

The Current State of Affairs between Us

Salam Fayyad

Salam Fayyad is the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. This speech was read in his sudden absence, by PA Foreign Minister and Minister of Information, Riad Malki on September 5, 2008. Afterward, Mr. Malki contributed his own remarks.

I would like to extend my thanks to the organizers of this evening for the opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts, and some of my feelings about the current state of affairs between us.

I think it is clear by now that the fates of our two peoples on this one land have been, and will always be, bound together. We both live on this land, and together, we share a respect for its unique and holy nature. As people, we share the same aspirations for ourselves and for our children.

And yet, a gulf stretches between us. A gulf of occupation. An economic gulf. And most painful of all, a gulf in the basic values created and reinforced by the occupation and by the absence of peace between us. Your children can go to school, but many Palestinian children cannot. You can go on holiday; many Palestinian children have never even seen the sea. You are free to make your own choices about your lives, and our every choice is subject to Israeli military order.

This gulf, this yawning division that separates us and demonizes us, each to the other, is unsustainable. The occupation is not sustainable. How long can Palestinians be denied a national home connecting the West Bank and Gaza as one free, independent state? Yet, I fear that the two-state solution is losing currency amongst both of our peoples and with the world community beyond.

The current dynamic of no peace and no war will inevitably come to an end. The opposite of peace is war. Not a war of the last century: no bandaged troops returning from the front, or buildings protected by the Red Cross on the roof. No, the war of this century is led by individuals, beyond the control of family or state institutions. The ideology of this war is a hard hatred, numb to human suffering, dead to tomorrow. Such individuals are within our society, and they are within yours and they threaten our society as they threaten yours. They are those who believe in the occupation as a means of conquest or who believe that Israel must cease to exist.

But the Israeli majority seems in no hurry to recognize this truth. For them, the occupation is over there, on the other side of the Wall, affecting the Palestinian people seen solely by Israel through the prism of security. But just as Israel will not cease to exist, neither will we, the Palestinian people, proud sons and daughters of this land. And the longer it takes for the Israeli government and people to come to terms with our existence as a people with rights and with roots, the longer and the worse this conflict will become.

And here we are again. In a stalling peace process, subject to the criminal investigations of the Israeli prime minister, with our future and our unresolved past suspended whilst we await the outcome of another Israeli election. Again, the peace process is held hostage to internal political affairs. Prime Minister Olmert will mark the seventh prime minister to have held office since the start of the peace process. And still we wait for a state, entitled, deserving and ever hopeful, because we believe in a world of international law, where governments cooperate to fight disease, where countries are capable of uniting to fight climate change, and where criminals meet their due before international tribunals many years after their crimes are only remembered by the victims. We are not Finns or foreigners in an alien land, we are Palestinians in Palestine, and it is time for us to be recognized, to receive justice and liberty.

The departure of Prime Minister Olmert coincides with the departure of President Bush. This is certainly a period of flux, and with such domestic uncertainty, it is difficult for our main interlocutor and sponsor of the peace process to commit the time and energy that is needed for us to end the occupation and this terrible conflict.

Moreover, I am not blind to the reality on the ground. It has been nine months since Prime Minister Olmert declared that there would be a settlement freeze as part of Israel's commitments at Annapolis. But since that time, we have witnessed repeated attempts to grab land: tenders for over 2,000 new settler housing units have been issued. That is, 2,000 new problems that will need solving as part of the negotiations on settlements. Bulldozers are in Palestinian olive groves. Babies are born at checkpoints. Children scale the Wall just to get to school and yet, despite these attempts to alter the reality on the ground, I pay tribute to President Abbas, a leader who, despite it all, was and remains prepared to sit and discuss the most difficult issues between us with Prime Minister Olmert.

Let me pay testimony also to the efforts of the US administration that has created and nurtured the process and its achievements over the last year and a half. I thank the Arab states for their tireless loyalty to the justice of our cause and their generous support, has enabled our survival during the economic collapse of the

occupied Palestinian territory that followed the closure of the West Bank and Gaza. The efforts of the Egyptian government led to the Gaza ceasefire, achieving what the Israeli military machine was never able to during its long presence in Gaza. Their efforts are a metaphor for the entire occupations: there are only political solutions; there can be no military resolution to the denial of our right to self-determination.

And we are determined. Strength comes from within, and we know how much work lies ahead of us to build the foundations of an independent, economically strong state that can live in peace with Israel. We have made great steps forward in recent months. The security services, the legacy of many decades as a liberation organization with temporary homes in foreign countries, have been restructured, and we are working hard with American, Egyptian and Jordanian help to turn them into the security services of a modern state. Our budget and development plans are lauded and supported by partners from the EU, Norway, the Middle East and around the world.

