The Prospects of Peace in the Middle East during President Obama's Administration - a Palestinians Perspective.

INTRODUCTION

- Are prospects for peace enhanced under an Obama Administration? If so, why? What are the lessons learnt from past negotiations, and what is required if peace is to be finally realized? What are the obstacles we still face? These are the questions that I have been asked to address here today.

- Before addressing prospects for Middle East peace under an Obama Administration, let me emphasize that peace between Palestinians and Israelis has always been achievable.

- One need look no further than international law and relevant UN Resolutions to know what a just and lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis requires. Both envision a sovereign and viable Palestinian state, established on the 1967 border with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side in peace and security next to Israel. In short, the two-state solution.

- We also know the way forward. Both the Arab Peace Initiative, which I will refer to later, and the Road Map, plot a clear path towards peace.

- What is missing then is not a solution, but rather the political will to bring about this solution.

- Only negotiations that are based on internationally recognized terms of reference, and that hold both parties accountable to international law and their respective obligations under existing agreements, have any chance of delivering a just and lasting peace.
WHAT IS THE CONFLICT ABOUT?

- The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not one fuelled by age old religious antagonisms or competing and equal claims to the land. The occupied Palestinian territory is not ‘disputed’ territory.

- Nor does resolving this conflict hinge on the concept of reconciliation. In South Africa, reconciliation began only after apartheid was dismantled. In Palestine, the long and difficult process of reconciliation will begin only after Israel’s occupation is dismantled. To talk of reconciliation before this is to ask Palestinians to reconcile themselves to their own occupation.

- Rather, the root cause of this conflict is Israel’s occupation. This includes Israel’s daily violations of international law at the expense of Palestinian rights and freedoms. This includes the rights of Palestinian refugees.

- Occupation is inadequate as a word to describe the intent and scope of Israel’s policies on the ground and their effect on Palestinians.

- Since 1967, Israel has instituted a policy of occupation, land colonization and apartheid in the occupied Palestinian territory.

- It has illegally confiscated and colonized over 40 percent of the occupied West Bank for settlements and their surrounding infrastructure. This is Palestinian land stolen from Palestinians, which we can no longer access or utilize.

- It maintains over 570 checkpoints, roadblocks and other impediments to Palestinian movement across the occupied West Bank, preventing freedom of movement for
Palestinian goods and people while destroying any real prospect for Palestine’s economic recovery.

- Much like the past laws of apartheid South Africa, we are forced to carry military issued permits that limit where we can live move and work. Most recently, Israel issued two new military orders that effectively deny the inherent right of Palestinians to be present in their own homeland.

- In violation of customary international water law, Israel exploits over 90 percent of our shared water resources, while allocating only 10 percent to Palestinian use. In Gaza, only 10 percent of the water is safe to drink because of over extraction.

- Israel’s regime of military orders and draconian ‘security laws’ exclusively targeting Palestinians disfigures every aspect of Palestinian life and takes away our most fundamental rights and freedoms.

- In East Jerusalem, home demolitions, forced evictions, ID revocations and rapid settlement expansion continues at an unprecedented rate.

- And in Gaza, Israel maintains an occupation by siege, leaving somewhere in the vicinity of 90 percent of Gaza’s population sinking in destitute poverty, and creating an environment where disease, despair and radicalization go hand in hand.

- The net effect of these measures is to isolate, fragment, and imprison Palestinians into ever smaller reservations or cantons, to fragment the OPT in a way that targets the political and social and economic cohesion of Palestinian society while denying Palestinians any hope of building a state, and to collectively punish all Palestinians.

- Peace requires an end to Israel’s occupation and a just solution for Palestinian refugees. This means an end to Israel’s colonization of occupied Palestinian land, an end to its system
of apartheid that discriminates between Jew and non-Jew, and the restoration of the full rights and freedoms long denied to Palestinians, including the right to self-determination.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

4 elements distinguish the current Obama Administration from previous US Administrations. They are:

a) **Early Involvement in Middle East**: President Obama committed his Administration early on to getting Middle East peace talks back on track, appointing George Mitchell as his Special Envoy while reiterating his personal commitment to mediating a just and lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis;

b) **Strong International standing**: President Obama continues to command significant political capital both at home and abroad which he can use to advance peace;

c) **Changes in US foreign policy**: In contrast to the Bush Administration’s policy of isolation and confrontation (‘war on terror’), President Obama has spoken of a new era of diplomacy and engagement with the Arab and Islamic world (Cairo Speech);

d) **US interest**: Most importantly, President Obama has framed Palestinian-Israeli peace both as a US national strategic interest and central to achieving regional peace and stability.

