



# FOR THE RECORD



## “Elections and Their Impact on Negotiations” Transcript of remarks by Dr. Saeb Erekat

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**Overview:** Dr. Saeb Erekat, chief negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization, spoke about the Palestinian legislative elections scheduled for January 2006, their potential impact on Middle East negotiations, and their possible influence on Israeli elections scheduled for March 2006 during a briefing on 29 November 2005 at the Palestine Center in Washington, DC. He also addressed U.S. policy toward the Middle East and regional security issues. The event was co-hosted by The Palestine Center and the Middle East Institute.

Samar Assad, Executive Director of The Palestine Center and its parent organization, the Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development, introduced Erekat. Clayton Swisher, Director of Programs at the Middle East Institute, moderated the Q&A discussion following the speaker’s briefing. The event was co-sponsored by The Palestine Center and the Middle East Institute.

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The Palestine Center  
Washington, DC  
29 November 2005

Thank you very much, Samar. Thanks to the Palestine Center and the Middle East Institute for this kind invitation. I came last night [to Washington, DC] and am leaving in two hours. I just had a good meeting with [U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice and other meetings at the White House with Mr. [John] Hannah [National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Chaney] and Mr. [Michael] Doran [Senior Director for the Middle East at the National Security Council]. I was also at the Senate for meetings. My message has been very clear.

My message is that we are holding our legislative elections on January 25, 2006, and we want the United States to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us to ensure these elections take place. I am here to request not a single American soldier. I am here to request the good offices of American civil society to come and observe, and to help us to monitor the transparent and free elections we are determined to hold. At the same, to protect us from any Israeli attempts to sabotage these elections by arresting candidates, assassinating them, road-blocs, and to enable us to conclude with the Israelis as specified in signed agreements about East Jerusalem.

I believe that what is going on now with the primaries in Fateh is the most significant thing happening. It is not easy. We held these primaries in my hometown—the constituency of Jericho—and in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem with no incidents. Yesterday there were some difficulties in Gaza, which led us to postpone these elections until Friday. Today we are holding primaries in East Jerusalem, and on Friday—one day before the candidates are eligible to register—we will hold them in Hebron, Gaza, Tulkarem, and Qalqilya.

The Palestinian election law specifies that anyone over the age of 28 on January 25, 2006, may run in these elections. Any Palestinian who is 18 years of age on that day can vote in these elections. We have very strict rules of conduct in the election law vis-à-vis incitement, using arms, or anything that may influence the elections and the democratic electoral process.

On democracy and elections in the Arab world, I think the imbalance of the situation is that in the last 450 years, there has been an absence of well-defined Arab-Western relations. I believe that from when Vienna was besieged until now, these relations have lacked any clear-cut definition. Two hundred years ago, the Western countries chose to physically liquidate the Arab forces of change and democratic values, and they chose an autocracy for us. They saw fit that that would serve the interests of the colonial powers. Later on, they moved from an autocracy to theocracy.

Today, in my opinion, anybody who says that the Arabs are not ready for democracy is a racist. Let's put it very frank and very straight-forward. Democracy is a need and a way of life. Arabs are just like you and any other democratic society—they want to have the ability to express their say in who rules them. Democracies, and systems of government based on democracy, are not imposed—usually the systems of imposition are the tyrannies and dictatorships. Honestly, once again, I would say that anyone who says Arabs are not ready for democracy is a racist. It is as simple as that.

We are facing a critical juncture in our history in the region of the Middle East. I believe there are those who believe they can handle such situations with gun ships, arms, missiles, and so on, but I don't think this will provide them an answer. Democracy is number one; number two is a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and there you do not need to reinvent the wheel. The parameters of peace are very well defined.

We have been negotiating since 1990, and I don't think we have wasted a single minute of these negotiations. Israelis and Palestinians have been going through very difficult, complex labor pains. The issues we negotiate are not about merging companies, or about borders of normal nations. [They are] issues that make people in Palestine and Israel breathe—issues of Jerusalem, settlements, borders, and refugees.

I don't recall in the history of conflict resolutions and negotiations a more difficult set of circumstances than the history, religion, psychology and security that have a lot of play in the minds of Palestinians and Israelis. I know that, realizing what is happening in Israel, we usually lie when asked about something taking place in Israel. We say this is a domestic Israeli affair, an internal affair, but I don't feel like lying today.

I really believe that if someone sneezes in Tel Aviv, I get the flu in Jericho. I believe these labor pains in Israel are not the result of an economic or social problem or about a difference of religion—it is about me. It's about me. To the Israelis, their options are very limited. Now they are confined to three. And I know that I am no match to them in the [U.S.] Congress and Senate—I know I am cost free. Nobody said politics is about fairness and justice. We're pursuing peace.