There are no limits to what we can achieve. We must simply be left unmolested to build for ourselves. Let me give you the example of Nablus, an ancient town, a proud regional capital and once-thriving center of commerce. Our PA security forces have now deployed in Nablus and ended the anarchy that prevailed in recent days. They do their best, but they are given severe limitations as to their ability to operate. Can a secure environment lead to a thriving economy? Perhaps. But if we turn the question around, can a thriving economy lead to a secure environment? It is a self-evident truth that inclusive prosperity is good for everyone.

In the meantime, we wait, our lives and our futures subject to “security considerations.” This current paradigm of what constitutes security for Israel cannot work. What security threat was ten-year-old Ahmed Mousa when he was shot in Ni’ilin by a border policeman with live ammunition from only a few meters away? Ahmed, with his little boy’s gangly limbs, is just one of over 1,100 Palestinian children who have died in this last phase of violence, ten times the figure of Israeli children killed in the same period. This is the most macabre comparison to have to make, but as a father, I understand the desire for all of us to keep our children safe. But your children are no dearer to you than our children are to us. So, if Israel wants security, then the path forward has always been clear: make peace with the Palestinians, withdraw from the settlements on our land and build a fence if you want, build a wall, build whatever the defense establishment thinks necessary, but build it on the 1967 border.

Otherwise, the great security lie is obvious to all. The Israeli security web across the West Bank is there for the benefit of the settlers and their theft of our land;

it is not for the security of Israel. [For them] security means settlements. For the Israeli army, there is no thinking about the exit strategy from the West Bank: the army will be there for as long as the settlements are there, and your sons and daughters will, God forbid, decades from now, be examining the shopping bags of Palestinian grandmothers and the school bags of Palestinian children to ensure that the great subsidized settlement enterprise can continue. The opportunity now lies in Israel's hands—to choose between the settlements or the two-state solution.

So let us get on with our lives, and you can get on with your lives. We will build an economy and the institutions of a state, and those that threaten the stability and prosperity will threaten us all.

They say “an Englishman's home is his castle.” Well, “a Palestinian's land is his identity.” We are from it and within it, and no matter how far away we are from our land, it is always with us. The time for “land for peace” is now.

Riaḍ Malki

We cannot envision a Palestinian state without Gaza. That state will be composed of the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. That is what we are striving to achieve—no half-states or temporary states, nor states with temporary borders. Obviously, we have said very clearly from the beginning that the problem in Gaza is one we are determined to solve. The moment that we achieve an agreement [with the Israelis], the implication is that Gaza will be a part of it.

We do not talk to Hamas and they do not talk to us. We have asked the Egyptians to help us create the positive conditions and atmosphere for a dialogue between the different factions to take place. As a result, they have been working hard on the bilateral level with different representatives of the various factions, which will allow for a national dialogue to be initiated under the umbrella of the Arab League.

We hope to end the separation between Gaza and the West Bank. Our interpretation is that the first step is to establish a coalition government that is not factional—a government that enjoys the full backing of all factions, and this government should prepare for an early presidential and parliamentary election. During that time, we need to restructure the security services and impose law and order in Gaza. We need a pan-Arab force to be deployed in Gaza for such a mission. This was our idea. We will get the reaction of many Arab countries when we attend the next meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo. There, we

will discuss whether this idea is possible or practical, and under what conditions it could be implemented in Gaza.

Of course the Bush vision talks about the two-state solution. The Road Map does, too. We went to Annapolis with the understanding that we would create the conditions to allow us to go into in-depth negotiations with the Israelis before the 2008 elections. After Annapolis, the Israeli government issued a tender to build new housing in settlements. We ask ourselves if the Israeli government didn't understand or is simply defying what was agreed upon. Of course, we are inclined to believe the latter. I have to be frank. Settlement activity on occupied territory has multiplied twelve-fold. If we read well such statements and actions on the ground, we understand that Israel does not want a viable Palestinian state to be created. In that case the whole idea of a two-state solution is not possible. What are the other options? We do not know; but we have to look into them. But since we are involved in bilateral relations with Israel based on what we agreed upon in Annapolis, this means we still believe in the possibility of a two-state solution. The moment we stop negotiations other options can be explored. Until that moment, we have to believe that the two-state solution is possible, though it depends on the attitude and behavior of the Israeli government. They have to choose, as our prime minister said, between settlements or a two-state solution. Until this very moment, we doubt that they have really chosen the two-state solution.