

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

**The President's News Conference With President Mahmoud Abbas of the
Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, West Bank**

March 21, 2013

President Abbas. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

Mr. President Barack Obama, I wish to warmly welcome you and the accompanying delegation to Palestine.

Mr. President, during your visit to our country, you will meet a people proud of their history, heritage, culture, and symbols; a young, creative, and entrepreneurial people who have made the miracle and arose from the calamities of the Nakba and continue the path of their ancestors, extending since the ancient times over this land, their land; a people who adhere to their rights and are in harmony and keep abreast with the realities of the age, its language and methods; a people who build institutions of the state of Palestine, giving an exemplary model despite all hardships and hurdles.

The people of Palestine, Mr. President, who receive you today aspire to attain their simplest rights—the right to freedom, independence, and peace—and look forward to that day to come quickly in which they exercise normal and natural life over the land of the state of Palestine—the independent state of Palestine—along the borders of the 4th of June, 1967, with Jerusalem, the "Lady of the Cities," as its capital, alongside the State of Israel.

We, Mr. President, believe that peace is necessary and inevitable, and we also believe that it is possible. We believe that peacemaking—and as much as it requires, political courage—also requires an expression of good faith, a recognition of people's rights, respect for the other, and dissemination of a culture of peace and the commitment to international legitimacy and its resolutions. Certainly, peace shall not be made through violence, occupation, walls, settlements, arrests, siege, and denial of refugee rights.

We are extremely in pleasure to receive you today in our country. Our people share with American people—and with you personally—the belief in the values and principles of freedom, equality, justice, and respect for human rights. And we, together with the peoples of the world, are partners in the pursuit to achieve a just peace that ends occupation and war and achieves security, stability, and prosperity to all the peoples of our region.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we have conducted a good and useful round of talks with His Excellency President Obama. It was an opportunity to focus, on our side, on the risks—and the disastrous risks—that the continuation of settlement activity represent on this two-state solution and over the need to release prisoners.

I asserted to His Excellency the President that Palestine has taken long and additional steps for the sake of making peace. I hereby assert again that we are ready to implement all our commitments and obligations and to respect the signed agreements and international legitimacy resolutions in order to provide for the requirements of launching the peace process and achieving the two-state solutions, Palestine and Israel.

We are also serious in ending the division and achieve the Palestinian reconciliation, which constitutes an additional source of power for us to continue our march towards making peace, security, and stability in the region.

I have renewed confidence that the United States, represented by His Excellency President Obama and Mr. John Kerry, shall intensify its efforts to remove the obstacles ahead of the efforts to achieve a just peace, which the peoples of the region have long awaited.

Here I wish to thank the President for his continuous confirmation of the U.S. commitment to provide support to the Palestinian people and to thank him and his administration for the support that has been provided during the past years—various forms of support—to the Palestinian treasury, to development projects, and to the UNRWA.

Mr. President, once again, you are welcome in Palestine. Thank you.

President Obama. Marhaba. Thank you, President Abbas, for your generous words and for welcoming me to Ramallah. I was last here 5 years ago, and it's a pleasure to be back, to see the progress that's happened since my last visit, but also to bear witness to the enduring challenges to peace and security that so many Palestinians seek. I've returned to the West Bank because the United States is deeply committed to the creation of an independent and sovereign state of Palestine.

The Palestinian people deserve an end to occupation and the daily indignities that come with it. Palestinians deserve to move and travel freely and to feel secure in their communities. Like people everywhere, Palestinians deserve a future of hope: that their rights will be respected; that tomorrow will be better than today; and that they can give their children a life of dignity and opportunity. Put simply, Palestinians deserve a state of their own.

I want to commend President Abbas and his Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, for the progress that they've made in building the institutions of a Palestinian state. And the United States is a proud partner in these efforts, as the single largest donor of assistance that improves the lives of Palestinians, both in the West Bank and Gaza. As your partner, we salute your achievements, and we mourn your losses. We offer condolences, in particular, over the loss of your fellow Palestinians last weekend in the tragic accident in Jordan.

And Ramallah is a very different city than the one I visited 5 years ago. There's new construction. There's new businesses, new startups, including many high-tech companies, connecting Palestinians to the global economy. The Palestinian Authority is more efficient and more transparent. There are new efforts to combat corruption so entrepreneurs and development can expand. Palestinian security forces are stronger and more professional, serving communities like Bethlehem, where President Abbas and I will visit the Church of the Nativity tomorrow.