**"My message is that we are holding our legislative elections on January 25, 2006, and we want the United States to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us to ensure these elections take place."**

We offer the Israelis today—my generation—a two-state solution: a Palestine on the '67 border, with East Jerusalem its capital next to the State of Israel, which we have already recognized. But they don't want this and they feel the urge to have an imposition of settlements in my hometown Jericho, and Nablus, Hebron, and East Jerusalem. We're not racists—Christian and Muslim Palestinians have never been racists.

The policies of settlements, walls, and dictation-rather-than-negotiation lead in one direction: they are undermining the two-state solution. It would lead me to another option: a one-state from my hometown in Jericho on the River Jordan to the Mediterranean. Call it "Israel" but I want to be equal. Once I say this, they say, "Oh! Look at these Palestinians; they want to undermine the Jewish nature of Israel." Well? Make up your minds. We're offering a two-state solution with 22 percent of historic Palestine called Palestine, 78 percent recognized as Israel. If you insist in snatching Ariel and Ma'ale Adumim, marking them with security escort points, accusing Arafat of being the problem—even though Arafat died one year ago but the problem goes on—then Abbas is weak. This story must come to an end.

The third option that is happening today in the streets of the West Bank is not something that anyone—and of all people, not the Jews—should be proud of. It is the creation of an apartheid system worse than that of South Africa. There are roads in the West Bank today that I cannot use as a Christian or a Muslim Palestinian. Such diseases as racism and bigotry, once they penetrate our skin no one is immune. Muslims can be racist; Palestinians can be racists; Arabs can be racists; Jews can be racists—Christians, blacks, whites, yellows. We can always find explanations for such racisms.

These are the three options. Our options are very limited also. I did not wake up one morning, and feel my conscience aching and that I wanted to recognize the state of Israel. I am not doing the Israelis a favor in pursuing peace. I am doing me, my family, and my people in pursuing this peace process. I don't think the Israelis woke up one morning either, and felt their consciences were aching or that they wanted to recognize Palestinians. We will not disappear, we did

not vanish. And we do not intend to vanish. Today the children who are born in my hometown Jericho will be, once they enter the first grade, in the majority of those between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean.

We have recognized Israel. We are willing to engage with the Israelis on the end game, the end of the conflict, the end of claims once and for all on issues like Jerusalem, settlements, borders, refugees, and water. There are solutions to each one of these issues. We can do it—peace is doable. These are the choices that we put in front the Israelis.

Ever since Adam negotiated Eve, I don't think there is a more disadvantaged negotiator than myself. I have no army, no navy, no air force, no economy, no support. Whatever it is, they are all there—all the complexities on earth! [We are] going through the most difficult transition of Palestinian political life. We are not able to distinguish between political pluralism and authority pluralism. This is a process that is painful. We believe our elections will help us in maintaining the rule of law and the one authority, which we are determined to do—not because we want to satisfy the Americans or the Israelis, but because we want to maintain our social fabric as Palestinians.

We woke up one morning on April 9, 2003, and found that the U.S. borders shifted from that of Canada and Mexico to those of Turkey, Iran, the Gulf, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, parts of China, and Pakistan. The political geography changed. The functional role of nations changed. No one needs the proxy role any longer in this region. It is the moment of truth for all of us.

I believe, as I said, that to deliver a stable, democratic, transparent Middle East—and we deserve no less as Arabs than this system of government—we need democracy and we need a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These two things are obtainable, are doable, and I believe it is time for the U.S. administration to abandon the policy of what is possible for the policy of what is needed.

Defining the U.S. policy in terms of what this Prime Minister of Israel can do and what this Prime Minister of Israel cannot do, and then coming and trying to impose those things on me, is not going to work. Abandon the policy of what is “possible” for the policy of what is needed.

What is needed is to put [in place] mechanisms for implementation, and to shift President Bush's vision of a two-state solution from a “vision” to a realistic political track. That is what is needed.

Today we stand before an opportunity. What is going on in Palestine with the primary elections in Fateh and the elections that are coming on January 25th are not your normal, typical elections. It is a turning point—it is a turning point in Palestinian political life.

The elections that are happening in Israel and the reformation of parties in Israel are not something normal. It is something that may change the face of political life in Israel. It is all happening because of our labor pains—because sometimes we know, but want to pretend we do not know, the answers for what it takes to deliver peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

You must understand that peace is not the absence of violence; it is much more. You can have violence in any society. But in our case, you should stop managing the crisis and focus on solving it.

As I have said, fourteen or fifteen years of our time have been devoted to solving it. Camp David was never a failure. Contrary to the stories you have heard or you may have read, at Camp David Israelis and Palestinians turned 80 percent of the stones. They came 80 percent of the way.

Our life has never been the same afterwards. We know it. Did we commit mistakes as Palestinians in Camp David? You bet we committed mistakes, but we were not the only ones who committed mistakes. Maybe those who were with me will master the courage, the moral courage, to stand up with me and define the mistakes they made as I can define the mistakes I made. At one point or another, we have to face the mirror and ask ourselves the question, “Could we have

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done something differently to save the lives of the thousands of Palestinians and Israelis who have been killed since that time?”

