

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT OBAMA, PRESIDENT HOSNI MUBARAK OF EGYPT, HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH OF JORDAN, PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU OF ISRAEL, AND PRESIDENT MAHMOUD ABBAS OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY BEFORE WORKING DINNER

East Room
7:05 P.M. EDT

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good evening, everyone. Tomorrow, after nearly two years, Israelis and Palestinians will resume direct talks in pursuit of a goal that we all share — two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. Tonight, I'm pleased to welcome to the White House key partners in this effort, along with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the representative of our Quartet partners, former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

President Abbas, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Your Majesty King Abdullah, and President Mubarak — we are but five men. Our dinner this evening will be a small gathering around a single table. Yet when we come together, we will not be alone. We'll be joined by the generations — those who have gone before and those who will follow.

Each of you are the heirs of peacemakers who dared greatly — Begin and Sadat, Rabin and King Hussein — statesmen who saw the world as it was but also imagined the world as it should be. It is the shoulders of our predecessors upon which we stand. It is their work that we carry on. Now, like each of them, we must ask, do we have the wisdom and the courage to walk the path of peace?

All of us are leaders of our people, who, no matter the language they speak or the faith they practice, all basically seek the same things: to live in security, free from fear; to live in dignity, free from want; to provide for their families and to realize a better tomorrow. Tonight, they look to us, and each of us must decide, will we work diligently to fulfill their aspirations?

And though each of us holds a title of honor — President, Prime Minister, King — we are bound by the one title we share. We are fathers, blessed with sons and daughters. So we must ask ourselves what kind of world do we want to bequeath to our children and our grandchildren.

Tonight, and in the days and months ahead, these are the questions that we must answer. And this is a fitting moment to do so.

For Muslims, this is Ramadan. For Jews, this is Elul. It is rare for those two months to coincide. But this year, tonight, they do. Different faiths, different rituals, but a shared period of devotion — and contemplation. A time to reflect on right and wrong; a time to ponder one's place in the world; a time when the people of two great religions remind the world of a truth that is both simple and profound, that each of us, all of us, in our hearts and in our lives, are capable of great and lasting change.

In this spirit, I welcome my partners. And I invite each to say a few words before we begin our meal, beginning with President Mubarak, on to His Majesty King Abdullah, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas.

President Mubarak.

PRESIDENT MUBARAK: (As prepared for delivery.) I am pleased to participate with you today in

relaunching direct peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. Like you, and the millions of Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs and the rest of the world, I look forward that these negotiations be final and decisive, and that they lead to a peace agreement within one year.

Our meet today would not have taken place without the considerable effort exerted by the American administration under the leadership of President Obama. I pay tribute to you, Mr. President, for your personal, serious commit and for your determination to work for a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine since the early days of your presidency. I appreciate your perseverance throughout the past period to overcome the difficulties facing the relaunching of the negotiations.

(Continued as translated.) I consider this invitation a manifestation of your commitment and a significant message that the United States will shepherd these negotiations seriously and at the highest level.

No one realizes the value of peace more than those who have known wars and their havoc. It was my destiny to witness over many events in our region during the years of war and peace. I have gone through wars and hostilities, and have participated in the quest for peace since the first day of my administration. I have never spared an effort to push it forward, and I still look forward to its success and completion.

The efforts to achieve peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis encountered many difficulties since the Madrid Conference in October 1999, and progress and regression, breakthroughs and setbacks, but the occupation of the Palestinian Territory remains an independent -- an independent Palestinian state is yet -- remains a dream in the conscious of the Palestinian people.

There is no doubt that this situation should raise great frustration and anger among our people, for it is no longer acceptable or conceivable on the verge of the second decade of the third millennium that we fail to achieve just and true peace -- peace that would put an end to the century of conflict, fulfill the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, lift the occupation, allow for the establishment of normal relations between the Palestinians and Israelis.

It is true that reaching a just and comprehensive peace treaty between both sides has been an elusive hope for almost two decades. Yet the accumulated experience of both parties, the extended rounds of negotiations, and the previous understandings, particularly during the Clinton parameters of 2000, and subsequent understandings of Taba and with the previous Israeli government, all contributed in setting the outline of the final settlement.