- In addition, there exists today unparalleled international support for the two state solution and Middle East peace, and a strong international consensus on the illegality of Israeli settlements and the damage they are doing to prospects for peace.

- It is this **convergence of interests** towards Middle East peace and America’s **renewed engagement** in the region, including its willingness to mediate Middle East peace talks, which largely explains the sense of hope and optimism that followed the election of President Obama.

- But as President Obama is finding out, translating optimism and opportunity into concrete progress on the ground is not easy.
• In particular, growing US and international frustration with Israel is palpable.

**ISRAEL: CHOOSING THE WRONG PATH**

• The Israeli government spent the best part of last year setting off a series of trial balloons (for example, its settlement moratorium) intended to distract, delay and complicate efforts to resume negotiations, while hoping to wear down international calls for Israel to freeze all settlement activity consistent with its obligations under the Road Map.

• It continues to adopt a bunker mentality, digging its heels in while pretending to open its arms to negotiations, further isolating itself from today’s international consensus on illegal settlements and the steps required to resume genuine negotiations.

• On all permanent status issues, it has become a government of NO.

• No to a settlement freeze, no to sharing Jerusalem, no to the 1967 borders, and no to the rights of Palestinian refugees.

• On the issue of settlements in particular, Mr. Netanyahu is seen as having taken President Obama on and won, with potentially fatal consequences for hopes of achieving Middle East peace.

• Let’s be clear here: US demands for a settlement freeze cannot be simply willed away as naivety on the part of the Obama Administration.

• As long as Israel continues to build illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian land, including in East Jerusalem, prospects for peace and the viability of the two-state solution will continue to diminish.
• To argue that a settlement freeze places unrealistic expectations on Israel is to dramatically lower our expectations of peace.

• It is not that the Obama Administration expects too much, but that the Israeli government offers so little. This defines today’s impasse.

PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

• Palestinian support for genuine negotiations leading to a just and lasting peace has never wavered. This support was demonstrated by the PLO’s endorsement of the 2 state solution as far back as 1988.

• Since then, peace in the form of a viable, sovereign and independent Palestinian state on all the territory occupied in 67 has been the overriding goal of the Palestinian leadership.

• We continue to implement our Road Map obligations in good faith. This includes significant financial, governance and security sector reforms.

• In the absence of reciprocal measures taken on the part of Israel, the challenge we face today is the lack of a genuine partner for peace.

• Palestinians cannot accept continued settlement construction or the ongoing colonization of Palestinian land in violation of international law, whether in occupied East Jerusalem or in any other part of the occupied Palestinian territory. This has been a consistent requirement for us to engage in negotiations. Our position has never changed.
• Without an immediate and comprehensive settlement freeze and the eventual dismantlement of settlements, there will be no Palestinian state left to negotiate and no two-state solution to speak of.

• Time is running out for the two-state solution. Palestinians cannot keep waiting for Israel to catch up.

• That is why the Palestinian National Authority continues to push on with its two-year state building plan.

• More broadly, our goal must be to advance Palestinian interests, better harness international support for the two-state solution, and build momentum towards peace in spite of Israel’s intransigence, including Israel’s refusal to end its occupation.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

• If there is to be any real prospect of peace in the coming two years, the Obama Administration cannot afford to ignore the lessons that nearly 20 years of negotiations teach us.

• Any resumption of negotiations requires clear US policies based on the following principles:

a) **Comprehensiveness over incrementalism:** There must be a focus on the big picture and bold moves to generate and sustain momentum. For example, the focus should be on lifting the entire closure regime in the West Bank and the blockade on Gaza, and not on negotiating the removal of a handful of checkpoints in the West Bank or securing a few pipes for a water project in Gaza.

b) **Political solutions over militarism:** Both Gaza and Lebanon have shown that Israel’s use of overwhelming, disproportionate force achieves nothing beyond deepening hatreds
and perpetuating the conflict. Time and again such measures have failed to weaken Palestinian aspirations for freedom or bring about a just resolution to the conflict in any way.