To Israel, they must understand that defense and security are not the same thing. They will never be the same thing. I think the United States of America spent \$440 billion last year on defense, and you can answer me about the feeling of security on the mental and the physical side, because that is the definition of security. I am not here to judge anyone. I am not here to make people recourse their action. I am here telling you that I could care less if you are divided between those who are pro-Palestinians or those who are pro-Israelis. My world is divided between those who are pro-peace and those who are against peace. My job is to save lives of Israelis and Palestinians. My job is to normalize the living conditions of Palestinians and Israelis. I need help. We stand with enormous challenges in the region. We are not far away from reaching the permanent status treaty. I hope that once the dust settles down in Israel, after this eruption with this political work, that the Israelis will choose a government that is willing to reengage in the real peace process on issues of settlements, borders, Jerusalem, and refugees.

Nothing should sabotage our elections. Please, make sure to help us in carrying out these elections. I know the arguments: Hamas arms, this arms—over the last five years, I don’t know who doesn’t have arms in Gaza or the West Bank. It’s parties, families, and so on. We need to do a lot. We have to do a lot. But the starting point is these elections. Make no mistake. It is the message to all Palestinians that changes of people who govern will be through ballots and not bullets. We need your help in these elections.

Nothing should sabotage these elections. We are not telling you that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside. Impose it on us, please—help us. All you have to do is just to convince the Israelis to keep the noses outside our elections. All you have to do is to guarantee that Israel will not go around assassinating our candidates, or arresting them, or preventing certain candidates from going from place to place. We want free and fair elections.

**“We offer the Israelis today—my generation—a two-state solution: a Palestine on the ‘67 border, with East Jerusalem its capital next to the State of Israel, which we have already recognized.”**

These elections—mark my words—will constitute a turning point in Palestinian political life. Matched with an election that is coming in Israel at the end of March, we may have a real opportunity.

Thank you very much. I stand to take your questions. *[Applause]*

**QUESTION** (*Barry Schweid, the Associated Press*): You used the word “sabotage” about a half-dozen times. What evidence do you have, or do you have evidence that Israel intends to kill people or sabotage the elections? You used assassination twice. If I could go a little further, is the whole process now in abeyance because of Israel’s political situation? Will there be necessarily several months of inaction at best on the peace front?

*Erekat*: I think you asked three questions and I’ll answer them. I’ll tell you what is the third question. *[Laughter]* Number one, no I do not have evidence. I have written my Israeli colleagues seven times—seven letters—because I chair the negotiations, asking them to form the joint committee to begin the preparations for the elections. Unfortunately, I have not gotten an answer from them yet. I am here in Washington urging the Americans to help us to form this joint committee to have the arrangements, because when you have the ballot boxes moved from Ramallah to Nablus you need to have permission and to have an escort.

People think of elections as democratic and free in nations. We are not an independent nation; we are not a state. The fact that the Israelis have not even answered us and that on Saturday we will open the date for candidates means that in East Jerusalem as of today we have not verified the voters list. We need the joint committee in East Jerusalem to begin working yesterday. We do not want to sabotage these elections. We are urging the Israelis not to resort to methods of assassination and arrest, if I can correct what I said. Because if they sabotage these elections, I think as much as we pay, they will pay. Now, on the question about—what was the second question?

*Schweid*: The political problems in Israel. Does that mean there has to be a long delay?

*Erekat:* No. On the political problems in Israel, there are two sets of issues. There is the short term. I want to acknowledge here the wonderful efforts exerted by Secretary Rice in pulling out the agreement on the Rafah terminal. In two and a half months I think everything was completed between us and the Israelis. But, psychologically speaking, how can they give control over us after 38 years? How do we trust them? It was a very painful decision for us. [Secretary Rice] came—we were relieved that she was going to go to Korea, and then when she came back from Amman we knew that we have to come back to our senses and have it anew. This shows that a third-party role is essential. It can work. It can succeed. All of our respect and thanks go to Dr. Rice, Mr. Wolfensohn, and others who participated with us.

As far as [your question], there is the airport, there is the movement between the West Bank and Gaza, and vehicles and goods. There is the returning to the situation of September 28, 2000; the release of prisoners; and the cessation of settlement activities. All of these issues must be dealt with immediately. Now, the long-term issues, like resuming the permanent status negotiations, we expect after the Palestinian elections and the Israeli elections.

This leads me to the third question that was insinuated by you—I really wish, and I urge the Israeli voters, to choose a government that is willing to engage in the end-game with us, because I believe the majority of Israelis today want to reach the end-game and that is true also of the Palestinians.

QUESTION (*Clayton Swisher, the Middle East Institute*): Just to follow up, as [U.S. General William] Ward has completed his mission, could you give us a brief report card? And as [U.S. General Keith] Dayton is planning on taking over, what expectations do the Palestinians have and what are you looking for in terms of expanding from a unity of command and facilitation to more training and preparation of the Gaza security forces?

