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IS PEACE POSSIBLE IN 2008? A PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

A Discussion with Yasser Abd Rabbo,
PLO Secretary General

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Introduction

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Featured Speaker

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Moderator

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. INDYK: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome to the Saban Center at Brookings. We're very honored today to be co-hosting this event with the American Task Force on Palestine and Ziad Asali who is the President of the American Task Force on Palestine is going to do the introduction. Our guest Yasser Abd Rabbo will speak to you for about 10 minutes or so. Then the three of us are going to have a conversation before we turn to you for your questions. So thank you again for coming. Ziad?

MR. ASALI: Thank you very much, Martin. It is a pleasure to be with the Saban Center and a particular pleasure also to introduce our mutual friend Yasser Abd Rabbo. Yasser is very hard to introduce. He is somebody who is known by everyone but I thought that I would just dwell on a couple of points in his career that started out with resistance. In 1967 with the Palestinian Resistance he started on the extreme left and has consistently stayed on the left but moving consistently to the right of the left. Whatever organization he joined he has managed to connect himself with reality and the reality dictated otherwise less than an ideological position. He has maintained that with the Popular Front and the Democratic Front and FIDA (?) and in the PLO. Yasser has a very, very distinguished career of actually having survived and been a

participant of all major Palestinian, Israeli, American, and international meetings and conferences in a leadership position. People might say anything they want about Yasser but there is a consensus that he is probably the leading Palestinian strategist.

He has been there when the Democratic Front that he joined and co-founded first established the historic compromise concept to accept the State of Israel and accept the State of Palestine on 1967 borders. I remember those times. It was an heroic position that was extremely controversial and the controversy continued to follow him even on his most imaginative positions that he takes out publicly and without fear. He has been there in Rabat when the PLO accepted the historic compromise in 1998, in Madrid, in Oslo, at Camp David or Arab summits, and Baba (?) and he in fact extended his political leadership position to become the Secretary General of the PLO, a position that he holds until now. He founded the Palestine Peace Coalition that he chairs and he has served a very interesting period of his career as the Minister of Culture and Information. During that period he established the law of the free press that the Palestinians actually enjoy up until now. He and his wife have been leading figures in Palestinian culture, in support the theater, supporting women's positions, and supporting all cultural festivals including the Cultural Prize for Palestine.

I can go on and on and on about Yasser and it is a testament to his staying skill that he is still at the cutting edge of

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Palestinian politics. This visit here is yet one more manifestation. Yasser, it is hard to say good things about somebody in their presence, but it is hard to say hard things about you.

(Applause)

MR. RABBO: Thank you very much. After this glorious introduction, how about ending the whole meeting now? Thank you, Martin. Thank you, Ziad. Thank you all for coming here today.

We are passing through a period which really is very difficult to judge. Is it the beginning of a serious process that will lead toward an historical agreement and compromise or are we heading toward a disaster, at least political disaster with all its consequences on the Palestinian-Israeli relations and on the regional future? I don't know, frankly, and I cannot predict and I have no answer for that question which holds me and maybe others for every day.

We are trying to do our best in order to avoid of course the other alternative, the other option, and that's why we are here and that's why we are trying to put a list of the past mistakes that we had committed in Camp David, before Camp David, after Camp David, and every day make a kind of rehearsal about these lists and promise ourselves that we are not going to repeat them so that at least we will not be blamed if there is God forbid a failure. I can tell you about this list of mistakes that we had committed in the past including in Camp David and after Camp David, but

let us leave it for another opportunity and let's look now a little bit more for the future.

When I compare between what is being said in the meetings and negotiations and what is going on on the ground, I am threatened of a kind of schizophrenic future maybe. What is being said is that we need to have an agreement by the end of this year. This is an opportunity. This administration is ready and willing and is doing also the utmost in order to reach that agreement before the end of this year. On the Israeli side, of course at least officially the Prime Minister of Israel is repeating the same. They want to have an agreement before the end of this year. We are saying this and we are threatening everybody and warning, I prefer warning than threatening, we are warning everybody that if we miss this opportunity, other forces will benefit not only the extremists of Israel and Palestine, but the extremists of the whole region will benefit. So this is I would say the positive face of the picture.

But if we look at what is going on on the ground, it is completely contrary to what is being declared and said in the meetings and officially. On the ground the settlement activities which were promised in Annapolis the last time that they will freeze are continuing, have accelerated, in Jerusalem, around Jerusalem, the whole of the West Bank and people are wondering what are you talking about? You promise us that by the end of this year our sufferings will end or we will start a different process, but at the same time we see the continuation of the

settlement expansions, the continuation of the same old lie, over 580 checkpoints, barriers beside the wall, behind the wall, in front of the wall, and life is not changing. Mr. Barak gave to Secretary Rice during her last visit that 50 earth mounds will be removed, the earth mounds. He declared that he removed 10 of them and he forgot about the other 40, and we had formed a committee to search all over the West Bank, and the Americans are doing the same, to see where are these 10 mounds, just to believe that there's a different beginning for a different process.