This outline has become well known to the international community and to both peoples -- the Palestinian and Israeli people. Hence, it is expected that the current negotiations will not start from scratch or in void. No doubt, the position of the international community, as is stated in the consecutive statements of the Quartet, in particular, in its latest August 20th statement, paid due respect to relevant international resolutions and supported the outline of final settlements using different formulation without prejudice to the outcome of negotiations.

It has stressed that the aim of the soon-to-start direct negotiation is to reach a peaceful settlement that would end the Israeli occupation which began in 1967, allowing for the independent and sovereign state of Palestine to emerge and live side by side in peace and security with the state of Israel.

I met with Prime Minister Netanyahu many times since he took office last year. In our meetings, I

listened to assertions on his willingness to achieve peace with the Palestinians, and for history to record his name for such an achievement. I say to him today that I look forward to achieving those assertions in reality, and his success in achieving the long-awaited peace, which I know the people of Israel yearn for, just like all other people in the region.

Reaching just peace with the Palestinians will require from Israel taking important and decisive decisions -- decisions that are undoubtedly difficult yet they will be necessary to achieve peace and stability, and in a different context than the one that prevailed before.

Settlement activities on the Palestinian Territory are contrary to international law. They will not create rights for Israel, nor are they going to achieve peace or security for Israel. It is, therefore, a priority to completely freeze all these activities until the entire negotiation process comes to a successful end.

I say to the Israelis, seize the current opportunity. Do not let it slip through your fingers. Make comprehensive peace your goal. Extend your hand to meet the hand already extended in the Arab Peace Initiative.

I say to President Mahmoud Abbas, Egypt will continue its faithful support to the patient Palestinian people and their just cause. We will continue our concerted efforts to help fulfill the aspirations of your people and retrieve their legitimate rights. We will stand by you until the independent state of Palestine on the land occupied since 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital. We will also continue our efforts to achieve Palestinian reconciliation for the sake of the Palestinian national interest.

Once again, I'd like to express my thanks to President Obama, and I renew Egypt's commitment to continue exerting all efforts, sharing honest advice and a commitment to the principles on which Arab and regional policy rests upon.

Please accept my appreciation, and peace be upon you. (Applause.)

HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH: (As translated.) In the name of God most merciful, most compassionate, President Obama, peace be upon you.

(In English.) For decades, a Palestinian-Israeli settlement has eluded us. Millions of men, women and children have suffered. Too many people have lost faith in our ability to bring them the peace they want. Radicals and terrorists have exploited frustrations to feed hatred and ignite wars. The whole world has been dragged into regional conflicts that cannot be addressed effectively until Arabs and Israelis find peace.

This past record drives the importance of our efforts today. There are those on both sides who want us to fail, who will do everything in their power to disrupt our efforts today -- because when the Palestinians and Israelis find peace, when young men and women can look to a future of promise and opportunity, radicals and extremists lose their most potent appeal. This is why we must prevail. For our failure would be their success in sinking the region into more instability and wars that will cause further suffering in our region and beyond.

President Obama, we value your commitment to the cause of peace in our region. We count on your continued engagement to help the parties move forward. You have said that Middle East peace is in the national security interest of your country. And we believe it is. And it is also a strategic European interest, and it is a necessary requirement for global security and stability. Peace is also a right for every

citizen in our region.

A Palestinian-Israeli settlement on the basis of two states living side by side is a precondition for security and stability of all countries of the Middle East, with a regional peace that will lead to normal relations between Israel and 57 Arab and Muslim states that have endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative. That would be -- well, that would also be an essential step towards neutralizing forces of evil and war that threaten all peoples.

Mr. President, we need your support as a mediator, honest broker, and a partner, as the parties move along the hard but inevitable path of settlements.

Your Excellencies, all eyes are upon us. The direct negotiations that will start tomorrow must show results -- and sooner rather than later. Time is not on our side. That is why we must spare no effort in addressing all final status issues with a view to reaching the two-state solution, the only solution that can create a future worthy of our great region -- a future of peace in which fathers and mothers can raise their children without fear, young people can look forward to lives of achievement and hope, and 300 million people can cooperate for mutual benefit.

For too long, too many people of the region have been denied their most basic of human rights: the right to live in peace and security; respected in their human dignity; enjoying freedom and opportunity. If hopes are disappointed again, the price of failure will be too high for all.

Our peoples want us to rise to their expectations. And we can do so if we approach these negotiations with goodwill, sincerity and courage. (Applause.)

PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU: Mr. President, Excellencies, Shalom Aleichem. Shalom Alkulanu. Peace unto us all.

I'm very pleased to be here today to begin our common effort to achieve a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

I want to thank you, President Obama, for your tireless efforts to renew this quest for peace. I want to thank Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senator Mitchell, the many members of the Obama administration, and Tony Blair, who've all worked so hard to bring Israelis and Palestinians together here today.

I also want to thank President Mubarak and King Abdullah for their dedicated and meaningful support to promote peace, security, and stability throughout our region. I deeply appreciate your presence here today.

I began with a Hebrew word for peace, "shalom." Our goal is shalom. Our goal is to forge a secure and durable peace between Israelis and Palestinians. We don't seek a brief interlude between two wars. We don't seek a temporary respite between outbursts of terror. We seek a peace that will end the conflict between us once and for all. We seek a peace that will last for generations -- our generation, our children's generation, and the next.

This is the peace my people fervently want. This is the peace all our peoples fervently aspire to. This is the peace they deserve.

Now, a lasting peace is a peace between peoples -- between Israelis and Palestinians. We must learn to live together, to live next to one another and with one another. But every peace begins with leaders.

President Abbas, you are my partner in peace. And it is up to us, with the help of our friends, to conclude the agonizing conflict between our peoples and to afford them a new beginning. The Jewish people are not strangers in our ancestral homeland, the land of our forefathers. But we recognize that another people shares this land with us.

I came here today to find an historic compromise that will enable both our peoples to live in peace and security and in dignity. I've been making the case for Israel all of my life. But I didn't come here today to make an argument. I came here today to make peace. I didn't come here today to play a blame game where even the winners lose. Everybody loses if there's no peace. I came here to achieve a peace that will bring a lasting benefit to us all.

I didn't come here to find excuses or to make them. I came here to find solutions. I know the history of our conflict and the sacrifices that have been made. I know the grief that has afflicted so many families who have lost their dearest loved ones. Only yesterday four Israelis, including a pregnant woman -- a pregnant woman -- and another woman, a mother of six children, were brutally murdered by savage terrorists. And two hours ago, there was another terror attack. And thank God no one died. I will not let the terrorists block our path to peace, but as these events underscore once again, that peace must be anchored in security.

I'm prepared to walk down the path of peace, because I know what peace would mean for our children and for our grandchildren. I know it would herald a new beginning that could unleash unprecedented opportunities for Israelis, for Palestinians, and for the peoples -- all the peoples -- of our region, and well beyond our region. I think it would affect the world.

I see what a period of calm has created in the Palestinian cities of Ramallah, of Janin, throughout the West Bank, a great economic boom. And real peace can turn this boom into a permanent era of progress and hope.

If we work together, we can take advantage of the great benefits afforded by our unique place under the sun. We're the crossroads of three continents, at the crossroads of history, and the crossroads of the future. Our geography, our history, our culture, our climate, the talents of our people can be unleashed to create extraordinary opportunities in tourism, in trade, in industry, in energy, in water, in so many areas.

But peace must also be defended against its enemies. We want the skyline of the West Bank to be dominated by apartment towers -- not missiles. We want the roads of the West Bank to flow with commerce -- not terrorists.

And this is not a theoretic request for our people. We left Lebanon, and we got terror. We left Gaza, and we got terror once again. We want to ensure that territory we'll concede will not be turned into a third Iranian-sponsored terror enclave armed at the heart of Israel -- and may I add, also aimed at every one of us sitting on this stage.

This is why a defensible peace requires security arrangements that can withstand the test of time and the many challenges that are sure to confront us. And there will be many challenges, both great and small. Let us not get bogged down by every difference between us. Let us direct our courage, our

thinking, and our decisions at those historic decisions that lie ahead.

Now, there are many skeptics. One thing there's no shortage of, Mr. President, are skeptics. This is something that you're so familiar with, that all of us in a position of leadership are familiar with. There are many skeptics. I suppose there are many reasons for skepticism. But I have no doubt that peace is possible.

President Abbas, we cannot erase the past, but it is within our power to change the future. Thousands of years ago, on these very hills where Israelis and Palestinians live today, the Jewish prophet Isaiah and the other prophets of my people envisaged a future of lasting peace for all mankind. Let today be an auspicious step in our joint effort to realize that ancient vision for a better future. (Applause.)