*Erekat:* The mandate of General Ward was to help Palestinian reorganize, reunite, consolidate, and equip Palestinian security forces, which were literally destroyed. Our command centers, communication centers, buildings, and vehicles have been totally taken out in the four years by the Israeli army and air force. I believe General Ward succeeded beyond my expectations. Nobody notices what he did. But since I follow these things on a daily basis, I believe our security forces have come a long way.

Make no mistake; we have a long way to go in this process of rebuilding the security forces. The chain of command is very well established. The kind of training we are getting is well advanced, and the kind of equipment that we are able to acquire through General Ward is something that we appreciate very much. We hope that General Dayton will continue in the same endeavor. For that, we appreciate the commitment of President Bush's administration.

QUESTION (*Nadia Bilbassy-Charters, Al Arabiyya TV*): If I may ask you an obvious question, Dr. Erekat. You just met with Secretary Rice and officials in the White House as well. Our understanding is that the administration is adamant that no armed groups should run for election—i.e., Hamas or Islamic Jihad or whoever.

What is your feedback from just meeting the Secretary now, as it is very unrealistic that you are able as the Palestinian Authority to disarm these groups in the few weeks between now and the election, and whether the Administration is willing to overlook their policy for the time being until the results of the election?

*Erekat:* American officials can answer for themselves, Nadia. And in my meeting with Dr. Rice and other American officials, we discussed the elections in general. We discussed the Palestinian election law. They bought up, without mentioning any party or name, our commitment to the "one authority and one gun," which I reiterated President Abbas' commitment to this, and we see the election process as part of it.

I came out of this meeting believing that the U.S. administration will stand shoulder to shoulder with us in carrying out these elections based on the Palestinian election law. And that, I think, is something we appreciate, and we hope to see monitors and observers coming very soon to begin monitoring the process of registration of voters before the election campaign.

We need a lot of training now. Our election law specifies that no less than 20 percent of the winners must be female. For this we are making a precedent we are proud of, but we need a lot of training and a lot of help to train the campaign movements, the party, and the coalitions in our villages, towns and refugee camps. I saw Mr. Ken Walsh of the National Democratic Institute yesterday. And I was informed that next week they'll be sending the first contingent of people who would be involved in the training of all candidates for these elections.

QUESTION (*Khaled Dawoud, Al Abram*): [What is] your impression about the administration's vision to go on after the elections in the Israel for a permanent settlement? Are you satisfied about that?



*Erekat:* Well, as I said, we discussed the short-term issues. Now, many people when they speak about the Rafah deal—I don't want to exaggerate the importance of the Rafah deal, but I don't want to minimize the importance of Rafah deal either. For us, the difference between the Rafah terminal functioning or not is the life of 1.3 million people and whether they are prisoners or free to move. This deal enabled 1.3 million people in Gaza to feel, for the first time in 40 years, that they can come and go freely.

After this, what do we expect? We have the airport, because if you want to give Gaza an opportunity in economics, you need to begin transferring the economy from that of labor-oriented to goods-oriented. And you can't do that without having the freest access to the movements of goods and then to begin the reinvestments, because creating one job in Gaza requires an investment of \$25,000.

We have the harbor. We have the movement of goods between the West Bank and Gaza in vehicles. And let me say, we are a poor country—that is, a poor people, not a country. We're not a country; we're a poor people. Our economy in the year 2005 will stand 1/34 of that of Israel—one-over-34 of that of Israel. The trade deficit between us and the Israelis is expected to be \$1.3 billion.

I come from Jericho. It's a banana area. When we were allowed to send our bananas to Gaza markets, the ton was sold for \$1,000. When we are prevented—under quote, unquote “security” reasons to [take] the bananas from Jericho to Gaza, it's now being thrown into the streets at \$100, while the Israeli farmers are getting easy access to Gaza with all goods. The issue of security disappears.

In the deal that Dr. Rice made, there is a provision about the movement of vehicles and goods and persons between the West Bank and Gaza. We must see this happening. And the date specified for that is December 15th. This is an important agreement in the short term. And as far as the long-term issues of permanent-status negotiations, we raised them. We said the U.S. must lead the Quartet into resuming the permanent-status negotiations as soon as these elections are completed.

QUESTION (*Swisher*): Just a follow-on to that, what about the *hudna* [the cease-fire toward Israel, brokered by the Palestinian Authority with the militant factions] when that expires between Islamic Jihad, Hamas? Isn't that December 13th?

*Erekat:* Every effort is being exerted to have all Palestinians committed to a cessation of violence against Israelis anywhere.

QUESTION (*Barbara Slavin, USA Today*): Very nice to see you here again.

*Erekat:* Barbara, it's good to see you.

*Slavin:* I want to ask about Hamas and the whole issue of Islamists and the election. We've just seen elections in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood has done extremely, despite government harassment. What are your expectations on the turnout and support for Hamas? And how do you think that is going to affect the relations of the next Palestinian government with the United States? Thanks.