So that's why the only thing that will help us to win the public opinion to our side is not the promises of Annapolis and the statements that we make here or after every meeting between Mahmoud Abbas and Olmert, but some change in the daily life of the Palestinians, and we can see that things are as they were before. For the Israeli government business is as usual and this puts or lays a question in front of us, what are we going to reach at by the end of this year? To be frank with you, it's not decided until now. What kind of document we are trying to achieve? We hear that the Israelis want a kind of shelf document, a kind of a DOP, declaration of principles. We on our side are talking about a framework agreement. Some of us are more ambitious to talk about a comprehensive final status solution and agreement. And if until now we did not decide the kind of document, the kind of agreement that we want to achieve, I doubt if it is possible to reach at some kind of a political achievement before the end of this year.

But let me say something in addition to that because I don't want to consume the whole time. Martin told me 10 minutes. You are generous for 15 minutes but no more than that. What's going on on the ground is not an expansion of settlements within the so-called limits of the settlement blocks. This is the justification that is being used by the Israeli government, although until now we didn't have any agreement about these settlement blocks. Nobody said that we accept these blocks to be part of Israel. We will discuss this with them. This is their position, but it's not ours. And if this was included in the famous letter which was sent by President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon, in this case although it was not as clear as that, it's an American-Israeli affair. We were not part of it.

But what's going on is not even that illegal expansion. It shows that the intention is a kind of solution which will be based on the division of the West Bank, a solution in spite of the repeated declarations we hear that we will have a continuous viable Palestinian State, but aim of the solution if it is the division of the West Bank, the partition of the West Bank, and not the partition of the historical Palestine because our understanding was that if we are going to have a two-state solution it should be based on the international resolutions, international understanding, that it is a kind of a partition of Palestine based on the two-for-two and other resolutions. But now the expansion shows that it is a kind of a partition of the West Bank itself. That's why when we look at the map, the Palestinian areas from the point of view of the Israelis do not

include greater Jerusalem, Latoon area, settlement blocks, even the Jordan Valley which is marked sometimes by some Israelis with some lines showing that this is an Israeli security interest. And from what we hear also from our Israeli counterparts is that they want a change in the borders based on demographic, geographic, I don't know what's geographic, but demographic, geographic, and security elements which is a hint that shows us that the Jordan Valley is one of the targets. So by this we are left with what President Bush reiterated yesterday, a kind of slice of Swiss cheese with holes here or there. This is the danger. And the Palestinian National Movement, the moderate camp along the Palestinians however moderate they are or we are, we cannot choose between a solution which is being based on two states on the lines of 1967 with mutual modifications of that line and a solution based on the division or the partition of the West Bank because the other solution is quite clear. It is enclaves. It will build a regime for the Palestinians where the Palestinians will be enslaved forever in these enclaves. We will never accept it and we will leave it for the future. Let the future decide in this case, not us.

So this is the problem which we have. That's one of the basic reasons why we are saying every day if we want to have a different start, a new beginning, put an end to the settlement activities as a priority and on that basis of that let us start fair negotiations between us. Maybe we will not finish everything, I hope we will during these 7 or 8 months, but

we might accomplish something which is the basic elements of a settlement, clear without ambiguity and this will be besides the freezing of the settlements the bridge that will connect between the present administration and the coming administration.

I think that when some people tell me this administration is leaving, weak, et cetera, maybe this is one of its points of strengths rather than points weakness. I don't believe that even a fresh administration led by a gentleman or by a lady or by whoever it is or she is will change the basic elements of the policy. The people who are there now know it. The people who are coming in the future, I think they know it.

So that's why we want, I want to conclude, we want to use this opportunity. We want a document which will be as clear as possible serving the basic elements in every issue, Jerusalem, the borders, the refugees, the security and other issues, defining what will be the mechanism, the timetable, for the continuation of the process in order to be able to use the opportunity of today. The words we heard yesterday in the White House, the State Department, to be frank with you are encouraging and I hope in spite of the introduction of Ziad, but I am not and my colleagues are not deceived by words and it's not because we heard the reiteration of the same words and encouragement. I feel that there is an encouraging atmosphere. We have to exploit that. We have to use that. It is never repeated in history so many times. It was repeated in

the once or twice. I don't know. So we have to build on that and that's what we intend to do. Thank you very much.

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