Remarks by Jason Greenblatt, U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations, at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Middle East

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Good morning. Thank you for your briefing, Nikolay, and thank you for your redoubled efforts to restore safety and security both to the people of Israel, who came under sustained attack from Gaza, and to the Palestinian civilians among whom Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad hid as they launched wave after wave of rockets. All of these innocent victims deserve better. The families of the four Israelis who died and the 200 Israelis injured, the Palestinian civilians killed and injured by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad attacks – they all deserve better.

It is simply unacceptable that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to target Israeli communities, including hospitals and schools, in a cynical attempt to extract concessions from Israel.

It is simply unacceptable that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to use civilians in Gaza, including children, as human shields.

It is simply unacceptable that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to siphon the scarce resources of the people of Gaza to build their terror arsenal, while preventing donor aid from reaching the people.

There will be no end to this suffering until all of us, together, say in public what I believe many of you are thinking: Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are to blame for the suffering of the people of Gaza.

Nothing can be meaningfully fixed until they renounce terror and cease their acts of violence and their vow to destroy Israel. When will the Security Council say this out loud? When will we clearly reject this terrorism?

As President Trump has said, the United States will always stand with Israel, and we will always support its right to self-defense. But we should not stand alone. We must all speak loudly and clearly and say that these attacks upon Israel, which are perpetrated by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, whether by rockets, incendiary balloons or other methods, must end.

I was just informed moments ago that Israeli firefighters are working to extinguish six blazes caused by incendiary balloons.

Also, the terrible suffering these attacks cause Israelis and Palestinians must end.

Every government has a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of its citizens.

The State of Israel, has faced since its birth, faced – and continues to face today – threats from enemies that call for its destruction and the death of the Israeli people. The State of Israel has no margin for error.

The Palestinians are also entitled to safety and security. A first step toward that goal is for us sitting here today to admit that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are the primary barrier to the dreams of those residents of Gaza who want to live in peace, raise their families, and find meaningful work.

Nickolay’s efforts on behalf of the United Nations, together with Egypt, have created a fragile peace in recent days. Qatar has sent funds which has eased some suffering. Keeping that fragile peace intact will require intense international pressure on Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

If that calm holds, I look forward to working closely with all of you, and with Nickolay and others to determine how we can best help the people of Gaza move past 12 years of suffering and deprivation, into a world in which they can imagine a real future.

On a separate but closely related topic – nothing stops us from undertaking now the hard work of ensuring that the Palestinians who receive UNRWA services have access to a more reliable and sustainable health and education services.

I thank UNRWA Commissioner General Krähenbühl for his briefing today, and for his work over the years.

But I’m afraid it is time for him and all of you to face the reality that the UNRWA model has failed the Palestinian people. UNRWA’s business model, which is inherently tied to an endlessly and exponentially expanding community of beneficiaries, is in permanent crisis mode.

That is why the United States decided that it will no longer commit to funding this irredeemably flawed operation.

The UNRWA model cannot provide to Palestinians what they deserve – a life where they can plan for their future and the future of their children, and one where they know whether schools and health clinics will remain open.

We did not come to this conclusion lightly. Since UNRWA’s founding, the U.S. has donated $6 billion. Let me repeat that: $6 billion – vastly more than any other country. And yet year after year, UNRWA funding fell short.

Year after year, budget shortfalls threatened essential services to Palestinian mothers and children. Year after year, UNRWA and other donors turned to the United States to make up the shortfall. And year after year, Palestinians in refugee camps were not given the opportunity to build any future; they were misled and used as political pawns and commodities instead of treated as human beings.

UNRWA is currently running on fumes, surviving on a surge in foreign donations in 2018 that is unlikely to be sustained this year, or in the future.

What happens when UNRWA’s bank account is empty again? We need to be honest about the situation.

UNRWA is a band-aid, and the Palestinians who use its services deserve better – much better. We do not have to wait until a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in place to address that fact.

For too long, we have dismissed the dismal situation of Palestinians in refugee camps as an unavoidable byproduct of the lack of a negotiated peace between Israel and the Palestinians. But nothing stops the international community from choosing to reach out its hand to Palestinians living in refugee camps today to address their very real everyday needs in a sustainable way, while we all continue to work toward a lasting and comprehensive peace.

We need to engage with host governments to start a conversation about planning the transition of UNRWA services to host governments, or to other international or local non-governmental organizations, as appropriate. The United States is ready to participate in that conversation. We tried to begin that conversation before we cut our aid to UNRWA. No one wanted to engage in that conversation back then. We remain ready to begin that conversation now. It is time to start.

We do not advance a comprehensive and enduring peace by ignoring the reality that UNRWA is unable to fulfill the mandate given to it by the General Assembly. We advance a comprehensive and enduring peace by making it clear that the international community is fully committed to providing a brighter future for today’s Palestinians and their children.

Palestinians have been held hostage for too long to UN resolutions, regional politics, donor fatigue, and weak leadership. It has been 70 years – three generations of Palestinians – who have suffered tremendously.

A similar number of Jewish refugees expelled from Arab lands shortly after the creation of the State of Israel also suffered tremendously. But there is a difference: those Jewish refugees’ needs for basic services and their desire to build a brighter future for their children were not held hostage to politics.

And it is time for the needs of Palestinians for basic services and their desire to build a brighter future for their children to stop being held hostage to politics. Do we not have an obligation to the Palestinians to make this transition?

Next month, in Bahrain, we and many others will participate in an economic workshop on an alternative path with the potential to unlock a prosperous future for the Palestinians. This is the first stage of a process that we want to begin to showcase what could be – how, if we can achieve a political solution to the conflict, we can also transform the lives of the Palestinians. It would be a mistake for the Palestinians not to join us. They have nothing to lose and much to gain if they do join us. But it is, of course, their choice.

I cannot but help point out the irony that at the time of our conference in Bahrain, which can pave the way to prosperity for Palestinians, UNRWA is hosting a pledging conference for a broken system.

The United States is committed to talking with others about how best to address the fearful uncertainty of UNRWA service recipients who aren’t sure whether schools or clinics will open and how we might help them actually build new lives, with or without a peace agreement.

But we’re also committed to resolutely standing by Israel as it addresses the urgent challenges presented by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad attacks from Gaza or elsewhere.

I approach this with humility. I acknowledge I have not brought with me today a solution – either to the acute crisis of Hamas’s violent and illegitimate rule over Gaza, or to the prolonged crisis caused by UNRWA’s inability to fulfill its original mandate, or any of the other challenges posed by this extraordinary conflict.

What we do know is that what we have today is not the answer. We do know that Palestinians and Israelis both deserve better. We do know that it is time to move past band-aid solutions and political assertions, into the adult world of hard choices.

The hopes and dreams of Palestinians living in refugee camps have been suspended for too long. So have the hopes and dreams of Palestinians living under Hamas’ punishing rule in Gaza. And so too have the hopes of Israelis who have lived under constant threats for decades and who yearn for peace.

This conflict is sad, and tragic, and complex on so many levels. But we must stop pretending that UNRWA and UN resolutions will somehow solve the conflict. They simply won’t.

Let’s work together to find a real cure. Thank you.