PRESIDENT ABBAS: (As translated.) His Excellency President Barack Obama, His Excellency President Hosni Mubarak, His Majesty King Abdullah II, His Excellency Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Mrs. Hillary Clinton, Mr. Tony Blair, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to start by thanking President Obama for his invitation to host us here today to relaunch the permanent status negotiations to reach a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement covering all the permanent status issues within a year in accordance with international law and relevant resolutions.

As we move towards the relaunch of these negotiations tomorrow, we recognize the difficulties, challenges and obstacles that lie ahead. Yet we assure you, in the name of the PLO, that we will draw on years of experience in negotiations and benefit from the lessons learned to make these negotiations successful.

We also reiterate our commitment to carry out all our obligations, and we call on the Israelis to carry out their obligations, including a freeze on settlements activities, which is not setting a precondition but a call to implement an agreed obligation and to end all the closure and blockade, preventing freedom of movement, including the (inaudible) siege.

We will spare no effort and will work diligently and tirelessly to ensure that these new negotiations achieve their goals and objectives in dealing with all of the issues: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, border security, water, as well as the release of all our prisoners -- in order to achieve peace. The people of our area are looking for peace that achieves freedom, independence, and justice to the Palestinian people in their country and in their homeland and in the diaspora -- our people who have endured decades of longstanding suffering.

We want a peace that will correct the historical injustice caused by the (inaudible) of 1948, and one that brings security to our people and the Israeli people. And we want peace that will give us both and the people of the region a new era where we enjoy just peace, stability, and prosperity.

Our determination stems to a great extent from your willpower, Mr. President, and your firm and sweeping drive with which you engulfed the entire world from the day you took office to set the parties on the path for peace -- and also this same spirit, exhibited by Secretary Hillary Clinton and Senator George Mitchell and his team. The presence of His Excellency President Mubarak and His Majesty King Abdullah is another telling indication of their substantial and effective commitment overall, where Egypt and Jordan have been playing a supportive role for advancing the peace process. Their effective role is further demonstrated by the Arab Peace Initiative, which was fully endorsed by all of the Arab states, and the Islamic countries as well.

This initiative served a genuine and sincere opportunity to achieve a just and comprehensive peace on all tracks in our region, including the Syrian-Israeli track and the Lebanese-Israeli track, and provided a sincere opportunity to make peace.

The presence here today of the envoy of the Quartet, Mr. Tony Blair, is a most telling signal, especially since he has been personally involved in the Palestinian Authority for many years and in the efforts for state building in Palestine.

Excellencies, the time has come for us to make peace and it is time to end the occupation that started in 1967, and for the Palestinian people to get freedom, justice, and independence. It is time that an independent Palestinian state be established with sovereignty side by side with the state of Israel. It is time to put an end to the struggle in the Middle East.

The Palestinian people who insist on the rights and freedom and independence are in most need for justice, security, and peace, because they are the victim, the ones that were harmed the most from this violence. And it is sending message to our neighbors, the Israelis, and to the world that they are also careful about supporting the opportunities for the success of these negotiations and the just and lasting peace as soon as possible.

With this spirit, we will work to make these negotiations succeed. And with this spirit, we are -- trust that we are capable to achieve our historical, difficult mission -- making peace in the land of peace.

Mr. Netanyahu, what happened yesterday and what is happening today is also condemned. We do not want at all that any blood be shed, one drop of blood, on the part of the -- from the Israelis or the Palestinians. We want people in the two countries to lead a normal life. We want them to live as neighbors and partners forever. Let us sign an agreement, a final agreement, for peace, and put an end to a very long period of struggle forever.

And peace be upon you. (Applause.)

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I want to thank all the leaders for their thoughtful statements. I want to thank the delegations that are represented here because they are the ones who oftentimes are doing a lot of the work. This is just the beginning. We have a long road ahead, but I appreciate very much the leaders who are represented here for giving us such an excellent start.

And I particularly want to commend Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas for their presence here. This is not easy. Both of them have constituencies with legitimate claims, legitimate concerns, and a lot of history between them. For them to be here, to be willing to take this first step -- the most difficult step -- is a testament to their courage and their integrity and I think their vision for the future.

And so I am hopeful -- cautiously hopeful, but hopeful -- that we can achieve the goal that all four of these leaders articulated.

Thank you very much, everybody. END 7:41 P.M. EDT