16 February 2017, Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East, Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process



Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, UN Photo

Mr. President, members of the Security Council,

On the night of 8 February, ISIS and its affiliates in the Sinai launched a series of rockets towards the Israeli coastal resort of Eilat. Thankfully, no one was killed or injured in the attack. I unequivocally condemn this act as well as those who inspired, implemented and celebrated it.

I recall this incident because it is a chilling reminder of the need for states to work together and stand firm against terror.

The Middle East continues to be plagued by extremism, bloodshed and displacement that feeds intolerance, violence, and religious radicalism far beyond the region.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, sadly, is not immune from these sweeping regional threats. Although leaders on both sides agree on the need to continue Israeli-Palestinian security coordination, there is increasing anger in the street and radical views are hijacking the discourse as moderate voices are increasingly vilified and cast aside.

It is critical that we all understand that we must never allow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to drift into the abyss of the extremism and radicalism sweeping the region. Palestinians, Israelis and the international community have a duty to act responsibly, avoid escalating tensions, refrain from unilateral actions and work together to uphold peace.

Sadly, today unilateral actions are returning the parties to a high-stakes collision course.

Mr. President,

On 6 February, the Israeli Parliament adopted the so-called "Regularisation Law" which enables the use of privately owned Palestinian land for Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank without the owners' consent. The law has the potential to retroactively "regularise" – under Israeli law – thousands of existing settlement units built on land owned by Palestinian individuals living under occupation, as well as dozens of illegal outposts. Its passage marks a significant shift in Israel's position concerning the legal status of the West Bank and the applicability of Israeli law therein. It contravenes international law and according to the Israeli Attorney General it is also unconstitutional. It is expected that the Supreme Court of Israel will rule on its constitutionality soon.

If the law stays in place, it will have far-reaching consequences for Israel, while seriously undermining prospects for the two-state solution and for Arab-Israeli peace.

This period also saw Government statements announcing significant settlement expansion, which were quickly followed by action. Within a three-week period, the Israeli authorities promoted some 4,000 housing units in Area C, including tenders for around 800 units, advancement of around 3,000 units and approval of plans for an additional 230 units. These numbers are all the more worrying if compared to the whole of 2016, when 42 units were tendered and some 3,000 were advanced in Area C. Settlements were also advanced in East Jerusalem during the reporting period, with the issuance of building permits for over 900 units.

Settlement activities are illegal under international law, as stated by the Middle East Quartet, they are one of the main obstacles to peace. All core issues, Mr. President, should be resolved between the parties through direct negotiations on the basis of relevant Security Council resolutions and mutual agreements.

Mr. President,

I continue to be concerned by the daily violence. So-called "lone wolf" attacks against Israeli civilians, though greatly reduced as compared to 2016, continue. On February 9th, in the market of Petah Tikva in central Israel, an 18-year-old Palestinian from Nablus shot and stabbed six Israelis, who were injured in the attack.

In the West Bank, three Palestinians were shot and killed by Israeli security forces in recent weeks, two allegedly attempting attacks on Israeli soldiers, while a teenager was killed during clashes with Israeli security forces. I once again call for the calibrated use of force and stress that live fire should be used only as a last resort, in situations of imminent threat of death or serious injury, with any resulting death or injury properly investigated by the authorities.

The trend of demolishing Palestinian-owned structures continues. Some 57 structures have been torn down, displacing 108 people. Last year saw over 1,000 demolitions, the largest annual number of demolitions on record,

nearly double the figure for 2015. I once again take this opportunity to urge Israel to cease this destructive practice.

Mr. President,

I welcome the Palestinian decision to hold the postponed local elections on May 13th, however I also take note of Hamas' rejection of that decision. Let me urge all factions to work together in good faith to uphold democracy and to overcome the internal divisions that are undermining Palestinian national institutions and the legitimate aspirations for statehood.

Local elections, if held simultaneously in both Gaza and the West Bank, and conducted in line with international standards, can contribute to advancing reconciliation. Gaza and the West Bank should be reunited under a single, legitimate and democratic Palestinian authority on the basis of the PLO principles and the rule of law, in accordance with existing agreements.

In Gaza, we have consistently warned that the situation is not sustainable and that another escalation is likely, unless the pressing needs of the population are more systematically addressed.

I also note that Hamas in Gaza has elected a new leadership. It is for this leadership to ensure that Gaza remains calm and avoid the risk of spiraling into another conflict. Rocket attacks, tunnel construction and smuggling only heighten that risk.

After over three months of relative calm, the launching of a rocket from Gaza towards Israel on February 5th – which landed without injury –reminds us all of the risk of further destabilizing an already combustible environment. In this environment all sides should exercise maximum restraint.

The volatile situation in Gaza continues to be exacerbated by the persistence of a major humanitarian and development challenges, related in large part to the crippling closures of the Strip and the continuing political divide. This winter has borne witness to a serious electricity crisis which in December left Palestinians in Gaza with only two hours of electricity per day. Tens of thousands of people came out in the streets in mass protests, many — including journalists, were detained. The crisis was temporarily resolved with a generous contribution of US$ 12 million from the State of Qatar.

As we speak, the United Nations is working actively with the Palestinian Authority, all stakeholders and key donors, on a roadmap to ensure that Gaza's massive electricity problems are addressed in a sustainable manner.

Mr. President,

Briefly turning to Lebanon, the reactivation of state institutions has continued. The President and Prime Minister have expressed their confidence that an electoral law will be agreed with the aim of holding timely elections.

On February 11th, in an interview, President Aoun stated "[…] the need to maintain Hizbullah's weapons". The UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon is in discussion with authorities on their continued commitment to relevant Security Council resolutions, in particular resolutions1701 and 1559, which clearly call for the disbanding and disarmament of all non-state armed groups.

Relative calm continued in the UNIFIL area of operations and along the Blue Line, with the exception of some ground and air violations. On 19 January, UNIFIL deployed on both sides of the Blue Line to mitigate tensions including weapons pointing between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces in the

context of the placement of a soil barrier near El Adeisse by Lebanese municipal workers, in violation of the Blue Line.

Meanwhile in the UNDOF area of operations the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic is holding, albeit in a volatile security environment on the Bravo side. On February 8th, the IDF carried out a strike on the Syrian side of the Golan in response to a spillover fire incident involving a tank shell that landed in an open area in Israeli-occupied Golan. Spillover from Syria continues to heighten the risk of further escalation between the two sides.

Both sides however have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. Conditions permitting, the full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority.

Mr. President,

Returning to the Palestinian - Israeli conflict, recent developments should be of concern to all.

Some may hold the illusion that the conflict can be “managed” indefinitely. That the absence of a clear strategy to advance peace is a strategy in itself.

The Middle East Quartet Report and Security Council resolutions have clearly outlined what is needed to advance a sustainable and just peace. The two-state solution remains the only way to achieve the legitimate national aspirations of both peoples. Israel can take the necessary step to stop settlement expansion and construction in order to preserve this prospect, while the Palestinian leadership can demonstrate their commitment to tackling the challenges of violence and incitement on their side. This will create an environment that will facilitate bilateral final status negotiations that the international community can support.

As Palestinians and Israelis face another period of uncertainty and concern for what lies ahead, I urge leaders on both sides to carefully contemplate the future they envision for their people.

Will it be a future built on perpetual conflict, rising extremism and occupation?

Or will it be a future built on mutual respect and an appreciation for the unimaginable wealth of opportunities that would come with peace?

The answer seems obvious but, as history has painfully demonstrated, the path to peace is riddled with hazards. The United Nations remains resolute in its commitment to help Palestinians and Israelis strive to overcome these challenges.

Thank you.