c) **Multilateralism over unilateralism:** A resolution to the conflict that has the agreement of all parties involved is far more likely to prove sustainable and lasting. Again, Israel’s experiences with Egypt and Jordan, as compared with Gaza and Lebanon, are instructive.

d) **The US must act as an honest broker:** US engagement must address the needs of all parties, and must be continuous and immediate. The US must also ensure that all sides comply with their obligations.

e) **The process must have a clear objective:** The goal of any negotiations must be clear up front, including defining the end-goal, establishing parameters as well as a clear timeline, and agreeing on next steps in the event that no progress is made.

f) **The process must be inclusive:** The approach should capitalize upon the international consensus of a Palestinian state in the territory occupied in 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue. The Arab Peace Initiative—with its strategic vision of a comprehensive regional peace—should be the centerpiece of this approach. Specifically, the US should re-energize the Quartet and pursue a multilateral approach with the clear goal of ending the conflict in a manner consistent with international law, UN resolutions, and existing agreements and terms of reference. US involvement should be coordinated with, and include, the Arab states and the EU. This would also apply to bringing in all Palestinian factions into the decision-making.

g) **Respect for the democratic process:** The outcome of Palestinian national reconciliation and elections must be supported. Undermining the outcome of reconciliation or upcoming elections will only undermine all efforts at building and supporting Palestinian
institutions. Expectations of any future national unity government should show flexibility and should not relegate it to failure from the outset.

**CONCLUSION**

- To return to my initial starting point, what is being tested today is the political will and the resolve of the international community to bring about a just and lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

- This is the key challenge on which prospects for peace under an Obama Administration hinge.

- The Annapolis negotiations provided us with a clear map of where the greatest differences between Palestinians and Israelis are. This should be our starting point.

- International law and UN resolutions provide us with the parameters that define what a just and lasting peace entails.

- And the Arab Peace Initiative offers us both an historic opportunity to move the peace process forward, and more than this, to aim ever higher towards a comprehensive regional peace.

- The tools are there. The question is whether there exists the political will to use them. Only time will tell.

**ANNEX**

**FOCUS ON ECONOMICS**

- Palestine’s economy continues to be suffocated by Israel’s occupation.
• This includes severe restrictions on imports and exports into and out of the occupied Palestinian territory, ongoing restrictions on Palestinian movement limiting labor and trade mobility, inadequate water supplies for industrial and agricultural use, and the loss of land as a result of settlement expansion and land confiscation.

• Since 2000, productivity has dropped by 25 percent and agriculture by 55 percent in the occupied Palestinian territory.

• In the process, our economy is radically shifting to a donor funded economy. Increases to donor funding largely account for the modest growth some have predicted for the Palestinian economy going forward.

• Palestine’s economy has been so severely damaged, and the bar has been set so low, that even with modest growth, Palestine’s economy is still far behind where it should be.

• Since 2000, real GDP in the occupied Palestinian territory has declined by a cumulative 34 percent in real per capita terms.¹

• 74 % of the main routes in the West Bank are controlled by checkpoints or blocked entirely²;

• Conservative estimates put the daily cost of Israel’s closure regime for Palestinians at between US$7 million (World Bank) and US$8 million (UNESCO) in lost income³;

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• 98% of Gaza’s industrial operations are now inactive. According to the Palestinian Federation of Industries, of Gaza’s 3,900 industries, only 23 are now operating⁴;

• 85% of Palestinians in Gaza currently rely on humanitarian aid to survive.⁵ In less than ten years, the number of families dependent on UNRWA food aid has increased tenfold.⁶

• As of December 2007, 57.2% of Palestinians were living under the poverty line (45.7% in West Bank, 79.4% in Gaza – note: the poverty rate in Gaza in 2000 was 30%). This data does not take in account the tightened siege and recent assault on Gaza.⁷

• In the end, Palestine’s economy is at the mercy of Israel. This in no way constitutes a secure foundation for Palestine’s economy, or any certainty regarding the future. For this reason, potential investors are still deterred from investing in Palestine. Israel determines whether our economy grows or contracts. In effect, Benjamin Netanyahu wields immense power over Palestinian businesses despite having been elected by no Palestinian.

• Self-determination and statehood alone hold the keys to unlocking Palestine’s economic potential.