Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power at a UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East

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Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Secretary-General Ban, for your sobering presentation. Across the Middle East, we see trends moving in the wrong direction – of rising violence, of political leaders choosing conflict over peace, of innocent people paying the price as conflicts fester. Today, I will discuss those trends in the Israeli-Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian contexts and what we can do to help reverse them.

Let me begin with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We share the Secretary-General’s serious concern about the situation on the ground, especially the violence against innocent civilians. There is absolutely no justification for terrorism or for the taking of innocent lives. That is why we condemn in the strongest terms the unconscionable terrorist attack last week in the West Bank, where a 13-year-old girl, Hallel Ariel, was stabbed to death in her own home as she slept.

In recent months, there’s been a steady stream of violence on both sides of the conflict. On June 21, as we heard, a 15-year-old Palestinian boy, Mahmoud Badran, was killed when returning home from a night out at a water park in the West Bank, in what the Israeli army said was an accidental shooting. Shortly thereafter, clashes broke out at Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount during Ramadan. We offer our most sincere condolences to the families of Hallel and Mahmoud and all victims of senseless acts of violence.

Israel just announced the advancement of hundreds of settlement units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. If implemented, this would be the latest step in what seems to be a systematic process of land seizures, settlement expansions, and legalizations of outposts that is fundamentally undermining the prospects for a two-state solution. As the Quartet Report makes clear, this is not just about settlement construction – it is a broader process, which includes not giving permits for Palestinian development and demolishing the homes and structures of Palestinians. As the report found, the population of settlements has more than doubled since the Oslo process began in 1993. Settlement activity is incompatible with a two-state solution and counterproductive to the cause of peace. The report is clear that Israel should cease the policy of settlement construction and expansion, designating land for exclusive Israeli use, and denying Palestinian development.

The Quartet Report reflects our concern about the trends on the ground that that are imperiling a two-state solution, such as violence, terrorism, and incitement to violence; the settlement construction and expansion; and the political and humanitarian situation in Gaza.

We are concerned that continuing on the current course will make the prospects of a two-state solution increasingly remote and risk entrenching a one-state reality. The Quartet Report’s main objective is to provide a way forward to achieve the goal all on this Council share: a negotiated two-state solution.

That way forward requires both sides to take all necessary steps to prevent violence and protect the lives and property of all civilians. The Palestinian Authority should act decisively to cease incitement to violence and clearly condemn all acts of terrorism, and both sides must refrain from provocative actions and rhetoric.

Finally, the report rightly recognizes the challenging situation in Gaza and the threat that poses to the two-state solution. This includes the build-up of illicit arms and militant activity in Gaza, which must be terminated. The report also outlines in detail the very dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, with 1.3 million Gazans in need of sustained humanitarian assistance. The international community must accelerate Gaza reconstruction and assistance.

The report stresses the urgent need for affirmative steps to reverse each of these trends and calls on both parties to independently demonstrate, through policies and actions, a genuine commitment to the two-state solution.

In other words, the parties should take steps now to move toward creating a peaceful two-state reality on the ground. The Quartet Report provides a constructive path forward to help create the conditions for meaningful negotiations.

In Lebanon, the country’s politicians must show leadership and flexibility by electing a president in accordance with Lebanon’s constitution and National Pact. Two years of a presidential stalemate has hobbled the government at a time when the country faces profound security risks, as demonstrated by the recent suicide attacks in the village of Qaa. That’s why the United States is helping the Lebanese armed forces build the capabilities necessary to counter violent extremism and protect the Lebanese people – an essential effort that more governments should support.

In Syria, the Assad regime continues to attack civilians, besiege cities, and prevent humanitarian aid from reaching those whose lives depend on it. Even as the regime and opposition committed to refraining from attacks during Eid, the Assad regime violated this commitment by continuing attacks on Darayya outside Damascus, as well as in Aleppo and Homs.

The Assad regime’s attacks over the last week demonstrate its aim to encircle and cut off access to Syrians in eastern Aleppo, with potentially devastating consequences. A besieged eastern Aleppo city would represent the largest such population in the country – with hundreds of thousands of additional Syrians cut off from regular access to aid.

Russia, as a co-sponsor of the cessation of hostilities, should use its influence on the regime to help stop these attacks.

On the humanitarian front, more than 590,000 people remain trapped in 18 besieged areas. In most of these cases, the regime and its allies continue to deliberately obstruct access to Syrians in desperate need of food and basic medicine. The regime regularly challenges the UN on the number of beneficiaries who need assistance in these besieged locations – trying to argue that the UN should be stocking even less aid in its convoys.

The challenges to accessing these besieged areas remain immense. Take one example: the town of Madaya near Damascus, which is besieged by the Assad regime. The people of Madaya are dependent on humanitarian deliveries for survival; otherwise, they would be putting their lives in grave danger if they tried to leave to get food, medicine, or other basic supplies.

According to a report from Physicians for Human Rights and the Syrian American Medical Society released just today, Madaya is surrounded by approximately 65 checkpoints. The report explains that each of these checkpoints can include military personnel, snipers, and heavy weaponry. Between the town and these checkpoints, this report further notes that up to 12,000 landmines and a network of dirt mounds and trenches keep the town’s 40,000 residents trapped – that is one landmine for every three residents.

These conditions, needless to say, are not conducive to resuming intra-Syrian negotiations. Last December, this Council unanimously expressed support for Resolution 2254 for a Syrian-led political process that establishes credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian governance. Getting a genuine cessation of hostilities back on track is critical to this goal. The Syrian people desperately need a reduction in violence and sufficient humanitarian aid.

Let me conclude, Mr. President. In Darayya, another town outside Damascus besieged by the Assad regime, Fatima Lahham recently told a reporter about her seven-year-old daughter Maram. Maram is going deaf. So, while others run for shelter when regime aircraft approach the town, Maram “just can’t hear them coming.” When the special batteries in Maram’s hearing aids run out, Fatima, her mother, has noticed Maram won’t take the hearing aids out.

According to Fatima, she says, “No, they might make me hear!” Though a recent aid convoy allowed her to get a new set of batteries, Fatima is deeply anxious about what will happen to her daughter when they run out again in a few weeks. Now, when young Maram draws pictures of people running away from bombs, Fatima sees that “there’s a little girl who isn’t running away because she can’t hear.” These are the consequences for just one family of the Assad regime’s sieges. It is horrifying to think of what will happen if continued Syrian and Russian airstrikes could force another 300,000 people in and around Aleppo to endure the same fate.

Thank you, Mr. President.