Moreover, this progress has been achieved under some extremely challenging circumstances. So I want to pay tribute to President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad for their courage, for their tenacity, and for their commitment to building the institutions upon which a lasting peace and security will depend.

I would point out that all this stands in stark contrast to the misery and repression that so many Palestinians continue to confront in Gaza because Hamas refuses to renounce violence, because Hamas cares more about enforcing its own rigid dogmas than allowing Palestinians to live freely, and because too often it focuses on tearing Israel down rather than building Palestine up. And we saw the continuing threat from Gaza again overnight, with the rockets that targeted Sderot. We condemn this violation of the important cease-fire that protects both Israelis and Palestinians, a violation that Hamas has a responsibility to prevent.

Now, here in the West Bank, I realize that this continues to be a difficult time for the Palestinian Authority financially. So I'm pleased that in recent weeks the United States has been able to provide additional assistance to help the Palestinian Authority bolster its finances. Projects through USAID will help strengthen governance, rule of law, economic development, education, and health. We consider these to be investments in a future Palestinian state, investments in peace, which is in all of our interests.

And more broadly, in our discussions today, I reaffirmed to President Abbas that the United States remains committed to realizing the vision of two states, which is in the interests of the Palestinian people and also in the national security interests of Israel, the United States, and the world. We seek an independent, a viable, and contiguous Palestinian state as the homeland of the Palestinian people, alongside the Jewish State of Israel: two nations enjoying self-determination, security, and peace.

As I've said many times, the only way to achieve that goal is through direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians themselves. There is no shortcut to a sustainable solution.

In our discussion with President Abbas, I heard him speak eloquently about the difficult issues that cannot be ignored, among them problems caused by continued settlement activity, the plight of Palestinian prisoners, and access to holy sites in Jerusalem. I understand that the status quo isn't really a status quo, because the situation on the ground continues to evolve in a direction that makes it harder to reach a two-state solution. And I know that the Palestinian people are deeply frustrated.

So one of my main messages today—the same message I'm conveying in Israel—is that we cannot give up. We cannot give up on the search for peace, no matter how hard it is. As I said with Prime Minister Netanyahu yesterday, we will continue to look for steps that both Israelis and Palestinians can take to build the trust and the confidence upon which lasting peace will depend. And I very much appreciate hearing President Abbas's ideas on what those steps could be.

I want both sides to know that, as difficult as the current situation is, my administration is committed to doing our part. And I know that Secretary of State John Kerry intends to spend significant time, effort, and energy in trying to bring about a closing of the gap between the parties. We cannot give up on the search for peace. Too much is at stake.

And if we're going to succeed, part of what we're going to have to do is to get out of some of the formulas and habits that have blocked progress for so long. Both sides are going to have to think anew. Those of us in the United States are going to have to think anew. But I'm confident that we can arrive at our destination to advance the vision of two nations, two neighbors at peace: Israel and Palestine.

If given the chance, one thing that I'm very certain of is that the Palestinians have the talent, the drive, and the courage to succeed in their own state. I think of the villages that hold peaceful protests because they understand the moral force of nonviolence. I think of the importance that Palestinian families place on education. I think of the entrepreneurs determined to create something new, like the young Palestinian woman I met at the entrepreneurship summit that I hosted who wants to build recreation centers for Palestinian youth. I think of the aspirations that so many young Palestinians have for their future, which is why I'm looking forward to visiting with some of them right after we conclude this press conference.

That's why we can't give up, because of young Palestinians and young Israelis who deserve a better future than one that is continually defined by conflict. Whenever I meet these young people, whether they're Palestinian or Israeli, I'm reminded of my own daughters, and I know what hopes and aspirations I have for them. And those of us in the United States understand that change takes time, but it is also possible, because there was a time when my daughters could not expect to have the same opportunities in their own country as somebody else's daughters.

What's true in the United States can be true here as well. We can make those changes, but we're going to have to be determined. We're going to have to have courage. We're going to have to be willing to break out of the old habits, the old arguments, to reach for that new place, that new world. And I want all the people here and throughout the region to know that you will have the President of the United States and an administration that is committed to achieving that goal.

Thank you very much.

Arab-Israeli Peace Process/Entrepreneurial Spirit of Israelis and Palestinians/Israeli Settlements in the West Bank

Moderator. Thank you. President Abbas. We will now open the floor to questions. We will take two questions. First question, Ali Sawafta, Reuters.

