occupation. Over the past four months, we have been going through the unprecedented situation. The declared

platform of the party that won the elections and formed the government does not conform to my platform and the commitments and prior agreements of the Palestinian Authority.

Our approach to dealing with this situation rests on the same concepts that led us to carry out elections on time. We are addressing this problem inside our institutions and in according with our laws and regulations. The good political activity in Palestine during the past few months is gradually producing a public opinion that emphasises respect for the agreements and commitments of the Palestinian Authority, and commitments to international law. I have asked the new government to amend its platform in order to conform to these commitments. We are in a continued dialogue that will take us to an expanded national dialogue in a few days. I hope that this will lead us to the required process of amendment.

Support of the International Community

Our approach needs the support of the international community. The new government must be given the chance to adapt to the basic requirements of the international community. Stopping assistance to the Palestinian Authority will exacerbate the deteriorating economic and social conditions, and will weaken the network of efficient and working government ministries, administrations and institutions that the countries of the European Union have played a vital role in building and developing.. Here I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Quartet for its latest decision to resume providing assistance to the Palestinian people on the basis of a mechanism which will be developed under the EU leadership. And, in this regard, we call upon Israel to fully release our tax and customs revenue immediately. The EU can play a leading role here. We call for your assistance in achieving the immediate release of these funds.

The Israeli government is yet again repeating the slogan of "no Palestinian partner." You remember that they used this slogan in the past as an excuse to abandon agreements and to refuse to return to the negotiating table. We are gravely concerned for the future of peace in our region as we hear about Israeli projects that aim to draw the final borders of Israel inside the occupied Palestinian territory. These projects will foreclose the possibility of implementing the two-state solution by annexing large portions of the occupied Palestinian territory and render that which remains of it into scattered islands that lack geographical contiguity and vital water resources. The attempt to implement these unilateral projects will destroy any remaining hope to revive the peace process. It will also lead to another bitter era of tension and conflict for which peoples in this region have, for decades, paid a heavy price.

We ask that the international community act immediately in order to prevent the region from sliding into an abyss and a new cycle of conflict that will negatively impact the region and the world as a whole at a moment when our region is experiencing other tensions. Such action would be based on international law, the "Roadmap" and in the adoption of negotiations between partners as an alternative to the policy of unilateralism, diktat and the negation of the other. Such action would draw its justification and necessity from values that unify people in our region, such as the yearning for freedom, peace, development and modernisation that we also share with the people of Europe.

The claim that there is no Palestinian partner has no basis. I reiterate that, based on the constitutional power granted to me by our basic law which entrusts negotiation responsibility in the hand of the PLO Executive Committee, its President and its Negotiations Affairs Department, we remain fully committed to return immediately to the negotiating table to reach an agreement that ends this long conflict. When I spoke to Mr Ehud Olmert by phone to congratulate him on taking office a few days ago, I stressed our true desire to immediately return to the negotiating table."

1967 border

Concluding, President Abbas expressed his thanks to the European Parliament for their invitation to speak and their hospitality. "I believe that I have just spoken before friends who share with us the dedication to promote the values of freedom, democracy, tolerance and dialogue. I am confident that you will continue to support the just cause of the Palestinian people until we gain our freedom and build an independent state in the Holy Land on 1967 border next to the State of Israel."