Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Middle East

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Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Mr. Mladenov, for your briefing.

When I first came to the United Nations two years ago, I was taken back a bit by this monthly meeting. The fact that the UN would consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not striking. It is, after all, a matter of international peace and security. What was striking was the frequency of the discussion and the one-sidedness of it.

Members of the Security Council have heard me say this many times. The problems of the Middle East are numerous, and yet we spend vastly disproportionate amount of time on just one of them. And the UN has shown itself to be hopelessly biased, as we witnessed again just two weeks ago when the General Assembly failed to condemn Hamas’s terrorist activity against Israel.

Over the past two years, I have attempted to provide more value in this monthly meeting by using my time to speak about other pressing problems in the Middle East. I have spoken about Iran’s illegal weapons transfers and destabilizing support for terrorism throughout the region. I have spoken about the barbarism of the Assad regime in Syria. I have spoken about Hamas’s illegal and diabolical use of human shields. I have spoken about Hezbollah jeopardizing the safety of the Lebanese people and its violations of Israeli sovereignty which have come to light even more clearly in the last month. I have spoken about Iraq and Yemen, about refugees and humanitarian crises.

I have done this for two reasons. I’ve done it to illustrate that most of the region’s problems have absolutely nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And I’ve done it to encourage the UN to move away from its obsession with Israel. This UN obsession has been entirely unproductive. It’s actually worse than that. The UN’s obsession with this issue has been counterproductive. It has sent a loud and false message to the Palestinians that they just might be able to achieve their goals by relying on the UN, rather than through direct negotiations. And it has sent a loud and accurate message to the Israelis that they can never trust the UN. This biased obsession is not the path to peace. It is the path to an endless stalemate.

Today is my last time addressing this monthly session as the United States Ambassador. Because it is, I’m going to deviate from my practice of the last two years. Today, I will directly address the Israel-Palestinian issue. Given my record, some may mistakenly conclude that I am unsympathetic to the Palestinian people. Nothing could be further from the truth. Here’s how I see it.

Israel is a thriving, strong, prosperous country. It has always wanted peace with its neighbors. It has clearly demonstrated its willingness to make big sacrifices for peace, including giving up large areas of land. But Israel will not make a peace agreement at just any price, and it shouldn’t. No UN resolutions, anti-Semitic boycotts, or terrorist threats will ever change that. Throughout its existence, and even today, Israel has been surrounded by threats to its security. It would be foolish for it to make a deal that weakened its security. And yet, even in the face of constant threats, Israel has become one of the leading nations in the world. Israel wants a peace agreement, but it doesn’t need one.

And then there are the Palestinian people. Like the Israelis, they are a deservedly proud people. They too do not need to accept a peace agreement at any price. But the condition of the Palestinian people is very different. Economic opportunity, health care, even electricity are all scarce in the Palestinian territories. Terrorists rule much of the territory, undermining the safety of all civilians. The Palestinian people are suffering terribly while their leadership clings to 50-year-old demands that have only become less and less realistic. What awaits the Palestinian people with a peace agreement are the prospects of a massive improvement in the quality of their lives and far greater control over their political future.

It is time we faced a hard truth: both sides would benefit greatly from a peace agreement, but the Palestinians would benefit more, and the Israelis would risk more.

It is with this backdrop in mind that the Trump Administration has crafted its plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. I don’t expect anyone to comment on a peace proposal they have not read. But I have read it. And I will share some thoughts on it now.

Unlike previous attempts at addressing this conflict, this plan is not just a few pages, containing unspecific and unimaginative guidelines. It is much longer. It contains much more thoughtful detail. It brings new elements to the discussion, taking advantage of the new world of technology that we live in. It recognizes the realities on the ground in the Middle East have changed – and changed in very powerful and important ways. It embraces the reality that things can be done today that were previously unthinkable. This plan will be different from all previous ones. The critical question is whether the response will be any different.

There are things in the plan that every party will like, and there are things in the plan that every party will not like. That is certainly true for the Israelis and the Palestinians, but it is also true for every country in the world that has taken an interest in this subject. Every country or party will therefore have an important choice to make. They can focus on the parts of the plan they dislike. For irresponsible parties, that would be the easiest thing to do. Just reject the plan because it does not satisfy all of your demands. Then we would return back to the failed status quo of the last 50 years with no prospects for change. Israel would continue to grow and prosper. The Palestinian people would continue to suffer. And innocent people on both sides would continue to be killed.

The other choice is to focus on the parts of the plan that you do like and encourage negotiations to move forward. And I assure you there is a lot for both sides to like.

Ultimately, as always, the final decisions can only be made by the parties themselves. Israelis and Palestinians will decide their own futures. They will decide what sacrifices they are willing to make. And they will need leaders with real vision to do it.

But my friends at the United Nations – in particular my Arab and European brothers and sisters – will also play a very important part. You will face the same choice. The choice between a hopeful future that sheds the tired, old, and unrealistic demands of the past or a darker future that sticks with the proven failed talking points of the past. The world will be watching. More importantly, the Palestinians and the Israelis will be watching. Their response will be effected by your response.

To my Arab friends, I have heard privately from many of you. You’ve said that you know a solution is urgently needed. But your governments have not been willing to talk to your constituencies about what is realistic or to the Palestinian leadership about the harm they’re doing to their very own people. By taking the easy way, you are really saying that the Palestinian people are not a priority for you. Because if they were, you would all be in a room helping bring both sides to the table.

As for the American people, we have demonstrated time and again our commitment to peace in the Middle East. We will continue to offer our hand in friendship to the Palestinian people, whom we have financially supported by far more than any other country has done. The Palestinians have everything to gain by engaging in peace negotiations. But whatever it is that others decide, the world must know that America will remain steadfast in our support of Israel, its people, and its security. That is an unshakeable bond between our two peoples. And it is that bond – more than anything else – that makes peace possible.

My hope is that as soon as – I am soon to be an outside observer who has invested so much time on this issue – that we will not still be having the same conversation, the same old speeches, in years to come.

Thank you.