**Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Middle East**

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AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General, for being with us today, as well as to Mr. Mladenov for his briefing.

We are meeting today in a forum that is very familiar to all of us. This session on the Middle East has been taking place each month for many, many years. Its focus has been almost entirely on issues facing Israelis and Palestinians. And we have heard many of the same arguments and ideas over and over again. We have already heard them again this morning.

It is as if saying the same things repeatedly, without actually doing the hard work and making the necessary compromises, will achieve anything.

Beginning last year, we have tried to broaden the discussion, and we have had some success in doing so. I thank my colleagues who have participated in those broader discussions.

One reason we did that is our well-founded belief that the United Nations spends an altogether disproportionate amount of time on Israeli-Palestinian issues. It’s not that those issues are unimportant. They are certainly very important. The problem is that the UN has proven itself time and again to be a grossly biased organization when it comes to Israel.

As such, the UN’s disproportionate focus has actually made the problem more difficult to solve, by elevating the tensions and the grievances between the two parties.

Another reason we have attempted to shift the discussion is that the vast scope of the challenges facing the region dwarf the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As we meet here today, the Middle East is plagued by many truly horrendous problems.

In Yemen, there is one of the worst humanitarian disasters on earth, with millions of people facing starvation. Meanwhile, militia groups fire Iranian rockets from Yemen into neighboring countries. In Syria, the Assad regime is using chemical weapons to gas its own people. This war has taken the lives of over half a million Syrians.

Millions more have been pushed into neighboring Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon as refugees, causing major hardships in those countries.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah terrorists exert ever-more control, illegally building up a stockpile of offensive weapons, inviting a dangerous escalation that could devastate regional security.

ISIS is engaged in an inhumane level of cruelty in much of the region. They’ve been dealt severe setbacks in Iraq and Syria, but they are not completely yet destroyed, and they still pose serious threats.

Egypt faces repeated terrorist attacks.

And of course, there is the terrorist-sponsoring regime in Iran that initiates and encourages most of the troubles I just outlined.

These immense security and humanitarian challenges throughout the region should occupy more of our attention, rather than having us sit here month after month and use the most democratic country in the Middle East as a scapegoat for the region’s problems.

But here we go again.

I do not mean to suggest that there is no suffering in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both sides have suffered greatly. So many innocent Israelis have been killed or injured by suicide bombings, stabbings, and other sickening terrorist attacks. Israel has been forced to live under constant security threats like virtually no other country in the world. It should not have to live that way.

And yet, Israel has overcome those burdens. It is a thriving country, with a vibrant economy that contributes much to the world in the name of technology, science, and the arts.

It is the Palestinian people who are suffering more. The Palestinians in Gaza live under Hamas terrorist oppression. I can’t even call it a governing authority, as Hamas provides so little in the way of what one would normally think as government services.

The people of Gaza live in truly awful conditions, while their Hamas rulers put their resources into building terror tunnels and rockets. The Palestinians in the West Bank also suffer greatly. Too many have died, and too much potential has been lost in this conflict.

We are joined here today by Palestinian Authority President Abbas. I’m sorry he declined to stay in the chamber to hear the remarks of others. Even though he has left the room, I will address the balance of my remarks to him.

President Abbas, when the new American administration came into the office last January, we did so against the fresh backdrop of the passage of Security Council Resolution 2334.

In the waning days of the previous American administration, the United States made a serious error in allowing that resolution to pass. Resolution 2334 was wrong on many levels. I am not going to get into the substance now.

But beyond the substance, perhaps its biggest flaw was that it encouraged the false notion that Israel can be pushed into a deal that undermines its vital interests, damaging the prospects for peace by increasing mistrust between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

In the last year, the United States has worked to repair that damage. At the UN, I have opposed the bias against Israel, as any ally should do.

But that does not mean I or our administration is against the Palestinian people. Just the opposite is true. We recognize the suffering of the Palestinian people, as I have recognized here today.

I sit here today offering the outstretched hand of the United States to the Palestinian people in the cause of peace. We are fully prepared to look to a future of prosperity and co-existence. We welcome you as the leader of the Palestinian people here today.

But I will decline the advice I was recently given by your top negotiator, Saeb Erekat. I will not shut up. Rather, I will respectfully speak some hard truths.

The Palestinian leadership has a choice to make between two different paths. There is the path of absolutist demands, hateful rhetoric, and incitement to violence. That path has led, and will continue to lead, to nothing but hardship for the Palestinian people.

Or, there is the path of negotiation and compromise. History has shown that path to be successful for Egypt and Jordan, including the transfer of territory. That path remains open to the Palestinian leadership, if only it is courageous enough to take it.

The United States knows the Palestinian leadership was very unhappy with the decision to move our embassy to Jerusalem. You don’t have to like that decision. You don’t have to praise it. You don’t even have to accept it. But know this: that decision will not change.

So once again, you must choose between two paths. You can choose to denounce the United States, reject the U.S. role in peace talks, and pursue punitive measures against Israel in international forums like the UN. I assure you that path will get the Palestinian people exactly nowhere toward the achievement of their aspirations.

Or, you can choose to put aside your anger about the location of our embassy, and move forward with us toward a negotiated compromise that holds great potential for improving the lives of the Palestinian people.

Putting forward old talking points and entrenched and undeveloped concepts achieves nothing. That approach has been tried many times, and has always failed. After so many decades, we welcome new thinking.

As I mentioned in this meeting last month, the United States stands ready to work with the Palestinian leadership.

Our negotiators are sitting right behind me, ready to talk. But we will not chase after you. The choice, Mr. President, is yours.

Thank you.