

# The United Nations, Israel and the Peace Process

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First allow me to thank the Israel Council on Foreign Relations for providing me the opportunity to address you here today. And let me thank you all for your interest in the United Nations and its work in the region.

I was appointed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon a little more than a year ago to be his Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. My duties consist by and large of leading the multifaceted UN efforts aimed at promoting a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as peace between Israel and all its Arab neighbors, including Syria and Lebanon. My mandate, in other words, is to oversee UN efforts aimed at fulfilling all of the relevant Security Council resolutions pertaining to this conflict, including 242, 338, 1397, 1515 and most recently 1850 and 1860.

I can only describe it as an interesting job. On any given day, I will be speaking with counterparts in Ramallah, Tel Aviv or Jerusalem; in the field in Nablus, Hebron, Jenin, Gaza or Sderot; on the road to Amman, Damascus, Cairo or Beirut; briefing the UN Security Council; or attending a meeting of the Middle East Quartet—that is, the UN Secretary-General, the United States, the European Union and Russia, together with Quartet Envoy Tony Blair. I returned this weekend from New York, where I briefed the Security Council, and from Washington, where I met with American colleagues in the new administration.

In all my work, I feel it is my duty to be acutely aware of the fears, concerns, hopes and aspirations of both peoples, and to do all I can to help them reconcile through negotiations and international support, on a basis that is acceptable and legitimate for the parties and the world community.

For Israelis, security remains the primary concern. In the context of a two-state formula, this means a Palestinian state that is a security partner, and a regional peace that truly signifies an end of conflict and a normalization of Israel's place in the region, within secure and recognized borders. For Palestinians, the primary issue is national self-determination and an end of an occupation that began over

forty years ago. They seek an independent and viable state in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and a just and agreed solution to the refugee issue.

These two aspirations are not only compatible—they are interdependent, as more and more Israeli leaders have come to recognize. Israel won't have lasting security without a viable Palestinian state, and Palestinians won't have a viable state without Israeli security. I do not intend here to debate the merits of the two-state solution, because it seems self-evident to me, and to all realistic people I talk to on both sides of the divide, that it remains the only viable future for both peoples. Instead, let us take stock of where we are today, and how to move forward toward the two-state solution in the period ahead.

Even if these aspirations are compatible, as I firmly believe, the picture in February 2009 is immensely complicated. Israelis and the world await the formation of a new Israeli government, after an election in which there was no clear winner. Palestinians are once again trying to address the problems of their own deep internal divisions. In the West Bank, Prime Minister Fayyad continues his impressive reform efforts, but these have not been accompanied by genuine Israeli moves on key issues like settlements. Last year's peace talks included important discussions, but they did not produce an agreement and are on hold. In Gaza, there is heavy destruction from Operation Cast Lead, a serious humanitarian situation and a sense of despair among the people, continued Hamas control, and we do not have a stable ceasefire, with rockets still being fired at Israel. Israeli–Syrian indirect talks have been suspended. The region faces deep divisions that manifest themselves in support for rival Palestinian factions and debates over the future of the Arab peace initiative itself. The uneasy calm along Israel's northern border was only this past weekend interrupted again. And there are, of course, broader regional and international challenges and changes to take into account. Foremost among these is the arrival of a new US administration, whose early signs of commitment to peace in the Middle East are extremely important and welcome. So what are the priorities in this complex constellation of issues, and how can we move forward?

Even as we await the formation of an Israeli government, the most immediate challenge is the situation in Gaza.

In the aftermath of the recent conflict, which caused heavy destruction and suffering in Gaza but has not stabilized the situation, the UN is leading efforts aimed at providing relief to the people. We are in constant dialogue with the government of Israel regarding humanitarian conditions and access into Gaza. While we appreciate Israel's stated readiness to address humanitarian needs, only

the most basic goods have been allowed in. Many of the limitations on access cannot be justified on security grounds. Moreover, there is a relationship between opening crossings and reducing incentives for smuggling. And it is clear, also from the experience of last year's calm, that an easing of the closure of Gaza is essential for any calm to hold, and to ensure that the socioeconomic fabric of Gaza does not unravel beyond all repair.

I had hoped to report last week to the Security Council that through the continuing good offices of Egypt, a durable ceasefire was in place between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Unfortunately, I was not able to do so. If a proper ceasefire is not put in place soon, we could find ourselves reverting to the dynamics of the past few years, which are inherently unstable and could lead to new outbreaks of violence and bloodshed. We need to get beyond two unilateral ceasefires and put in place a proper ceasefire regime, and I do not believe this effort should be further complicated by excessive linkage to other issues.

