THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
--
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING
THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION
New York, 16 December 2016

[as delivered]

Today, I report to the Security Council for the last time on the Situation in the Middle East.

It saddens me that my last such briefing brings no sense of optimism for the future.

Some may ask why, given all the crises in the region, I chose to address the Council on the question of Palestine.

To them, I say that while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the cause of the wars in the Middle East, its resolution can create momentum for peace throughout the region.

In 1947, on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolution 181, the world recognized the two-state solution and called for the emergence of "independent Arab and Jewish states".

On 14 May 1948, the State of Israel was born.

Almost seven decades later, the world still awaits the birth of the Palestinian state.

As the Security Council has made clear, Gaza, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, have been under military occupation since 1967. These lands comprise the future Palestinian state, ultimately to be agreed by the parties through direct negotiations.

History has shown that peace and security can be built only on the basis of respect and mutual acceptance. The right of the Jewish people to have a state does not negate the right of the Palestinian people to statehood.

Yet Palestinian frustration and grievances are growing under the weight of nearly half a century of humiliating occupation.

Ten years ago, the majority of both peoples believed in the two-state solution. Today that majority is unravelling.

Leaders on both sides increasingly speak to their ever more radicalized constituencies, rather than to each other.

The expanding Israeli settlement enterprise and an ever-more-entrenched status quo is preventing

Palestinian development and locking in Gaza.

Some Israeli politicians increasingly call for the so-called “full” annexation of the West Bank.

Gaza and the West Bank remain politically divided, and Palestinian factions fail to make the compromises necessary for national unity.

Israelis feel that there is no end in sight to terrorism, as incitement and calls for Israel’s obliteration continue unchallenged by Palestinian leaders.

The framework for peace remains unchanged: the establishment of two states, on the basis of the principle of land for peace, and a just and comprehensive regional peace consistent with relevant Security Council resolutions as well as with existing agreements signed between the parties.

As I took office ten years ago, the Middle East was still recovering from the years of the second Palestinian uprising and the war between Israel and Hizbullah in 2006. The re-affirmation by the League of Arab States of the Arab Peace Initiative and the convening of the Annapolis Conference in 2007 brought some hope.

Despite early optimism, attempts at reaching a final resolution failed to make headway and were upended with the eruption of conflict in Gaza in December 2008. Further attempts at peace in 2010 and 2013 were equally eclipsed by renewed hostilities.

The summer of 2014 saw the most devastating conflict in Gaza to date.

During the height of the fighting, I traveled to the region and met with regional and international partners as well as with the leadership in Israel and Palestine to push for a ceasefire. An agreement, sadly, came too slowly for those who paid a heavy price during those 50 days of horror.

I said then, and I continue to insist, that without addressing the deeper causes of this conflict, such cycles of escalation will persist.

Yet another troubling measure of the current state of play is that, during my tenure, the Security Council adopted only two resolutions on the Middle East peace process, the most recent almost eight years ago.

We are fast approaching a precipice as a direct result of the actions of those seeking to destroy the prospects for peace.

But there is a way out of this deadlock – by both sides implementing the recommendations in the recent report of the Middle East Quartet.

This would demonstrate that Israelis and Palestinians are serious about building trust and laying the foundations for meaningful negotiations that will end the occupation based on 1967 lines, establish a viable, independent Palestinian state and resolve all final status issues.

But there are also major obstacles.

As I have consistently stated, Israel's settlement activity beyond the 1967 line is in flagrant violation of international law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Settlements eat away at the land meant for a future Palestinian state. Over the past decade, the number of Israelis living in settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, increased by some 30 per cent to about 600,000 people.

A bill currently being debated in the Israeli legislature risks the "regularization" of more than 50 outposts and thousands of housing units built on private Palestinian land in the West Bank – a clear violation of international law.

If adopted, this legislation would for the first time apply Israeli law on the status of Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

I strongly urge legislators to reconsider advancing this bill, which will have negative legal consequences for Israel and substantially diminish the chances for Arab-Israeli peace.

Bold steps by Israel to empower the Palestinian Authority, based on the transition envisioned in previous agreements, can bring benefits to the Palestinian people and increase Israeli security.

Progress in this area, however, will be difficult unless the Palestinian authorities take brave and concrete steps to address incitement and violence.

Acts and statements that glorify terror are unacceptable. I have repeatedly and strongly denounced incitement and all acts of terror.

Stabbings, vehicle rammings and other attacks by Palestinians do nothing to advance their dream of statehood.

Israel must also understand that continued occupation and heavy-handed security responses -- including the possible excessive use of force and the highly restrictive closure policy in Gaza -- play into the hands of extremists. These actions risk undermining moderate voices, and further deepening the gulf between the two sides.

I have also decried the practice of administrative detention and ill-treatment in detention by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Similarly, executions of prisoners by Hamas in Gaza are absolutely unacceptable.

And I continue to speak out against constraints on freedom of expression by Israeli and the Palestinian authorities, including against human rights defenders.