Q. After you meet leaders from both sides, is there any chance to resume peace talks as soon as possible? And do you think that the two-state solution is still valid in this policy of expanding settlements is continuing going on? And my last question: Did you raise the freezing of settlement activity with the Prime Minister Netanyahu when you met him? Thanks.

President Obama. Based on the conversations that I've had with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, I do think the possibility continues to exist for a two-state solution. I continue to believe it is our best—and indeed, in some ways, our only—chance to achieve the kinds of peaceful resolution of old conflicts, but also the opening up of new opportunities for peoples on both sides to thrive, to succeed, for both Israel and a state of Palestine to be incorporated into the global economy.

I mean, one of the striking things, one of the ironies of this conflict is that both the Israelis people and the Palestinian people are extremely entrepreneurial. They have a keen business sense. They could be hugely successful in helping to lift up the economy of the region as a whole.

I was with President Peres this morning before I came here, looking at a high-tech exhibit that was taking place in Jerusalem. And there was actually a program that U.S.—a U.S. company, Cisco, had set up, where it was hiring young Arab engineers and Palestinian engineers because they were so well qualified, so talented, and there was a great hunger for those kinds of skills. Well, imagine if you have a strong, independent state that's peaceful, all the talent that currently is being untapped that could be creating jobs and businesses and prosperity throughout this area.

So I absolutely believe that it is still possible. But I think it is very difficult. I think it's difficult because of all sorts of political constraints on both sides. I think it's difficult, frankly, because sometimes, even though we know what compromises have to be made in order to achieve peace, it's hard to admit that those compromises need to be made, because people

want to cling on to their old positions and want to have 100 percent of what they want, or 95 percent of what they want, instead of making the necessary compromises.

And as a politician, I can say it's hard for political leaders to get too far ahead of your constituencies. And that's true for Prime Minister Netanyahu; I'm sure it's true for President Abbas as well.

But if we can get direct negotiations started again, I believe that the shape of a potential deal is there. And if both sides can make that leap together, then not only do I believe that the Israeli people and the Palestinian people would ultimately support it in huge numbers, but I also think the world and the region would cheer. There would be some who would be upset because they benefit from the current conflict. They like the status quo; they like the arrangement as it is. But I actually think that there are majorities out there who right now don't feel helpful, but still would strongly support both Palestinian and Israeli leadership that made the necessary effort and compromises for peace.

Now, one of the challenges, I know, has been continued settlement activity in the West Bank area. And I've been clear with Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Israeli leadership that it has been the United States policy, not just for my administration, but for all proceeding administrations, that we do not consider continued settlement activity to be constructive, to be appropriate, to be something that can advance the cause of peace. So I don't think there's any confusion in terms of what our position is.

I will say, with respect to Israel, that the politics there are complex, and I recognize that that's not an issue that's going to be solved immediately. It's not going to be solved overnight.

On the other hand, what I shared with President Abbas and I will share with the Palestinian people is that if the expectation is, is that we can only have direct negotiations when everything is settled ahead of time, then there's no point for negotiations.

So I think it's important for us to work through this process, even if there are irritants on both sides. The Israelis have concerns about rockets flying into their cities to—last night. And it would be easy for them to say, you see, this is why we can't have peace, because we can't afford to have our kids in beds sleeping and suddenly a rocket comes through the roof. But my argument is, even though both sides may have areas of strong disagreement, may be engaging in activities that the other side considers to be a breach of good faith, we have to push through those things to try to get to an agreement, because if we get an agreement, then it will be very clear what the nature of that agreement is: There will be a sovereign Palestinian state, a sovereign Jewish State of Israel.

And those two states, I think, will be able to deal with each other the same way all states do. I mean, the United States and Canada has arguments once in a while, but they're not the nature of arguments that can't be solved diplomatically. And I think we can keep pushing through some of these problems and make sure that we don't use them as an excuse not to do anything.

Israeli Settlements in the West Bank/Arab-Israeli Peace Process

Moderator. Our second question comes from the U.S. delegation, and it will be the last question. Major Garrett of CBS News.

Q. Mr. President, President Abbas, on behalf of all my colleagues, I want to get a little bit more specific on the question of settlements and the overall peace process. Mr. President, when you started your administration, you called for a halt of new settlement activity. That held

up for a while, but then it dissipated. And then late last year when the Israeli Government announced very sensitive settlement activity in the E-1 zone, your administration put out a statement that many in this region thought was either tepid or completely nonresponsive. What would you say here, in Ramallah, Mr. President, to those entrepreneurial Palestinians you referenced who believe you've either been equivocal or nonresponsive to the issue of Israeli settlements?