That said, once we achieve a ceasefire, it is clear that it is unlikely to be durable or long-lasting without real progress on broader issues. This includes the question of Corporal [Gilad] Shalit and Palestinian prisoners, continued cooperation to prevent the resupply of weapons to Gaza, the full implementation of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access so that crossings are properly open, and, perhaps most important of all, progress in bringing Gaza and the West Bank together under one legitimate Palestinian Authority headed by President [Mahmoud] Abbas.

It remains to be seen whether Palestinian reconciliation can be achieved, and it is right to be skeptical, given the deep nature of the disputes of power and ideology separating the factions. But I believe one Palestinian Authority is essential for the two-state solution to be feasible, and therefore, Palestinian unity is in Israel's interest as much as the Palestinians.

In saying this, I do not close my eyes to Hamas' actions or positions, many of which are deeply irresponsible. I have made clear my condemnation of the firing of rockets, which are terrorist actions that cannot be justified. Hamas does not serve its own people by refusing to accept certain basic parameters of the peace process, or by seeking to arm and re-arm through illicit smuggling of weapons. The division between Gaza and the West Bank, in the aftermath of Hamas' takeover by force in mid-2007, was a calamity. Hamas has to shift positions if a unity process is to work, as the Quartet has made clear.

I very much view unity as a process rather than an event. Egypt is beginning that process later this week by inviting factional leaders to talks in Cairo. Our hope is that the factions can agree on a transitional technocratic arrangement, based,

for instance, on PLO principles and in the context of a durable ceasefire, paving the way for new presidential and legislative elections. For this to happen, Arab governments need to create an environment conducive to the success of Egypt's efforts. The only alternative is the continuation of the status quo in both Gaza and the West Bank, which is not a long-term option, because Gaza will remain inherently unstable. Moreover, any political agreement struck amidst this deep Palestinian division will inevitably face deep challenges on the Palestinian side, so perpetuating the divide will serve no one's interest—including Israel's.

The situation in Gaza must not divert us from the overall political process or the challenges on the ground in the West Bank.

I commend the current Israeli government for pursuing negotiations with President Abbas and the PLO last year. Obviously, the next Israeli government should abide by Israel's commitments under the Annapolis process, including implementation of the Roadmap obligations and the pursuit of continuous final status negotiations on all core issues, without exception, as was reaffirmed by the parties before the Quartet in Sharm-el-Sheikh last November. We look to the formation of the next Israeli government and a resumption of negotiations.

In the current environment, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that on the ground, some significant progress has been made over the past year. It is a testament to the efforts of President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad that relative calm and security were maintained in the West Bank during the Gaza crisis. This has preserved the important law and order gains made in 2008. With international backing, the Palestinian Authority embarked on an impressive initiative aimed at providing increased security for Palestinians on the West Bank and meeting its Roadmap obligations to fight terrorism. A new culture of responsibility has swept through the PA, and its performance has won praise from many circles, including from within the Israeli government and defense establishment.

We are also seeing the Palestinians take their economic future into their own hands. Palestinian public finances are in order, and the PA has embarked on a comprehensive development program. This has attracted unprecedented levels of donor commitment and private sector interest, including more tourists and the participation of businesspeople in investment and trade fairs in Bethlehem, Nablus and Jenin. The PA is implementing hundreds of small but important projects throughout the West Bank, making a difference in people's lives.

These measures should give Israelis new confidence—and the determination to do more to help. All Quartet members are working to try to create a positive cycle of Palestinian performance and Israeli enablement. We need Israel's help. It is so

important that Israel work to empower its genuine partners on the other side. No Palestinian effort of self-empowerment will succeed if the weight of the occupation is growing heavier, not getting lighter. This requires action to lift roadblocks and, even more important, to freeze settlements.

When I raise the settlement issue with my Israeli counterparts, I am often told that Israel dismantled settlements in Gaza and it can do so again in the West Bank in the context of a peace deal. But Israel's obligation made solemnly to the international community by accepting the Roadmap and the Annapolis commitments is to do what the Mitchell report first identified all the way back in 2001: freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth, and dismantle outposts erected since March 2001. Just as we intend to fully hold the Palestinian Authority accountable for its Roadmap commitments, I believe we must do the same with Israel.

Every time I have briefed the Security Council since Annapolis on the process, I have been compelled to report settlement activity. According to one monitoring group, there was a 69-percent increase in the number of new structures built in settlements in 2008 over the previous year. The approach taken since Annapolis to secure implementation of Roadmap commitments to freeze settlement activity has not worked. This is a clear challenge that must be addressed.

