

www.haaretz.com

Last update - 02:45 24/06/2003

'Road map is a life saver for us,' PM Abbas tells Hamas

By [Arnon Regular](#)

Selected minutes acquired by Haaretz from one of last week's cease-fire negotiations between Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and faction leaders from the Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular and Democratic Fronts, reveal some of the factors at play behind the scenes in the effort to achieve a hudna.

Abbas opened the session after hearing scathing criticism from faction leaders for his Aqaba speech in which he defined their activities as "terrorism." He began with a broad review of his two meetings with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Aqaba summit.

"After seven days we did not reach agreement in Cairo on either the hudna or the united leadership. These points were later discussed in contacts in Gaza and in my view, the two points are the ones that should be on the table."

Abbas said: "The descriptions of what happened at Sharm el Sheikh and in Aqaba are vague in parts and in some parts are inventions, so this is an opportunity to talk about what happened since the PA accepted the road map on December 20," he said. "Despite our reservations we decided not to make them an obstacle, believing that the road map was a life saver for a tiger whose head was caught in the neck of the bottle."

Abbas said "we were told that [President George] Bush is committed to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state beside the state of Israel, so based on our saying that we are ready to try that experiment, that is what was determined."

He explained to the faction leaders that with regard to the first phase of the road map, there was an agreement with the Americans that "the Palestinians would speak publicly about their commitments according to the map and then the Israelis would do the same thing." From there, he moved on to describe what happened at the summits. He said that Bush told the Arab leaders that he is fully committed to a solution based on his vision speech from June 24, 2002 and is ready to move

forward "if there is help on your part."

"The Arabs supported him and I said we are ready to fulfill our commitments as they appear in the map," said Abbas. He said the discussion of the start of the implementation of the map dealt with Gaza, where he said that Palestinian Authority institutions "are 75 percent destroyed, while in the West Bank they are 100 percent destroyed."

He emphasized that at that stage he made clear to the participants at the Sharm summit that "we need time and capabilities to stand on our feet. And I explained that I had already spoken with Ariel Sharon about reaching a hudna between all the Palestinian factions." According to Abbas, "Bush exploded with anger and said 'there can be no deals with terror groups.' We told him that they are part of our people and we cannot deal with them in any other way. We cannot begin with repression, under no circumstances, and I made clear to Bush that Sharon already agreed with that."

He said that he presented Bush with the deliberations about the hudna that he had with Sharon in Jerusalem after he was appointed prime minister. He explained to Bush that the dialogue between the Palestinian factions that began in Cairo and continued in Gaza were on the verge of completion. He said that Bush said "a case-fire is not the whole story" - Bush meant that a hudna is only the start of the process of disarming the groups.

Abbas outlined the political contacts during the Aqaba summit and said he added the prisoner issue at the three-way session with Bush and Sharon. "I told them the prisons are the election district for a campaign of calm in the Palestinian territories." He said Bush then turned to Sharon "with the following words, 'look what you can profit from this, that holding onto the prisoners only creates tension.'"

Abbas said: "We were asked what we need if Israel withdraws and we said 'that there not be raids, chases, assassinations or house demolitions, because that kind of activity will destroy everything.'"

Abbas tried to placate the faction leaders by telling them that Palestinian Security Minister Mohammed Dahlan had raised the exact same issues with John Wolf, the American monitor of the road map. He tried to explain that in the wake of the failed attempt on Abdel Aziz Rantisi's life, the PA was now insisting on an end to the assassinations.

He went on to explain his speech in Aqaba. "We did not speak of our rights but only of our commitments. Bush was impressed

by that and mentioned the prisoners and settlements in his speech." On the matter of the right of return, Abbas said "that right appears in all the previous initiatives, and is not under discussion now. Bush asked, if that's the case, why mention the settlements now, and I told him the settlements are happening now. The Israelis use the excuse of natural growth and I told them that according to U.S. statistics, 33 percent of settlements are empty. We said the growth should happen westward, and not on our territory."

Abbas said that at Aqaba, Bush promised to speak with Sharon about the siege on Arafat. He said nobody can speak to or pressure Sharon except the Americans.

According to Abbas, immediately thereafter Bush said: "God told me to strike at al Qaida and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East. If you help me I will act, and if not, the elections will come and I will have to focus on them."

</hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=310788>

[close window](#)