*Erekat:* Well, I think I you should ask me this question on January 26th, 2006, and I would be happy to answer you as usual, Barbara. I think—let me be very frank with you. As Palestinians, we have chosen the way of democracy. We have chosen the way of the ballot boxes. When you count the votes, whoever gets the highest votes will rule. And people must respect the democratic choice of Palestinians.

I belong to the Fatah party. We're having these primaries—I think it is the first time in our region that parties are having primaries. We're doing that because we are determined to win. And that we will do. I won the primaries in Jericho, and I'm running again. I'm determined to exert every possible effort to win. My program is peace, reconciliation and development. And I believe, I hope, that the Palestinians will take my message very clearly.

QUESTION (*Ron Kampeas, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency*): In terms of what you talked about the U.S. role, not confining itself to what the possibilities are but to what the needs are, particularly ahead of the elections, you outline several areas that need immediate addressing now in terms of the airport, the port. What about the elections? Is there a U.S. role in terms of what you talked about, having written seven times [and] not heard from the Israelis? Additionally, in more or less the same area, a month ago we were talking about, basically, Bibi [former Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu] versus Arik [current Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Ariel Sharon] in the elections, which presented one set of possibilities. Now it's Bibi versus Arik versus [the newly-elected leader of the Israeli Labour Party, Mr. Amir] Peretz, which presents a whole different set of possibilities. Does that make you a little bit more optimistic?

*Erekat:* Have you ever had a group of cats outside your window at 12:00 midnight, shouting? [Laughter] Answer me. Can you tell if they're making love or fighting? [Laughter] Maybe this is the definition of our politics back there, the Israelis and Palestinians. Sometimes it's so "sophisticated" for us. And that's what I told you. This is the most significant thing I've seen [in Israel] since the Israeli occupation came to my hometown, Jericho, in '67. I was 12-years-old at that time. I see the significance of what is going on there.

The fact that Mr. Peretz is elected, I believe, is a departure from the code of conduct of security-based campaigns, to a social economic campaign. I believe that the coalitions within the Likud now are taking shape and part of who's who against Bibi and Bibi against whomever—but we have to again, you know, shut our mouths and say we have to respect the democratic choice of the Israelis and this is a domestic affair of Israel. And, we want a government of Israel that would reengage with us. I hope that this will happen.

*Kampeas:* What would be the U.S. role in what happened?

*Erekat:* Look, we're not asking, and I can speak on behalf of the Israelis also here, for the U.S. to negotiate for us or to make the concessions for us. We are asking the U.S. to use its good offices with both parties, in order to [help us] once they see that we came a long way and there's not something that is going to [make] the whole thing go back and collapse. [We're asking the U.S.] to make this little push, as Dr. Rice did with the Rafah terminal.

QUESTION (*Joyce Karam, the Arabic Daily Al-Hayat*): Sir, my question is about the European Union report that's really warning from the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and maybe, you know, the extension of Ma'ale Adomim and link it to East Jerusalem. How are you going to deal with this threat ahead of the negotiations since it is a reality on the ground?

*Erekat:* That was one of the issues that we discussed with Dr. Rice and other officials today. This Israeli policy of settlements—the *fait accompli*, dictation and facts on the grounds—are undermining the two-state solution. They're really killing the two-state solution. And to those who stand to believe in the two-state solution and to maintain the two-state solution, they must have Israel comply with an obligation it committed to. The road map specified, verbatim, that Israel must stop settlement activities including natural growth.

*Karam:* But if it doesn't?

*Erekat:* Well, that's the question we are raising with the Europeans, with the Americans, with [people] all around the world. I believe they have built settlements—I remember Mr. Sharon in 1995 standing in a settlement called Netzarim in Gaza, where he said the future of the that settlement was part of the future of Tel Aviv. In 2005, we know what happened in Netzarim. Settlements and peace don't go together. It's either settlements or peace. I hope the Israelis and those who want peace will choose peace and not settlements.

QUESTION (*Manelisi Dubase, the South African Broadcasting Corporation in Johannesburg*): Mr. Erekat, [former U.S. President Bill] Clinton and his point-man in the Middle East, [former chief U.S. negotiator Mr. Dennis] Ross, have written in one of the editorials in the *New York Times* that it's about time that South African President Mbeki can play a role in the issues in the Middle East, saying that South Africa comes from almost the very same difficult situation as that that [you have in Palestine]. Have you identified or have you consulted them on the role they can play? Can you brief us on that?

*Erekat:* I am proud to have a personal association with President Mbeki. I am proud that I was among some Israelis and Palestinians who went to South Africa for a few days, sat with the negotiators from all political spectrums during the negotiations in South Africa. I was struck that these people managed to advance in their spirit and minds far, far beyond what we were able to do as Palestinians and Israelis. These people have made a rule before they engaged in the negotiations [between] blacks and white that, number one, negotiations will continue under any circumstances, unlike Palestinians and Israelis who stop negotiations and punish themselves for anything that goes wrong outside.

