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SPECIAL DOCUMENT

MAHMUD ABBAS'S CALL FOR A HALT TO THE MILITARIZATION OF THE INTIFADA

Around mid-November 2002, PLO Executive Committee secretary Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), who is often named as a possible successor to Yasir Arafat, delivered a controversial speech to a closed meeting of the heads of the popular committees of the Gaza Strip refugee camps in which he criticized the course taken by the al-Aqsa intifada and called for abandonment of the armed struggle. The transcript of Abbas's speech was published by al-Hayat on 26 November, enlivening public debate as to what the Palestinian strategy should be (for another perspective see the Azmi Bishara piece in this issue). The excerpts below were translated and published by Mideast Mirror on 27 November.

LEGITIMATE QUESTIONS

After two years of the intifada, we have to ask a number of legitimate questions: What have we achieved? What positive or negative aims have we accomplished? What actions have we taken over the past two years? What were the consequences of these actions, and what were the pitfalls, the mistakes, and the failings? How can we go on, what method should we adopt, and in what direction should we be heading?

Two years on, our opinion is that the intifada was not wrong because it was a popular outburst against Israeli practices, erupting from the people's conscience. There were three reasons for this outburst: The people's frustration at the stumbling negotiations, the Israeli government's continued settlement expansion, and Ariel Sharon's visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque.

We must not forget that when we came here via the Oslo gateway, we came in order to complete the peace process. Therefore, at the very heart of our struggle, there is a goal that we must still achieve. This started with Gaza and Jericho first, then moved on to the other West Bank cities, reaching 42 percent of West Bank territories, which were divided into areas A and B, placed under Palestinian control.

We also began the stage of [national] reconstruction and received capital and investors. The world started offering us aid to prepare us for building our homeland and for completing our path toward the full achievement of our aim of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, thereby putting an end to the occupation and to settlement, and resolving the refugee problem in accordance with Security Council Resolution 194.

However, from today's perspective, what happened over these two years has been the total destruction of all we have built and all that had been built before that. We now stand below the poverty level in both Gaza and the West Bank. Our people are

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lost, hungry, and suffering. The reason for this is that many people have responded to Israeli provocations, with the result that the intifada has deviated from its natural path.

These people began to use weapons in a way that we were never prepared for, using whatever they could come up with, such as mortars, bombs, and other such weapons, firing from houses and neighborhoods, and resorting to masked and armed demonstrations. As a consequence, we are now in the midst of a military confrontation rather than a popular intifada that expresses popular anger to which no one can object, nor resort to all means of destruction against us, as is happening now. For as you can see today, all the West Bank's cities have become subject to destructive operations on a daily basis as a result of Israel's ability to exploit the situation.

Some might say that Sharon does not want peace or security. This is true. For if Sharon were to sit at the table to present his political program—a program that he has already proposed to us more than once—we would not be the only ones to reject it. A major part of the Israeli people would also reject it because it in no way indicates peace. In this case, his fate will be like that of Benjamin Netanyahu, who opposed and rejected only to be brought down by the Israeli people themselves.

Given this, we should have sat down to the negotiations table to expose Sharon and push him to a corner where we are more able to act than he is, rather than allowing him to drag us to an arena in which he excels and outshines not only us, but the entire Arab world—namely that of military power and the force of arms.

The arms we possess are those that we were allowed to bring in for public security purposes. The rest were either smuggled or bought from here and there. Therefore, we should have exploited the opportunity provided by September 11 when Abu Ammar said, "I am against terrorism," and the U.S. said, "We want this man, clap for him." And when Sharon said, "How can you clap for this man? You have betrayed Israel," the U.S. responded, "Keep quiet."

Since then, however, matters have only been made worse by subsequent developments and by our mistakes that have allowed Sharon to continue his aggression. Among these mistakes was the PFLP's declaration that it was responsible for killing [former Israeli right-wing minister] Rehavam Ze'evi. The PFLP should not have declared its responsibility, because the immediate result should already have been known—namely, Israel's siege of President Arafat and al-Muqata'a, which has been going on since then with some interruptions. . . . Those who are shooting and issuing declarations should therefore have some semblance of national responsibility.

Consequently, there was need for reform. During the siege, everyone was speaking on behalf of everyone else, and no officials and no ministries were working. . . . We had to stop and ask, Where are we heading? This was the origin of the call for reform as a Palestinian interest, a reform of our affairs and a redirection of our path, and of our march to revive our people and assume our responsibilities.

