



UNITED NATIONS

MEETINGS COVERAGE AND PRESS RELEASES

22 OCTOBER 2015

DSG/SM/910-SC/12093

Israeli-Palestinian Violence Rooted in Absence of ‘Genuine Political Narrative and Political Horizon’, Deputy Secretary-General Tells Security Council

The following is Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson's briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, in New York today:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, once again, entered a dangerous phase. The eruption of violence gripping the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as Israel and Gaza shows no signs of abating. From 1 to 21 October, 47 Palestinians and 7 Israelis have been killed. More than 5,000 Palestinians and some 70 Israelis have been injured.

We condemn, in the strongest terms, all attacks against Israelis and Palestinians alike. The recent wave of knife attacks and shootings is particularly appalling. There can be no justification for such despicable acts.

As he reported to the Council yesterday, the Secretary-General travelled to Israel, Palestine and Jordan where he met with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials and King Abdullah II. In all his exchanges he condemned and conveyed alarm at the upsurge in attacks and violence over the past two weeks, and offered his deep condolences to the people of Israel and Palestine. He also had moving meetings with victims and their families on both sides.

The Secretary-General's visit had a clear goal: to support collective efforts to stop the violence, reduce the tensions and incitement, and begin to draw a political horizon that can lead to lasting peace and security. President [Mahmoud] Abbas and Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu assured the Secretary-General that they are working to curb the violence, in particular through continued security coordination. Yet, while important, security measures alone will not suffice.

Let us be clear. There is no justification whatsoever for murder. That should not stop us from asking why the situation has deteriorated. This crisis would not have erupted, I suggest, if the Palestinian people had a perspective of hope towards a viable Palestinian State; if they had an economy that provides jobs and opportunities; if they had more control over their security and the legal and administrative processes that define their daily existence — in short, if the Palestinians did not still live under a stifling and humiliating occupation that has lasted almost half a century.

They see, instead, the growth of illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which undermines the very possibility of a two-State solution and poses growing security risks to the Palestinian population. They see the emergence of a parallel de-facto settler community, with better infrastructure, better services and better security than in Palestinian populated areas. With every passing day, their dream of real Statehood is becoming more elusive. Nowhere is the frustration and anger at the current situation more evident than among the young people.

The current situation also, understandably, sharpens a sense of fear amongst the Israeli population. Israeli civilians see the recurrence of violence as seriously threatening their personal security and their country's security. They are also alarmed over signs that anti-Semitism is on the rise globally. We must understand these Israeli concerns. Israelis see growing attempts in the international community at what they believe aimed at “delegitimization” of the State of Israel. When confronted with a climate of terror, Israelis rightly expect their authorities to enforce security.

Taken together, the failed peace initiatives and the reluctance of leaders on both sides to take the bold steps necessary to make progress will create a highly combustible reality. A reality in which Israel's security concerns remain unmet and the Palestinian national struggle risks taking on an ever more violent dimension; and this in a region already wracked by violent, religious extremism.

The Secretary-General condemned the setting ablaze of Joseph's Tomb last week in the West Bank by hundreds of Palestinians. This was a shocking act of violence with the potential to lead to reprisals affecting other Holy Sites. The sanctity of all Holy Sites must be respected, especially so as to deny extremist elements any opportunity to transform the current situation into a religious conflict.

Tensions at the Holy Sites in the Old City of Jerusalem continue to be a dangerous driver of the current wave of violence. This year, during the holy month of Ramadan — the most quiet in 10 years, by the way — Jerusalem welcomed some 3 million visits by Muslim worshippers from the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem. However, extremists on all sides have sought to disturb the historic status quo. Concerns among Muslims that this is under threat have been exacerbated by irresponsible incendiary statements. These have come from a number of sources and directions, reaching the point that many have become convinced that the Israeli Government plans to violate the historic status quo.

The Secretary-General welcomes Prime Minister Netanyahu's repeated assurances, most lately during his visit, that Israel has no intention of changing the historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. But, that message will only resonate if swift action is taken on the ground that demonstrates this public commitment. In this regard, we welcome the Prime Minister's decision to ban ministers and Knesset members from visiting the Holy Sites.

The Secretary-General encourages Israel and Jordan, in view of its special role as a Custodian of the Holy Sites, to act jointly and coordinate the necessary steps. This would be in line with their previous understandings to ensure that the historic status quo is preserved.

The shocking murders of the Dawabshe family in July and the lack of progress in arresting the perpetrators were another critical trigger of the current escalation. This incident reflects an increasing sense of critical exposure among Palestinians in the face of settler violence and reinforces their feeling of injustice. It is imperative that Israel take action to empower Palestinian institutions to protect vulnerable communities. It must vigorously address the perceived impunity for settler violence by expediting investigations and prosecutions of the Dawabshe family's killers.

The third factor perpetuating the fragile situation is the level of force used by Israeli security forces in countering some of the violence. A number of incidents, many caught on video and widely disseminated, call into question the degree of response, including the apparent disproportionate use of lethal force as a first resort. The Secretary-General has reminded Israeli authorities that live fire should be used only as a last resort, in situations of imminent threat of death or serious injury. It is their duty to ensure a prompt and independent investigation into incidents where use of force has resulted in death or injury, and to ensure accountability where there is evidence of wrongdoing. The Secretary-General is also concerned that Israeli authorities have resumed punitive demolitions, targeting the homes of perpetrators, or alleged perpetrators, of attacks against Israeli civilians and security forces.

Incitement is another factor significantly fuelling the situation. While the leadership on both sides have tempered their rhetoric of late, misleading and inflammatory public statements continue to surface from all sides. The vitriolic nature of the public discourse is alarming. Every incident that takes place evokes impassioned narratives and counternarratives that feed a vicious cycle of hatred and division.

Contrary to the shameful boasts by militant Palestinian groups, including members of Hamas, there is nothing “heroic” about the killing of an innocent man and the serious injury of his wife and two-year-old child as they walked through Jerusalem's Old City. Or the stabbing of a 65-year-old woman near a bus station in Tel Aviv. Or the killing of an Israeli couple while driving with their four children. This is murder, full stop.

Crimes like these risk perpetuating the current climate of fear and mistrust. We call on all stakeholders, including the Palestinian leadership, to unequivocally condemn the violence and stand up publicly against extremism and incitement. Failure to do so, on both sides, leaves the door open for extremists to aggressively promote their destructive agendas.

The first priority for all of us must be de-escalation. Let me emphasize again, as the Secretary-General did yesterday, that the violence is rooted in the absence of a genuine political narrative and political horizon. Each month we have conveyed to this Council the reality on the ground that is the backdrop of this latest outbreak. Efforts must be amplified from all quarters to restore Palestinian and Israeli hope that peace is still possible. We must urgently achieve real progress towards a negotiated two-State solution.

To do so, we must see significant change of policies, consistent with prior agreements, which will strengthen the Palestinian institutions, economy and security. This would help create the conditions for the parties to return to meaningful negotiations. We need to hear Palestinian leaders address sincerely Israel's legitimate security concerns and see them take steps to end incitement. To this end, the Middle East Quartet envoys must continue their outreach to regional and international partners to examine how they may contribute to a comprehensive resolution of the conflict. The envoys are planning visits to Israel and Palestine in the coming period.

In closing, Palestinians and Israelis deserve a future free from the fear of repeated new rounds of violence. Establishing the beginning of trust between the parties is key to overcoming the painful legacy of this conflict. The United Nations will continue to work at the side of Israelis, Palestinians and international partners to advance this crucial goal towards peace and reconciliation.

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