The second lesson I learned from the negotiators in South Africa is that they had a theme called strengthening the other side. I think we have a long way to go as Palestinians and Israelis. That is why, you know, we appreciate that South Africa is involved. They have special representatives who come to see us and the Israelis. We were in South Africa several times. And yes, I believe South Africa with experience and the transformations is something that can teach us a lot, as Palestinians and Israelis.

QUESTION (*former Arab League Ambassador Clovis Maksoud*): Dr. Erekat, you have articulated the collective frustration in the negotiating process. Is there any expectation that at some time, be it with American intervention or the Quartet's intervention, Israel will acknowledge that it is an occupying power in the West bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem? Because if it doesn't consider itself an occupying power, it is therefore a "claimant power." As a result of that, what it does it make painful concessions rather

than compliances with the mandate of an occupying authority. The second question, which is part of this, in the roadmap, which is a process, have you decided with the negotiators of Israel what is the map at the end of the road?

*Erekat:* The map at the end of the road, as specified in the last phase of the Road Map, Phase III, is that the objective of the peace process is to end the Israeli occupation that began in 1967. I think it was the first time that this objective was defined in any document that was submitted to Israelis and Palestinians. All Security Council resolutions lacked this line, but if you read the Road Map, in the last phase, it specifies that the objective of the third phase in the Road Map is to end the Israeli occupation that began in 1967.

Israel is an occupying power. That's what I believe and that's what international community believes. For the Israelis to deny facts doesn't mean they don't exist.

*Swisher:* Sharon actually acknowledged that in 2003, I believe, in his speech. He said, you can call it what you want, but it's an occupation.

*Erekat:* Look, I can't stand guards on the lips of any Israelis. As hard as it is just to watch what they do and to think about what they are doing, the last thing I want to do is to stand guard on their lips. They are an occupying power, and the whole peace process between me and them is to end their status as an occupying power and to make them as neighbors to me. That's all.

QUESTION (*Tarek Rashed, Middle East News Agency of Egypt*): We have been hearing a lot of talk about the two-state solutions, and we have been hearing Americans urging Palestinians to be prepared for a state and to put their house in order. But we didn't hear what the minimum of land is that Palestinians are ready to accept to declare a state on, as a starter. Thank you.

*Erekat:* You know something I don't? [*Laughter*] I think we are engaged in a peace process, not in a *souk*. The peace process has specified in the road map is to end the Israeli occupation that began in 1967. Israelis can build settlements, can make incursions into my hometown of Jericho with tanks, and can do whatever they want.

We have no army, no navy and no air force. But trust me, this Palestinian pen will only sign on something that will be doable and satisfactory to the Palestinian people, and that is what is defined in the international legitimacy codes and resolutions.

We have started. We declared the state in 1988. And we have been recognized by more than 100 nations on earth. The last thing we want to do now is to re-engage in interim agreements or make interim solutions, or states with provisional borders. All these concepts—these are issues that we don't consider as a starter; it's a non-starter. On this I would like to note my appreciation also to Egypt role in enabling us and helping us in Gaza now. They've been doing it for the last years, and recently in the last few months. They have done a great job in helping us in regrouping, reequipping our security forces, and training us on how to run an international border. And for that, I thank Egypt.

QUESTION (*Tom Lippman, the Middle East Institute*): It seems to me that the premise of the two-state solution as you describe it is the same as the premise of the peace plan offered by Saudi Arabia a couple of years ago and endorsed by the Arab League. That is, that if you get an agreement based more or less on the '67 borders, it is the end of the game—game over, Israel lives in peace. What I don't understand, though, is that given the continued existence of the Islamic Jihad and given the positions taken by certain organizations with whatever external support they may be getting, how can you persuade the Israelis to accept that premise and to believe that when you say the game is over, it really will be over?

*Erekat:* Well, first of all, in your comments about the Saudi initiative, I personally believe that this is the most important strategic move made by Arabs since 1948. Unfortunately, this wasn't even noticed in Israel when a unanimous Arab decision was taken at the Beirut Summit to say that we'll fully recognize the state of Israel in exchange for withdraw to the 1967 [border around] the Occupied Territories. It is our commitment, to answer your question.

We know that the Israelis want an end game, want an end of claims, and want an end of conflict. And, trust me, they will know very well whether we are capable of delivering or not. When that moment comes, we will show every capability to deliver on our commitments.

QUESTION (*Speaker's name and affiliation unidentified*): Yes, Dr. Erekat, thank you so much. You spoke about the Arab nations playing a role, specifically Egypt. [Egyptian] President Hosni Mubarak was recently quoted as saying Sharon was the only man he believed could deliver peace. Do you share that same sentiment, and if not, is there another candidate you believe that might help the two-state solution a little better?

