Remarks at a UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East

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U.S. Mission to the United Nations

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AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Mr. President. I would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his briefing.

The United States’ commitment to peace in the Middle East – and our commitment to advancing the vision of two states, living side-by-side, in peace – is unwavering. Many are rightfully frustrated with the lack of progress. We are too. We will continue to be steadfast in our support of efforts that will advance dialogue, advance peace, and advance progress; and we will oppose those that do not. Progress will be borne from hard choices made by both leaders to advance the cause of peace over parochial politics.

As such, we remain very concerned by the wave of terrorism, violence, and the utter lack of progress the parties have made toward a two-state solution. It is important that both sides demonstrate, with concrete policies and actions, a genuine commitment to achieving a two-state solution to reduce tensions and restore hope in the possibility of peace.

What we have seen on the ground, and what families like the Meir family present here today have experienced first-hand, is absolutely unconscionable.

The recent spate of violence, which has been going on for more than six months, has included stabbings, shootings, and vehicular attacks. Including, as the Israeli ambassador just noted, reports of a bus having exploded in Jerusalem. Acts of terrorism have taken too many lives, including Americans. The victims have included soldiers and civilians, pregnant women and mothers, Israelis and Palestinians. It must come to an end. Let’s be perfectly clear and unequivocal: there is no justification, there is no rationalization, for terrorism. Terrorism is terrorism. It is wrong. It is bloody. And it must stop. Anyone that aspires to achieve a viable and independent Palestinian state must understand that engaging in incitement to violence only serves to undermine this goal. Only a political outcome, not violence, will allow this goal to be realized. The United States has and continues to call on the Palestinian leadership both publicly and privately to do everything possible to combat all forms of incitement and to explicitly condemn terrorist attacks.

All perpetrators of violence should be brought to justice. And justice should be blind, it should be fair, and it should be equal. We remain deeply concerned about the shooting of a Palestinian assailant on March 24th in Hebron by a member of the Israeli Security Forces, and are following the legal proceedings against the accused perpetrator closely. We note that just today charges of manslaughter were brought against the soldier. It is critical that every possible effort be taken to show restraint, guard against unnecessary loss of life, and de-escalate tensions. In cases where anyone from any side acts outside the law, they must be held accountable.

As we have stated repeatedly, the United States strongly opposes settlement activity; it is incompatible with and calls into question the Israeli government’s commitment to two states. That is why we are deeply troubled that since January 1st, there have been a number of Israeli declarations of state land in the West Bank, including expropriating almost 600 acres south of Jericho and almost 250 acres south of Bethlehem. Just last week, the Government of Israel advanced hundreds of housing units in West Bank settlements in various stages of the planning process. Many of these units are located beyond the separation barrier, deep in the West Bank. These actions – the process of land expropriations, settlement expansions, and legalizations of outposts – are wrong and fundamentally undermine the prospects for a two-state solution. Similarly we are deeply troubled by the demolitions and evictions undertaken by the Israeli authorities in several locations throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

As we have made repeatedly clear, we continue to look to both sides to demonstrate with actions and policies a genuine commitment to a two-state solution.

Nowhere are Palestinians suffering more than in Gaza, where the slow pace of reconstruction remains concerning. The stranglehold Hamas wields over the population in Gaza forces the pace of reconstruction to stall further as the taxes it levies and its diversion of construction materials leave Palestinians in Gaza with much less than they would otherwise have to rebuild their homes, rebuild their communities, and rebuild their infrastructure. It was announced just today that the Israeli military discovered a tunnel extending into Israeli territory from Gaza 10 days ago. We all have an obligation to ensure that reconstruction materials are used for their intended purpose.

We remain deeply concerned about the humanitarian conditions in Gaza. The United States has provided an initial contribution of $43.4 million to UNRWA’s $403 million emergency appeal for its operations in the West Bank and Gaza. And we thank those on the Council and in the international community who have made contributions, but far too few have stepped up with resources. We ask others to join the United States in meeting these vast needs.

