

Abbas wants negotiations with Israelis, but not with Netanyahu

By Akiva Eldar and Aluf Benn

RAMALLAH - Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday launched a direct appeal to the Israeli public to coincide with the upcoming meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama.

The Palestinian leader launched his "popular peace campaign" to explain the PA's positions to Israelis. His aim is to win Israelis' trust and enlist their support for a peace settlement based on the 1967 borders (with minor changes and land swaps.)

At a meeting with six Israeli journalists in his Ramallah office yesterday, Abbas spent an hour patiently answering questions, including one about the doubts he expressed over the scope of the Holocaust in his doctoral thesis.

He invited the guests to dine with him and shared his impressions of the World Cup games, as well as anecdotes from meetings with Israeli leaders and Obama. After about three hours, Abbas urged the journalists, "don't let me lose hope."

Abbas said his family was pressing him to retire from politics due to his age (75) and reiterated his pledge not to run in the next presidential election. He warned that in view of the difficulties in the peace process, growing numbers of Palestinians are calling for abandoning the two-state solution in favor of a one-state solution.

Abbas said that former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban was right when he said the Palestinians never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. "To this day, I regret our rejection of the Partition Plan in 1947," he said.

"Now I tell you Israelis - don't miss the opportunity the Arab League has offered you with its peace initiative."

Though that plan requires Israel to withdraw from all the territories it conquered in 1967, Abbas said he was confident Syria would not sabotage a deal to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even if it does not advance the negotiations with Syria (which insists on a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights).

Abbas said he would not sign a reconciliation agreement with Hamas unless it adopts the Arab peace initiative and the principles incorporated in the road map peace plan.

Abbas, who was in high spirits, joked with the Israeli guests and had photos taken with each of them. He told many anecdotes about his smoking habits. Between one cigarette and another, he disclosed that opposition leader Tzipi Livni used to smoke cigarillos and that he had smoked in Obama's company.

He spoke proudly about joint receptions that Jewish and Palestinian community leaders in South America had hosted for him. He said that Yasser Abed Rabbo, who is in charge of the PA's television channel, had invited Netanyahu for an interview but received no response.

The PA intends to invite President Shimon Peres to a large peace rally in Jericho, he added.

Abbas said that despite the absence of direct negotiations with Israel, he has repeatedly offered to resume the work of the joint committee to prevent incitement, which was established 12 years ago after Netanyahu consented to it at the Wye summit. But even to this, Abbas said, Israel has not responded.

Responding to the claim that the doctoral thesis he wrote in 1982 for Lumumba University in Moscow had expressed doubts about whether six million Jews really perished in the Holocaust, Abbas said he saw the Holocaust as a crime against humanity, and had meant only that he lacked the tools to determine whether six, five or seven million Jews died in it. As far as he is concerned, he added, the murder of even one innocent person is a crime against the world. Abbas said he has instructed his ambassadors in Poland and Russia to take part in Holocaust memorial days.

Abbas expressed support for a deal with Hamas to free kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, but said the agreement must not just release Hamas prisoners. Rather, it must free all the thousands of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

He said Netanyahu recently received a Palestinian proposal to deploy an international force in the territories, under NATO or UN auspices, as part of a final-status deal establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. The proposal was given to Netanyahu by American envoy George Mitchell in the context of the PLO's positions on borders and security arrangements.

Abbas said the plan he proposed was examined by the U.S. National Security Advisor, James Jones, in his previous role as special envoy to the region, and has also been accepted by the Arab states.

He was responding to Netanyahu's statement that it is impossible to discuss borders before reaching an understanding about security arrangements.

Abbas said the positions on borders that he gave to Netanyahu were based on the agreements he reached in talks with former prime minister Ehud Olmert. These agreements, he said, were as follows: The border would be based on the June 4, 1967 lines in both Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the northern part of the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley and the no-man's land near Latrun, but would include border adjustments and land swaps on a 1:1 scale.

Abbas said he and Olmert had "exchanged maps" on the basis of these principles, with the Americans' knowledge and approval.