

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

**Remarks Following a Meeting With President Mahmoud Abbas of the
Palestinian Authority and an Exchange With Reporters**

June 9, 2010

President Obama. Hello, everybody. Be careful, careful.

Before I begin, I know that there was just a vote in the United Nations Security Council. I'm going to comment on that separately; I don't want to detract from the topic at hand here. So for reporters who are interested in that issue, I will be making a statement about that after our session here.

I just want to thank President Abbas for being here and his delegation. We just concluded some very productive discussions on this issue. I commended President Abbas for the excellent work that he and Prime Minister Fayyad have been engaged in over the last several years in strengthening the security as well as improving the economic situation for his people. He's done so through hard work and dedication, and I think the whole world has noticed the significant improvements that we've seen as a consequence of his good administration.

But obviously, there is a lot of work that remains to be done so that we can create a two-state solution in the Middle East in which we have an Israel that is secure and fully accepted by its neighbors and a Palestinian people that have their own state, self-determination, and the ability to chart their own destiny.

Now, we've just gone through a difficult period in the region. We saw the tragedy with the flotillas, something that I think has drawn attention all around the world to the ongoing problems in Gaza. As part of the United Nations Security Council, we were very clear in condemning the acts that led to this crisis and have called for a full investigation. And it is important that we get all the facts out. But what we also know is that the situation in Gaza is unsustainable. I think, increasingly, you're seeing debates within Israel recognizing the problems with the status quo. And so President Abbas and I had very extensive discussions about how we could help to promote a better approach to Gaza.

We agree that Israelis have the right to prevent arms from entering into Gaza that can be used to launch attacks into Israeli territory. But we also think that it is important for us to explore new mechanisms so that we can have goods and services and economic development and the ability of people to start their own businesses and to grow the economy and provide opportunity within Gaza.

And so we are going to be working hand in hand to make sure that we come up with a better approach and urge Israel to work with all parties involved—Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and the international community—to find a resolution to this issue.

In the meantime, the United States, which is already the biggest humanitarian aid donor in Gaza, is going to be announcing an additional \$400 million in assistance for housing, school construction, business development, not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank, because we think it's important for us to reaffirm once again our commitment to improving the day-to-day lives of ordinary Palestinians.

Now, what we also discussed, though, and what we will continue to work on over the next several months is the fact that not only is the status quo with respect to Gaza unsustainable, the

status quo with respect to the Middle East is unsustainable. It is time for us to go ahead and move forward on a two-state solution that will affirm the needs of Israeli citizens and will affirm the needs of Palestinian—Palestinians who are desperate for a homeland.

We have had very productive proximity talks. Senator Mitchell—who is here, I think, standing in the back—has been very active, working with both the Palestinians and the Israelis to try to start moving this process forward. And I want to thank President Abbas for participating in these proximity talks, even under some difficult circumstances. He has shown courage and tenacity in wanting to resolve this issue. And we believe that with Israelis and the Palestinian Authority coming together, making clear that a peaceful, nonviolent solution that recognizes both the security needs of Israel as well as the legitimate aspirations of Palestinians is the right way to go, can yield real progress in the coming months.

It's important that we understand the sense of urgency that the Palestinian people feel in this process. Obviously, you've got organizations like Hamas that have not recognized Israel, that have not renounced violence, who are calling for a different approach. And we think it's important that, given President Abbas's commitment to a peaceful, diplomatic solution to these issues and, I think, the desire of people both in Israel and Palestine—Palestinian Territories for a peaceful solution, that we move forward. And the United States is going to put its full weight behind those efforts.

Now, I did share with President Abbas, in order for us to be successful in these next several months, that both sides have to create an environment, a climate that is going to be conducive to an actual breakthrough. And that means, on the Israeli side, curbing settlement activity and recognizing some of the progress that has been made by the Palestinian Authority when it comes to issues like security. It means, on the Palestinian side—and I was very frank with President Abbas—that we have to continue to make more progress on both security as well as incitement issues. And if we can, over the next several months, try to lift up what are the honest and legitimate concerns of both sides, and if both Palestinians, Israelis can recognize that they have a common interest in moving off of what has been this dead end, then I believe that potentially we can make significant progress before the end of the year.