There was talk of forming a new government, and the PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council) started to play its role as a representative of the people, which had freely selected it. . . . When we began consultations regarding the new government, we stressed that it must be as small as possible, because it has two main tasks ahead of it, reform and the elections scheduled for next 20 January. . . .

The main aim of this new, transitional government is to implement financial, administrative, and security reforms. In addition, this government will have to face two important tasks: First, it must deal with what will happen as a result of the Iraqi situation and the U.S. intention to strike Iraq. For if war were to break while things are as they are at present, all our achievements and dreams will be lost; hence we should

reform our situation. Second, the new government will have to attend to the civil and security agencies that have been destroyed, rendering the PA unable to carry out its tasks.

SAVING GAZA

There is now a similar danger that looms over Gaza, which is very close to being invaded. The responsibility borne by anyone in a position of leadership requires that we take all the necessary precautions and work to spare our people in Gaza the dangers of human, material, and political loss that they will incur if the invasion occurs.

Gaza is the only place in the PA territories where there is still some semblance of life, in the sense that not everything has been destroyed yet, and because there are still some agencies, institutions, and ministries that are continuing to work, unlike in the West Bank.

How can we preserve the Gaza Strip and save it quickly from a real tragedy that awaits it? This calls for a swift and speedy effort to control all forces and maintain security in the Strip in order not to provide the Israelis with a pretext for continuing and escalating their aggression against our people. Thus, we face three possibilities:

First: We succeed in controlling the situation. I do not believe that there is anything preventing this from happening. . . . If we do succeed, we can say to the world that in the only place where we are still able to act, we have done our job, and hence we can demand that the world remove the Israeli army from the cities of the West Bank. The consequence would be that Israel would be forced to leave all the cities of the West Bank and we would be able to rebuild our institutions.

Second: We fail, but this would be an experiment in which we would not have lost anything. In fact, the entire world would know that we had made a serious effort to control the situation.

Third: We fail because of actions taken by the Israeli government. In that case, the world would know that we had tried and that Israel is the party that should be held accountable. By doing this we would be pushing Israel—rather than ourselves—into a corner, and all eyes would then be focused on Sharon, who does not want peace.

Now, however, all the pressures are directed toward us; we are being accused of not acting and of being behind all these operations because we do not speak out against terrorism. This is the result of allowing matters to get out of hand. Unfortunately, we in Gaza do not speak with one heart. Let us discuss matters and reach an understanding, first among us members of Fatah, and then with other organizations, such as the PFLP and PDFLP, and then with Hamas and with [Islamic] Jihad. Let us agree on where we want to go. Through dialogue we can reach a formula for an agreement, a formula for a truce with the aim of protecting our country.

If the various organizations want to participate in government, they are welcome. If they want to play the role of a democratic opposition, they are also welcome. For the important thing is that people are no longer able to bear the burdens of life under the present conditions, so we have to do all we can to change them.

We cannot achieve our aims by the use of force. It is the duty of the new government to specify the road we should take, announce it openly, and convince our people that this road will lead to our desired goals. There may still be some here or there who are not in agreement with the Palestinian consensus. We should try to get them to commit themselves to place the higher national interest above their personal or individual interests, even if we have to use force to do so.

At the beginning of the intifada, some said that it would bring Sharon down because he was elected to achieve security. But Sharon has not fallen because the intifada was derailed from its proper course. In my opinion, Sharon is the most important leader the Zionist movement has known since Herzl, who did not enjoy 80 percent of the support that Sharon has.

It was said that this intifada would stop settlements. . . . But, the process of expanding settlements has been continuing while the intifada continues. Some say the settlers have fled . . . but we know that this is just empty talk.

Finally, some said that the intifada would liberate Jerusalem and the occupied territories. The result, however, is that the territories that were liberated through negotiations and peace have been reoccupied by force. We have only been left with the Gaza Strip, which we hope to save before it is too late.