You only have to place yourselves in President Abbas' shoes to understand why this issue is so important. As he seeks to negotiate a border, and to persuade his own people that negotiation is the route to statehood, Israel daily deepens and widens its footprint in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem. Every Palestinian knows this, because they encounter daily the checkpoints made necessary by the existence and expansion of so many settlements, and because they see the cranes at work on the high hills, creating facts on the ground.

Many Israelis say that they would like to see more direct engagement with the Arab world, and I understand why. I am fortunate enough to travel regularly in the Arab world, and I want to tell you as honestly as I can: Arab steps towards Israel are not likely to happen while no settlement freeze is in place, particularly as long as no border has been agreed between yourselves and the Palestinians. On the other hand, I do believe a genuine Israeli settlement freeze would greatly empower those in the Arab world who seek an active and creative approach to advancing the Arab peace initiative and fully welcoming Israel into the region in the context of a peace settlement.

This brings me to the broader prospects for regional progress towards peace and, in particular, the advancing of the Israel–Syria track. It is regrettable that this track has been put on hold due to the Gaza conflagration, at a time when

there appeared to be prospects for progress. This is another sign of the dangers of seeking military approaches over political ones. We continue to believe in the importance and potential of Israeli–Syrian negotiations, and hope that it will be possible in the year ahead to further this track alongside a reinvigorated Israeli–Palestinian track. Indeed, we believe that a comprehensive regional approach to peace is required if bilateral efforts are to bear fruit. This should be borne in mind as plans are finalized in a collaborative manner for an international conference in Moscow.

Let me close with a few words about the role of the United Nations in this process, and its relations with Israel. This is a big and complex subject, and there is a lot of misunderstanding about it. There are many different parts of “the United Nations,” but as the representative of the Secretary-General, I represent him. Sometimes the UN podium is used for totally unacceptable statements threatening Israel’s very existence, or even for peddling antisemitism—statements which the Secretary-General has condemned. Remember, people speaking “at the UN” don’t necessarily speak “for the UN.” In addition, the UN’s intergovernmental bodies often spend a great deal of time criticizing Israeli actions—sometimes with good reason, but often unfairly, and out of context. The previous secretary-general, Kofi Annan, as well as the current one, have spoken out against this phenomenon. But there is a lot more to the United Nations than this, and there are many areas in which a positive agenda is being pursued between the UN and Israel today.

Israel sends its citizens to serve in peacekeeping missions, and to work as UN staff members in humanitarian agencies. It participates as never before in many UN forums, including the General Assembly, once considered only a chamber of acrimonious criticism of Israel. For the UN’s part, the organization has issued landmark resolutions, including the long-overdue and historic resolution of November 1, 2005 marking a day for remembrance of the Holocaust. These and other measures were a first step in ensuring, as Kofi Annan put it, that “the fight against antisemitism must be [the UN’s] fight, and Jews everywhere must feel that the United Nations is their home, too.”

One of the largest concentrations of UN agencies and missions in the world is right here in your region. As special coordinator, I am tasked with giving guidance to some twenty-one humanitarian and development agencies operating throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Their work—aside from being a lifeline to the Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza where the needs are so large—is helping the Palestinian Authority build the institutions of a future Palestinian state. We therefore serve Israeli interests no less than those of the Palestinians. Likewise, UN peacekeepers on the Golan Heights and in Lebanon provide important buffers of stability in sensitive areas, pending political agreements. And my own office, UNSCO, along

with our partners in the Quartet, is working to unite the international community behind the effort to help Israel and the Palestinians achieve peace, which I have spoken about today.

There is a maturing relationship between Israel and the UN, and I believe it is in everyone's interest to build on it. We will reach the full potential of Israel's role in the UN as we achieve peace in the Middle East. For Israel's part, as a number of prime ministers have concluded, a decision must be made, and implemented, to end the occupation that began in 1967 and establish lasting peace with the Palestinians. With President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad extending the hand of peace, we all have a vital interest in ensuring that the path of moderation and negotiations can yield a Palestinian state.

This agenda must be carried forward with determination and creativity in the year ahead. Sometimes, in listening to the Israeli debate about the peace process, I feel that it lacks a full measure of realism, precisely because it lacks a sense of urgency. The window of the two-state solution will not remain open forever. The combination of physical and political disintegration of the Palestinian territories cannot go on indefinitely without the two-state solution becoming the major casualty. For Israel's sake, no less than for the Palestinians, I hope that the next Israeli government will take up this process with the determination to see it through.