So I just want to let President Abbas know that I said when I took office this was an issue that I cared deeply about and I was willing to spend a lot of time and energy and political capital on—that commitment has not wavered. And I think the American people want to see a resolution of this issue that is equitable. We will continue to work side by side with you, as well as the Israelis, to resolve this in a way that is good for the children and future generations both in Israel and in a future Palestine.

So thank you very much.

President Abbas. Thank you, sir.

President Obama. Thank you.

President Abbas. Thank you, Mr. President. And we, indeed, have just held very important discussions that touched on the political process as well as the very important latest development that happened in Gaza.

Of course we value and deeply appreciate all the efforts of the United States, as well as the effort of President Obama, in all the assistance and help for pushing forward the economic and security levels. And we have reached a satisfactory picture of the economic and security levels. Yet we are determined to keep pushing forward in our efforts to bring it up to the next level.

And I also appreciate the attention and the determination of President Obama in seeing that we push forward the political process as soon as possible. And I assert and I affirm that we will not give up on this endeavor ahead of us, because it is in our interest, it is in the interest of Israel, in the interest of the world, and also, most of all, in the interest of the United States.

We know that time is of essence, and we know that we must not miss this opportunity. We affirm the importance of bringing about peace and security in the region.

And I would like to thank President Obama for the support that he will give to Gaza, and we have just talked about that now. This is a positive signal of the United States that the United States cares about the suffering of the people in Gaza and about the suffering of the Palestinian people.

And we also see the need to lift the Israeli siege of the Palestinian people, the need to open all the crossings, and the need to let building material and humanitarian material and all the necessities go in to the Palestinian people.

And also, we appreciate the attention given to the formation of an investigation committee that would investigate what happened in the latest events, the events of what we call the "Freedom Flotilla" or the "Freedom Fleet."

And I say in front of you, Mr. President, that we have nothing to do with incitement against Israel, and we're not doing that. What we care about is to live in coexistence with Israel in order to bring about the independent Palestinian state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and stability.

We adopt and we affirm the Arab Peace Initiative that was adopted in summits—in Arab summits as well as in summits held by Islamic countries. Fifty-seven Arab and Islamic countries have said that they would recognize Israel if Israel withdrew from the occupied Arab land.

Mr. President, we thank you, and we express our deep respect for all your efforts, specifically on the peace process and bringing about peace in the Middle East. We know the two-state solution you said is in the—is a critical interest of the United States. This is a slogan that we are proud of, and we will pursue very seriously our efforts in order to bring about peace in the Middle East.

President Obama. Thank you.

President Abbas. Thank you very much.

President Obama. Thank you.

We got time for, I think, two questions. So on the U.S. side, we're going to call on Matt Spetalnick of Reuters.

U.N. Security Council Resolution on Iran Sanctions

Q. Yes. Mr. President, I know you're going to be making a statement later on Iran, but I just wondered if—

President Obama. Yeah, so don't waste that question on that.

Q. You're not going to answer anything—[inaudible].

President Obama. I'll do that at the next one.

Israel/Gaza Freedom Flotilla Incident/Blockade of the Gaza Strip

Q. Did President Abbas ask you to take a tougher line with Israel over the Gaza aid flotilla raid, and will you, in fact, do so—an outright condemnation of Israel's actions? And do you support Israel's insistence on doing a flotilla investigation on its own, perhaps with some foreign involvement, or are you in favor of the U.N. proposal for a fully independent inquiry?

President Obama. Well, let me take the second question first. What the U.N. Security Council called for was a credible, transparent investigation that met international standards. And we meant what we said; that's what we expect.