And do you, President, Abbas, do you believe it is necessary for the peace process to start with a declaration publicly from the Israeli Government that it will either slow down or stop entirely new settlement activity?

And broadly, on the peace process itself, Mr. President, you talked about thinking anew. Historically, the theory has been nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to. Are you, Mr. President Obama and President Abbas, open to a theory that would say, if things are agreed to, they shall be implemented, to build confidence on both sides and restart the peace process? Thank you.

President Obama. Well, Major, I think I answered the question previously about settlements. You mentioned E-1, in particular. I think that is a—an example of a—at least a public statement by the Israeli Government that would be very difficult to square with a two-state solution. And I've said that to Prime Minister Netanyahu. I don't think that's a secret.

With respect to whether there's a requirement for a freeze or moratorium, I want to repeat what I just said earlier, which is, if the only way to even begin the conversations is that we get everything right at the outset—or at least, each party is constantly negotiating about what's required to get into talks in the first place—then we're never going to get to the broader issue, which is how do you actually structure a state of Palestine that is sovereign, contiguous, and provides the Palestinian people dignity, and how do you provide Israel confidence about its security, which are the core issues.

The core issue right now is, how do we get a—sovereignty for the Palestinian people and how do we assure security for the Israeli people? And that's the essence of this negotiation. And that's not to say settlements are not important. It is to say that if we solve those two problems, the settlement problem will be solved.

So I don't want to put the cart before the horse. I want to make sure that we are getting to the core issues and the substance, understanding that both sides should be doing what they can to build confidence, to rebuild a sense of trust. And that's where, hopefully, the U.S. Government can be helpful.

On your last point, I think that part of my goal during this trip has been to hear from both President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu about what they would need and how they would see a potential path, how it would be structured. And so I think it's premature for me to give you an answer to the question you just posed. I think it was a good one, I think it was a legitimate one, but I'm still hearing from them. And me, Secretary Kerry, others, we're going to go back and look at what we've heard from both sides and make a determination as to what has the best prospect for success.

I will say this: that I think incremental steps that serve to delay and put off some of the more fundamental issues, rather than incremental steps that help to shape what a final settlement might look like, are probably not going to be the best approach, because I—it's not clear that that would, in fact, build trust. If you have a situation where it looks like the incremental steps replace the broader vision, as opposed to incremental steps in pursuit of a

broader vision, then I think what you end up getting is 4 more years, 10 more years, 20 more years of conflict and tension, in which both sides are testing the boundaries of those incremental agreements.

Whereas if we can get a broad-based agreement that assures the Palestinians that they have a state, and you have a comprehensive approach that ensures Israel the kind of security that they need, the likelihood of that deal holding—and ultimately, the sense of trust that comes from people-to-people relations, not just governmental relations—I think that's much more likely to occur.

President Abbas. Regarding the issue of settlements, it is not only our perception that settlements are illegal, but it is a global perspective. Everybody considers settlements not only a hurdle, but even more than a hurdle, towards the two-state solution.

We mentioned and we remember that the Security Council, during the seventies and eighties, had issued more than 13 resolutions not only condemning settlements, but demanding ending them and removing them because they are illegal. We are asking for nothing outside the framework of international legitimacy. Hence, it is the duty of the Israeli Government to at least halt the activity so that we can speak of issues. And when we define our borders and their borders together, each side will know its territory in which it can do whatever it pleases.

So the issue of settlements is clear. We never give up our vision, whether now or previously, but we continue to maintain this vision, and we believe the settlements are illegal and that settlement activity is illegal. We hope that the Israeli Government understands this. We hope they listen to many opinions inside Israel itself speaking of the illegality of settlements.

We spoke about this with Mr. President, and we clarified our point of view on how we can reach a solution. Many Palestinians, when they see settlements everywhere in the West Bank—and I don't know who gave Israel that right—they do not trust the two-state solution or vision anymore. And this is very dangerous, that people and the new generation reaches the conviction that it is no more possible to believe in the two-state solution.

We continue to believe in the two-state vision on the 1967 borders, and consequently, if peace between us and the Israelis is achieved, the Israelis will know very well that the Arab and Islamic world all together, which means 57 Arab and Muslim States, shall immediately recognize the State of Israel according to the road map—and thank you—and the Arab initiative.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:33 p.m. at the Muqata Presidential Compound. In his remarks, President Obama referred to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres of Israel. President Abbas referred to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). President Abbas and the moderator spoke in Arabic, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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