*Erekat:* See at that point, I would stop short of saying this as a Palestinian. I say that I want the Israeli people to elect a government that is willing to re-engage in the real peace with me. We haven't had negotiations since January 2001. That's the



truth. But there is a difference between communications and meeting and daily issues and negotiations. I can promise you something. I will respect the democratic choice of Israelis, and whomever the Israelis elect we will take as partner in the negotiations. I hope they will have the will to re-engage in the permanent-status talks. And I hope they will treat me the same.

QUESTION (*Ori Nir, The Forward*): Saeb, I would like to ask you two questions. ... First question I wanted to ask you—is there any negotiational engagement bilaterally between Israelis and Palestinians at the moment, which is the small question. The large question is, 20 years ago when we spoke, you were writing an op-ed for [the Palestinian daily newspaper] *Al-Quds* and we were speaking about things like the “Jordanian option,” [U.N. Resolution] 242, and things like that. Twenty years [later] we have Israel withdrawing unilaterally from Gaza. We have a party headed by Sharon, which officially has on its platform a two-state solution and withdrawals from the West Bank. My question is what is the rush? If Israel is not ready yet for final-state negotiations, what’s the rush? You see that things are going—that time is working in your advantage. Why rush it?

*Erekat*: First question, no. I differentiate, Ori, between negotiations and communications. Communications is talking to each other—we talk every day at various levels. But we don’t have negotiations.

On your second question, I believe time is of the essence. You know, it makes a difference—it makes a lot of difference. I don’t want my son to be a suicide bomber, Ori. That is the truth. I want my son to have an opportunity similar to your [children]. And if not rushing translates into the pictures we’re seeing in Israeli cemeteries and Palestinian cemeteries, I believe we should have rushed a long time ago.

I have never believed in a “Jordanian” option or an “Israeli” option. I believe that we have one option. When I said I did not wake up one morning and feel my conscience aching for you, or your suffering, and that [that is why] I wanted to recognize you. And I said that you would not wake up one morning as Israelis and feel your consciences aching for myself, and I meant it. We both realized that this conflict is unique and cannot be played in accordance with a zero-sum game. You can never, regardless of how many tanks you possess, state-of-the-art planes, navies, relations, money, whatever—you can never define a clear-cut winner or a clear-cut loser. It’s either two winners or two losers. And two losers we have been through the conflict and through the mentality, thus the rush. I believe we owe it to our people to say that time is of the essence. And saving a single life is worth it. This is not poetry. It’s my son.

QUESTION (*Janine Zacharia, Bloomberg News*): I have two questions. Ariel Sharon stated quite clearly that Israel will not allow the elections to take place, presuming throwing up roadblocks and obstacles if Hamas and Islamic Jihad are on the ballot. What do you say to that? Second, can you talk about the challenges that Abu Mazen is facing right now? How safe is he personally, politically?

*Erekat*: Well, I hope that Mr. Sharon would—I don’t want to say the word sabotage—I hope that Mr. Sharon will change the course of his thinking about Palestinian elections, and I hope that he would leave us alone. I hope he will not impede Palestinian natural growth—democratic natural growth—and I hope he will not impede these elections or do anything to sabotage these elections.

As far as President Abbas—Abu Mazen—is concerned, I think he has the most difficult job on earth today, at the end of 2005. He has an overloaded wagon of complexities and we have a lot to do. We have a lot to solve. We have a lot to tackle. We have to provide a lot of answers, a lot of jobs, and create many things, thinking them thinkable, but above everything else, we believe that all these things can move fast if we begin to do the planning merited by our own freedom.

We found out that if you don’t have the freedom to choose and to plan and to think and to live, I’m afraid that all the issues that you require from me—because it’s fashionable to tell Palestinians what to do and people like to tell me what to do. People love this—I don’t know why, but they love it. And they treat me like a superpower and they treat me that I should do one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And these ten people don’t know that a single Israeli officer can prevent me from leaving my home in Jericho if he chooses to.

It is basically my freedom and the freedom of Abu Mazen to think, and to plan for our people, on how to handle the overloaded wagon of complexities we have.

QUESTION (*Speaker’s name and affiliation inaudible*): We have a couple of questions. We’ve seen press reports recently that the PLC is considering a switch to a fully proportional representation system. And we’d like to hear your thoughts on that, if you think it’s likely it will go through, and how that would affect voting. And second, we’d like to hear you speak to the possible switch of the negotiating responsibilities from the PLO to the PA. Would the Palestinian Authority take over any of those? Is the PLO breaking up? And how do those two bodies face off against each other?

*Erekat:* On your first question, there was an attempt last week by some of my colleagues in the legislative council to propose—which is their right, by the way, to propose an amendment to the election law—in which I can tell you I personally, proudly, defeated with 35 votes in one session, because I don't think it's appropriate to talk about changing laws ten days before the opening of the candidacy, at the 12th hour. It's really inappropriate. With all due respect to my colleagues, we had had eight months of debates over proportional or majoritarian representation, and I don't think that there is such a thing as a better electoral system. We have settled down. I was fully support majoritarian system, the constituencies. That's my personal opinion. Me and my colleagues defeated three motions—three readings—but then the compromise was made to have 50-50, to enable small parties, individuals who want to have the proportional system, but then I think this was inappropriate at the last minute to come with this amendment, which was defeated by me getting the signatures—35 of my colleagues in less than an hour—to motion back and to drop this.