We note that the Government of Israel has expanded the Palestinian fishing zone off of Gaza’s coast from six to nine nautical miles, which we hope will help somewhat improve the livelihoods of Palestinian fishermen in Gaza.

And turning briefly to the political process, as the Quartet Principals jointly stated in Munich in February, the status quo is unsustainable and significant steps are urgently needed to stabilize the situation and to reverse negative trends on the ground. Both sides must demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to a two-state solution in order to rebuild trust and avoid a cycle of escalation.

And we believe that the Quartet’s upcoming report will help to inform international discussions on the best way to advance a two-state solution.

Turning now to the continuing horrific situation in Syria, we welcome the third round of intra-Syrian talks, which resumed in Geneva last week, and thank United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his efforts. As UN Security Council resolution 2254 states, “The only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people…including through the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent while ensuring continuity of governmental institutions.” This is the heart of the effort by the International Syria Support Group, and the process Special Envoy de Mistura aims to move forward in Geneva.

We are acutely aware that the Geneva talks and the situation on the ground in Syria are deeply interwoven; success or failure in one area intimately affects the others. The stakes are enormous. And certainly, on both the cessation of hostilities and improving humanitarian access, more can and must be done.

The cessation of hostilities is holding in parts of the country, and has improved the day-to-day reality of many Syrians’ lives in those areas. But violations continue; we remain particularly disturbed by the regime’s continued attacks on parties to the cessation of hostilities. These violations not only harm and kill Syrian civilians, but also place great strain on other parties to the cessation of hostilities, many of whom have made great efforts to show restraint. The regime’s behavior will only strengthen the position of groups like Jabhat al Nusra, who consistently try to undermine the cessation of hostilities. We continue to press the opposition to resist being drawn into violence as a result of Nusra and regime actions, and we have urged the opposition to maintain compliance with the cessation of hostilities. There must be a halt in the escalating violence in Aleppo and in other areas, including Latakia, Hama, and the suburbs of Damascus, where recent events pose a serious threat to the durability of the agreement.

To understand the human dimensions of violations to the cessation of hostilities, I want to say just a word about Dr. Hasan al-Araj, a respected cardiologist in northern Hama, who was killed in an air strike last week. As of today, there are very few doctors left in Hama and there are no cardiologists. Hearts that need care will have no one.

Once again, the Syrian regime needs to end the killing and the violence and it needs to do much more on humanitarian access in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Of the 4.1 million Syrians in hard-to-reach locations, the United Nations has been permitted to reach just 249,000 people this year. 249,000 out of 4.1 million – or a little more than six percent of those in hard to reach areas. The main reason for this is clear: the deliberate obstruction by the Syrian regime, including disputing the United Nations’ population figures, as a new mechanism to prohibit aid from reaching starving populations. The regime deployed this new strategy in the Damascus suburbs of Arbeen, Zamalka, Zabadin – as all three areas had been approved for assistance delivery, but were stalled as the United Nations had to renegotiate with the Syrian regime exactly how many people were in need of assistance. Instead of feeding people, they are forced to negotiate and renegotiate exactly how many starving people will be fed.

For those trapped in the besieged areas – where people are intentionally starved and maliciously denied access to international assistance – of the 486,000 people in 18 besieged locations, the UN has only been allowed to reach 12, and just 152,500 people. We must do better, and we must do so quickly as people are literally starving to death. As such, we commend the United Nations’ efforts and the recent successful airlift of food supplies for the some 4,000 residents in Deir al Zour, under besiegement by Daesh, while noting the remaining challenge to address the needs of all 200,000 in the city. We also hope that the recent UN trip to Daraya will lead to immediate assistance delivery to its people, people who have not received one crumb of aid since 2012. The world is witnessing an intentional massive starvation campaign in real-time. All actors, including the regime need to allow food to reach people who are literally dying for it. We once again call on the Syrian regime to comply with international law, including Security Council resolution 2254, and the demands of the international community to allow assistance to reach all Syrians in need.

The next steps in Syria are as urgent as they are clear: there must be a permanent cessation of hostilities, full humanitarian access, an end to the violence, and all Member States must support the political transition in Syria.

Thank you, Mr. President.