We should not expect the intifada to bear more than it can take. We must ask where we are heading. . . . The future of our homeland cannot be made entirely dependent on the interests of particular individuals or organizations. Some organizations have their own vision, and they have been saying that they do not want the PA, or that they want to destroy or replace it. However, they will not replace it, for there will be no PA to replace when everything has been destroyed.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

What is needed then? What is needed is to clearly and firmly say Enough is enough. For, if we stop now, we would still be able to go on. . . . Let us say to the world that we have been slaughtered and destroyed, and that this is a crime that must stop because we want peace. Anyone who really believes in peace would then stand on our side. Here, it is worth mentioning that the entire world now calls for a Palestinian state, which was not commonly said before. In addition to Israel's withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967, this has become one of the fixed axioms of the international community.

We are certain that in three to six months of negotiations, Sharon will fall because he would not be able to offer anything. He is against removing a single settlement and against giving the Palestinians more than 50 to 60 percent of the West Bank. Therefore, the entire world will not listen to him. His fate will be like that of Netanyahu: defeat and ejection from government. . . .

Now, however, we are being asked to implement unreasonable preconditions that we have never been asked to implement before. For example, we are being asked to draft a constitution (when Israel itself does not have a constitution), and to appoint a PM (Prime Minister). Preconditions have multiplied in such a way as to force us to say No. To put it bluntly, the aim behind this is simply to get rid of the PA.

The PA is now forced either to implement these preconditions or be deprived of aid. If we were to say that we are unable to do what they have been demanding, they would simply oust us. Therefore, I say we should ask: Where are we heading? We must be brave and not be afraid to say what we believe is right.

When we reached the Oslo agreement, no one was on our side. They said that we should have asked the people or asked the Arab states. You all know the accusations that were made against us. The result, however, was that we returned to our homeland and regained parts of it. We are now present on our homeland. The phenomenon of the Palestinian lost between airports and borders came to an end. He could

return to his country if he so wished. About 250 to 300 thousand Palestinians did in fact return. Of course, the refugee problem still remains; but at least the phenomenon of homelessness came to an end with the negotiations and with peace, when it could not have been ended through war. We have gone to war many times, and you all know what the results were. Were Arab tanks surrounding Tel Aviv when we reached agreement at Oslo?

Another subject must be mentioned here. I have grave reservations regarding the participation of our Palestinian brothers in the lands occupied in 1948 in the intifada, despite my great admiration for their great sacrifices. Their participation was a very grave mistake. We refused their participation in the first and the second intifadas. We told them that their position was special and peculiar, and that their role was different from ours, although it is an important role in bringing down [Israeli] governments and electing others in their place. If you want to help us, help us with daily provisions and peaceful demonstrations together with the Israeli peace movement.

What happened, however, was the opposite. At the beginning of the intifada, they marched in their first demonstration and thirteen martyrs fell and another eighty were wounded. The Israelis then said, "Those people have been living amidst us for fifty years and are behaving like this. How can we allow the refugees to return, then?" This spread like fire through dry hay in Israel, with the result that every Israeli started to ask himself, "Do we accept the return of people such as these?" So, the question is what benefit have we gleaned from all this? The Arab citizen in Israel can do a lot in a rational and political manner, without chasing illusions and demagoguery. The result has been extremely negative for the issue of refugees.

In a public debate in Ramallah, some said that our people are patient and steadfast. I answered them that our people no longer believe in these practices. The people want to eat and to feel secure in their lives and their possessions. People can see the PA men receiving their salaries, when everyone else has nothing to eat. . . . Our people are insecure and cannot find anything to eat. How can we lead them and convince them of our national project, and how can they possibly obey us?

We are not calling for an end to the intifada, but for setting it back on the right path and ridding it of its negative aspects, especially its militarization. We can march or demonstrate. As for the phrase "a cascade of blood," I do not like it. Whose blood will be cascading? Our children's blood, the blood of your children. I said this in a seminar in Ramallah attended by Fatah cadres and leaders. They were angry, told me that these were red lines, and criticized me. . . . But every Jewish person in Israel now is with Sharon because they all believe that he protects them. I want to deprive him from this pretext, based on the principle that we want our rights and do not want war. Once this is clear, the number of Israelis who will side with us will increase.

We must stop now, and it is in our interest to stop now. We must give ourselves a chance, and we may succeed. It is not our hobby to kill. We have a goal to reach. This is the correct point that must be stressed to every person who says that we must continue down the same path.

Moreover, what has occurred was not simply our fate. It was something we had created with our own hands. . . . We must think a lot before we say that what happened to us was simply our fate.