What was your second question? [*Inaudible discussion*] I refer you to paragraph five of article one to the interim agreement in which the Israeli government forced us to sign that the PA has no legal international status whatsoever, and it is the PLO that can sign. On all the agreements that I sign with the Israelis, it says Saed Erekat on behalf of the PLO. They have a reason for having this.

QUESTION (*Shmuel Rosner, Ha'aretz Daily*): What is their reason?

*Erekat:* This is not the time to talk about that, about what Israelis or I think about that.

*Rosner:* You were very specific about the ways with which Israel needs to help or the U.S. needs to help the Palestinians achieving some “needs” in Gaza—the airport, the seaport, et cetera. But you weren't so specific discussing the obligations of the Palestinian Authority or the plans you have for disarming the terror groups, before or after the elections. Can you specify?

*Erekat:* There are sets of obligations, and I said I'm committed to my obligations. I said that Dr. Rice there is the issue of the “one authority, one gun” and the rule of law. As I said, we reiterated our commitment to that. So maybe you did not listen to that, to say that. I did not say that. But you should know that the Road Map has performance-led implemented—that the Road Map is done in parallel, not sequentially. Israel has no right whatsoever to condition the implementation of the road map on me. I have an obligation of having one authority, one legal gun, the rule of law. I am going at it in parallel in the three stages, but that doesn't mean that Israel should stop and watch me as I sweat and finish everything.

The second thing here is that Israel should not tie my hands, tie my legs, blindfold me, and throw me to the sea, so a correspondent here and there will tell me, “Oh, look at these people! He's drowning. He's no good as a partner. He's not swimming, you see?” [*Laughter*]

You know, honest to God. Putting us in this dilemma by destroying our command centers, our communication centers, our vehicles, confiscating the pistols and the guns we have and with our police, arresting the police—and then to say how come you're not doing enough?

Literally, in towns like Nablus, like Tulkarm, like Jenin, like Qalqilyah, like Hebron, like Bethlehem, if we get a Palestinian policeman in uniform to help the traffic there, he is either taken to jail or shot. If you envisage a way that I should handle control of Palestinian society without security, without laws, without being there, without police, without jails, tell me.

I talked about what General Ward did. I talked about what General Dayton is doing. I said I'm no match to you in the Congress and the Senate. You don't need to score points with me. You don't, all right? But at the end of the day, the choices are yours. Make up your minds! I have made up my mind. You hid behind Arafat being a problem, a Palestinian president who was elected. You made him the problem. He died a year ago—did the problem disappear, sir? What's happening with Abu Mazen now? What are you writing about him?

I believe if we're going to stay the course of settlements, walls, not facing the moment of truth that we need to face, I will repeat the sentence I said when President Arafat died. If you were to have Mother Theresa as our president, Thomas Jefferson as our prime minister, Montesquieu as our speaker, and Mahatma Gandhi take my job and be the Palestinian chief negotiator [*Laughter*], they will link them to terrorism and ask them, how come you're not doing enough? [*Laughter*]

QUESTION (*Francois Clemenceau, French Radio Europe 1*): You didn't mention the role of the Quartet. Is it because it doesn't work anymore or it's not a useful or effective tool?

*Erekat:* Once I was interviewed on an Arab TV show, the “Dialogue of Life.” [The interviewer] asked me some questions. I mentioned my childhood, my sisters, and so on. I forgot to mention my wife—I was punished for a year. [*Laughter*] I did mention the EU. And when I say today that the European Union took the most courageous decision by accepting to play the

role of a third party in Rafah. I believe this is a most important strategic decision taken by Europe and a third party. And for that, I stand to praise this courage and this bravery by Europe. Not that we don't want them to monitor us and to see to it that we are carrying out and ensuring that we carry out our obligations—no, we want them to vouch for us.

But the other thing, sir. This is the first time in our history that we operate an international crossing point, and we don't know how. We know, but we need Europe's help in upgrading our human and technical expertise in accordance with international standards. We want the Palestinian person to come to that point and leave in 15 minutes, because sometimes they have had to stay there for 40 days in the last 38 years, sometimes for four months. Europe is providing the technical training, the expertise, and the equipment needed to inspect luggage. They told us we have to have 12 counters for passports and not six; what kind of things, what kind of inspections for cars. I hope the day will come that what was written in the road map about monitors on the ground will have just begun in Rafah.

*Swisher:* Dr. Erekat, on behalf of the Middle East Institute and The Palestine Center, I want to thank you for taking such generous time out of your busy schedule. *[Applause]* You were eloquent and candid as always.

Thank you very much. *[Applause]*

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