

Dr. Saeb Erakat, Chief Palestinian Negotiator, held a press conference on the 23rd August to discuss the Palestinian positions in advance of direct negotiations with Israel, set to begin on September 2 in Washington, DC.

During the press conference, Dr. Erakat highlighted the Middle East Quartet statement as a turning point in the PLO's decision to enter direct negotiations. The statement, given on August 20, 2010, noted the Madrid terms of reference, Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative as a starting point for this new round of negotiations. The PLO considers these principles be the basis for the direct talks.

Dr. Erakat went on to say that any successful peace talks must lead to a sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital and a just and agreed solution to the refugee issue, in line with UNGAR 194.

Dr. Erakat stressed the Palestinian commitment to the peace talks, yet mentioned their serious reservations regarding Israel's intentions and commitment to a just and lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis. This skepticism, he said, is a result of Israel's continued settlement activities, home demolitions and other illegal practices in the occupied Palestinian territory. Israel's commitment to a negotiated agreement and a two-state solution will be evident on the ground. If new construction tenders are issued (a plan which has already been announced by the Netanyahu government) during the negotiation process, it will be a clear affront to peace and Palestinians will be pushed out of the negotiations process.

Dr. Erakat stated that President Abbas sent a series of letters to President Obama, Lady Ashton, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and President Medvedev. In these letters, President Abbas expressed his commitment to peace and demanded that the international community take a strong and unequivocal position regarding Israel's obligation to freeze all settlement activity, without exceptions. President Abbas also reiterated the PLO's position: if settlements, house demolitions and evictions continue, Palestinians will not continue negotiating.

Dr. Erakat also mentioned that even before the direct negotiations have begun, Israel has already made their preconditions known – a demilitarized Palestinian state, a security buffer in the Jordan River Valley and a Palestinian recognition of a "Jewish" state. Palestinians enter these negotiations, which have been called for alongside Israel, in good faith and without preconditions and ask to have an Israeli partner willing to accept the long-established and internationally-accepted terms of reference of our negotiations.