I think everybody—people in Israel, people in Turkey, people within the Palestinian Territories, certainly people here in the United States—want to know the facts of this tragedy, what led to it, how can we prevent it in the future. And I think I've said to the Israelis directly, and certainly my team has communicated the fact that it is in Israel's interest to make sure that everybody knows exactly how this happened so that we don't see these kinds of events occurring again. And we expect that the standard that was called for in the U.N. Security Council to be met.

With respect to the issue of taking a tougher line, I think President Abbas and I spent most of our time discussing how do we solve the problem. One of the things that we see is that so often rhetoric, when it comes to issues in the Middle East, outstrip actually solving issues. And our conversation was focused on how do we actually allow more goods, more services into Gaza? How do we allow businesses to thrive? How can we get construction moving? How can we put people to work in Gaza?

The Palestinian Authority is already doing a number of things inside of Gaza, providing employment opportunities, providing assistance to people directly. The United States is already providing assistance. But the status quo that we have is one that is inherently unstable. And I think the Israelis have come to recognize that.

The question now is, how do we create a different framework so that people in Gaza can thrive and succeed, so that extremists are isolated, as opposed to having an excuse for engaging in violent activities, but also, how do we do it in a way that Israel's legitimate security concerns are met?

We—and I think President Abbas agrees with this—recognize that Israel should not have missiles flying out of Gaza into its territories. And so there should be a means by which we are able to stop the flow of arms that could endanger Israel's security. At the same time, we're doing so in a way that allows the people in Gaza to live out their aspirations and their dreams both for themselves and their children. And that's something that we're going to spend a lot of time focusing on. And we've already begun some hardheaded discussions with the Israelis in achieving that.

Middle East Peace Process/Blockade of the Gaza Strip/Aid to Gaza

[At this point, a reporter asked part of a question in Arabic. She continued in English as follows.]

Q. And, Mr. President, if I may ask you a question—

[The interpreter was privately translating the question for President Obama.]

President Obama. Okay, I was just finding out what you were asking him. [Laughter]

Q. I can translate that to you if you want.

President Obama. Okay.

Q. I just asked him that there is talk that the administration wants to move from proximity talk to direct negotiation, what the Palestinian Authority wants to see as a condition to move to that stage.

And if I may ask you, the European Union has proposed opening of the Gaza crossing. Would you endorse that, with the EU supervision?

And the money you talked about now, the \$400 million, what mechanism—who is going to distribute this money? Because in the past, that's been a problem regarding the money.

President Abbas. With regards to the transitioning from the proximity talks to the direct talks, we did not say—we are not saying—we are not saying that we have conditions. What has happened is that we agreed that should a progress be achieved, then we would move on to direct talks. We are working in order to make progress. President Obama is working for that to see progress. And we—this is what we have.

President Obama. Okay. With respect to the aid to Gaza, I'll let my team give you the details in terms of how that will be administered and how the money will begin to flow.

With respect to the broader issue of lifting the blockade, as I said before, I think the key here is making sure that Israel's security needs are met, but that the needs of people in Gaza are also met. And it seems to us that there should be ways of focusing narrowly on arms shipments, rather than focusing in a blanket way on stopping everything, and then, in a piecemeal way, allowing things into Gaza.

So if we can get a new conceptual framework—and I'll be talking to my European counterparts as well as Egypt and Israel and the Palestinian Authority—it seems to me that we should be able to take what has been a tragedy and turn it into an opportunity to create a situation where lives in Gaza are actually directly improved.

But let me make this final point: That in the long run, the only real way to solve this problem is to make sure that we've got a Palestinian state side by side with an Israel that is secure. And so we're going to be dealing with these short-term problems, but we also have to keep our eye on the horizon and recognize that it's that long-term issue that has to be focused on. So many of the immediate problems in front of us have to do with the fact that we haven't solved this broader problem.

Okay? Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:58 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Salam Fayyad of the Palestinian Authority; and U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George J. Mitchell. President Abbas spoke in Arabic, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the audio was incomplete.

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