The absence of Palestinian unity throughout the occupied territory presents an obstacle to the

two-state solution.

The failure to organize Palestinian general elections has remained one of the clearest signs of this disunity and of the fragile Palestinian democratic process.

The division between the West Bank and Gaza can be overcome only with the formation of a single, legitimate, inclusive Palestinian government, on the basis of PLO principles.

We must urge a renewal of the democratic legitimacy of Palestinian leadership and institutions and ensure that they represent all Palestinians.

It is unacceptable that Hamas still boasts an anti-Semitic Charter that aspires to the obliteration of Israel. Hamas must, once and for all, renounce the use of violence and recognize the right of Israel to exist alongside a Palestinian state, in accordance with all relevant Security Council resolutions and previous agreements between the parties.

Over the last ten years, the Palestinian Authority has made strides in building its institutions. In 2011 these achievements were recognized by the international community as being "well positioned for establishment of a state." Palestine received non-member observer state status in 2012, and I witnessed, alongside President Abbas, the raising of the Palestinian flag for the first time at the United Nations just last year.

Still Palestine's state-building and democratic governance aspirations continue to be undermined by the occupation and the lack of Palestinian national unity.

The centrality of the challenges facing Gaza cannot be over-stated.

Indiscriminate rocket fire by Hamas towards Israel for a decade has convinced many Israelis that there is no hope for peace. After three brutal conflicts, Israel's crippling closures and a decade-long political divide have left two million Palestinians trapped in a humanitarian tragedy, without hope for a political horizon.

I have witnessed this devastation on my four trips to Gaza. I must warn, as I have repeatedly stated, that Gaza is a tinder box.

It is almost certain to explode unless movement and access restrictions are lifted and humanitarian needs are addressed; unless rocket attacks, tunnel construction and smuggling stop; unless progress is made on establishing a Palestinian state, with Gaza an integral and peaceful part.

I also want to take this opportunity to commend the efforts of United Nations colleagues working with such diligence and dedication to promote peace and prevent yet more violence.

Let me begin by honouring the 24 United Nations staff members based in the occupied Palestinian territory who were killed in the line of duty during my tenure. Their sacrifices shall never be forgotten.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency – UNRWA - provides a much-needed element of stability for 5.3 million Palestine refugees across the region. It continues to face serious financial challenges. I urge Member States to honour their commitment and increase their contributions to the Agency.

The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process has been instrumental in bridging differences between all sides, facilitating negotiations and engaging with the region and international partners.

The United Nations Country Team is working under difficult circumstances, to provide relief to vulnerable Palestinians and to help build the institutions and policies of a future independent Palestinian state.

During the past ten years, I have argued that we must never accept bias against Israel within UN bodies. Decades of political maneuverings have created a disproportionate volume of resolutions, reports and conferences criticizing Israel. In many cases, rather than helping the Palestinian cause, this reality has hampered the ability of the UN to fulfill its role effectively.

At the same time, Israel must realize that the reality in which a democratic state, governed by the rule of law, keeps the Palestinian people under military occupation will continue to generate criticism and calls for accountability.

As we look to the future, I call on the Security Council to reaffirm without reservations that there is no alternative to the two-state solution.

The status quo entrenches a one-state reality of perpetual occupation and conflict.

We must not give up on the right of Palestine to exist, just as we must protect the right of Israel to exist in peace and security with its neighbours.

I urge you to explore the vast potential of incentives and begin immediately to develop, in consultation with the parties, an agreed framework for advancing a final resolution to this conflict on the basis of direct negotiations.

The upcoming Conference in France could be an opportunity to begin this discussion.

The Arab Peace Initiative presents a chance to develop a comprehensive settlement of the conflict. But there cannot be sustainable peace between Israelis and Arabs without progress towards Palestinian statehood.

Ten years ago, my predecessor, Kofi Annan, called for a revitalized Middle East Quartet, working closely with international and regional partners, to facilitate and sustain direct negotiations. I fully believe that this architecture remains critical.

Since becoming Secretary-General, I visited the region eleven times, including during periods of

war.

And for ten years, I pressed Israelis and Palestinians to start believing in a common future, bound by their undeniable historic, religious and national connection to the land.

These aspirations have not been fulfilled.

I will continue to hope that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians are tired of the tug-of-war over historical narratives.

But hope alone will not end the occupation nor rid the Palestinian and Israeli people of their legitimate fears.

There must be a major shift, to courageous and concrete action by the parties that enables meaningful negotiations. The United Nations will continue to assist this process.

Ultimately, it is up to the Israelis and Palestinians to make peace—we cannot do it for them. They must rebuild trust in each other, as the only way to address the fears and suspicions that have led to the deep polarization we see today. At the same time, we all can and must contribute to building trust, so sorely needed in the Middle East and the world today.

This work must begin now, before it is too late.

Thank you for your leadership.

ENDS

Murad Bakri
Public Information Officer
Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO)
Tel: +972-2-5687287
Mobile: +972-54-5627815
E-mail: bakri1@un.org
www.unsco.org