

ROBERT SERRY

United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process

SPEECH AT J-STREET CONFERENCE

**IMPLICATIONS OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS
FOR THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS**

27 February 2011

Thank you for inviting me to address this conference. I value this opportunity to speak to the J-Street conference because, like you, I think of myself as pro-Israel, pro-Palestinian, and pro-peace. As the only international envoy for the peace process actually based on the ground in Jerusalem, I am able to visit the whole region and have been following the latest dramatic events very closely.

The UN has been promoting in the last decade awareness to the need for fundamental change in the Arab world, with its series of Arab Human Development Reports drafted by experts from the Arab world. The people in many countries in the Middle East are now rallying courageously and peacefully to address many of the issues identified in these reports. This is all about attaining the human rights and aspirations the UN stands for! Now, even more than before, it is time to support – as the Secretary-General is doing – the non-use of force and respect for basic freedoms, and to ensure that any transitions are conducted on the basis of proper principles, including non-violence, political pluralism, and socio-economic empowerment. The Secretary-General has encouraged the leaders in the region to listen to the legitimate aspirations of their people. And if leaders like now in Libya resort to appalling violence against their own people, the international community must come together to find ways to stop the violence.

Yesterday, the Security Council voted unanimously a strong resolution demanding an immediate end to the violence and called for steps to fulfill the legitimate demands of the population. The resolution also referred the situation in Libya to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and imposed sanctions, including an arms embargo, travel ban and assets freeze. The Secretary-General welcomed the resolution as a clear expression of the will of a united community of nations against violations of international peace and security. Tomorrow, the Secretary-General will be here in Washington to meet with President Obama.

To be sure, democracy will not come overnight and it will require a path of reforms and building of institutions, but the tide of history cannot and should not be stopped. We must ensure that the legitimate rights of the people are addressed while their just cause is not hijacked by radical movements. Now is the time to encourage the forces that would lead to the creation of viable democratic institutions and socio economic development. One very good way to do so is by pushing forward the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. A breakthrough would widely resonate through the region, with very positive results. And conversely, the absence of hope for Middle East peace could complicate efforts to shape an agenda of positive change for the region.

Israelis are understandably concerned with possible instability in the region and of a scenario in which it will be surrounded by less friendly regimes. I understand Israel's security concerns. As you know all too well, in Israel one is never far from a frontier. Today, Israelis look north and see Hizbollah; south and see Hamas. If they look beyond their immediate horizons, they see a region undergoing the most profound changes in decades. They also see a regime further east – Iran – proceeding with a nuclear programme, which uses unacceptable and threatening language about Israel, and supports groups that would do Israel harm. I understand that Israelis want to be sure that if they make an historic agreement with the Palestinians, it will last. It must genuinely end the conflict, and not be reopened later.

In my view, Israel has a partner for peace. The Palestinian Authority leadership has in some ways been ahead of the curve of regional change, not behind it. Since mid-2007, the Palestinian Authority under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad has undertaken far more sweeping reforms than any other government in the region. Today, the Palestinian Authority is delivering on its security obligations in the West Bank. It is also growing its economy and delivering services to its people. The strong institutions now established represent the basis of a state-in-waiting.

But if the Palestinian efforts to build the institutions of a state are not matched by Israeli efforts and measures to roll back the occupation, the state building project is bound to fail. This is clear. The Palestinians must be given a territorial basis to build a contiguous state, otherwise the institutions they are readying for statehood will not be sustainable. This agenda needs more space to grow, both geographically and politically. In Hebron, for example, the city is in dire need for more land so it may expand, build houses and relocate its industrial area. Such land can only be found in area C, so this expansion is up to the Israeli authorities. Without serious progress on the ground as well as in the political track, the state building agenda will eventually lose credibility with a Palestinian public that sees little incentive of continuing cooperation with Israel, especially in view of settlement expansion.

Equally, we have to allow and help the Palestinians to give greater legitimacy to this project, by aiding them to overcome their internal divisions, and to seek the people's consent in both Gaza and the West Bank through democratic processes. The events in the region have made this even more pressing and Prime Minister Fayyad has called for exactly this. I agree with him that the absolute cornerstone for any viable way forward among the Palestinians must be a root-and-branch commitment to non-violence. We at the UN are also working with Israel to get its blockade of Gaza eased – and I can report some progress in this direction in the last six months. Most notably, we have been increasing the rate of construction of schools, houses and other priority infrastructural projects, in particular to address pressing water and sanitation needs. But much more needs to be done. It is not acceptable nor is it wise to punish the civilian population, including children, and drive them into a sense of hopelessness, due to the very real dispute that continues between Israel and Hamas. The violence emanating from Gaza—which saw a worrisome escalation last week—is unacceptable and the Secretary-General and I have repeatedly condemned the indiscriminate firing of rockets at civilian targets. On the ground we are actively trying to persuade all parties to refrain from violence, and we urge Israel to exercise restraint and avoid civilian casualties in its response. Protection of civilians in conflict is always a core UN concern. When requested, my office has also provided assistance to the ongoing efforts to secure the release of Staff Sergeant Shalit through the negotiations conducted by the German mediator.

The region's balance of power is changing, and not necessarily in Israel's favor. In a volatile region, Israel needs to find local partners, reduce its liabilities and exposure, and increase its international support. In my view, there is only one way to do this. It is to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Every other road leads to more international dismay and more Palestinian despair – and more empowerment of those in the region who thrive on the unresolved conflict.

As we contemplate this new regional reality, we must work to preserve past achievements – such as the vitally important peace between Israel and Egypt. We must also be aware that the region's dynamics could mutate in sinister directions, even though I believe this fear is unlikely if we can create genuinely pluralistic political processes in Egypt and elsewhere which enable the younger generations of Arabs to participate in shaping their nations' futures.

Let us imagine for a moment a Middle East in which Israel is not the only democracy. Peace, in this scenario, will have to be based on a wide acceptance by the people. Indeed, it may be more difficult to achieve. But if it is reached, peace based on popular consent could be stronger and “warmer” than the agreements we have seen in the region till today.

This brings me to another point I wish to make. The people have shown by their actions that they are alive to the shortcomings of their region's politics, and they are stepping forth to change it. They bring the same critical faculties to the peace process. It simply will not do to profess that you respect the Palestinians but you are prepared to destroy the Shepherd's Hotel in East Jerusalem. It does not hold water to say you want a two State solution but you are going to authorize 2000 new settler units in four months after the expiry of a partial settlement freeze, as Israel has done. It lacks credibility to call for negotiations on a final status agreement when senior ministers in the government call for the opposite. It is time to get serious. If we don't, everyone will lose – including Israel.

In situations where there is deep distrust between the parties, we cannot hope that they can rebuild trust simply by being told to sit down and talk. Something more is required. I am convinced that the United States' commitment to the peace process is deep and strong. And the Quartet embodies a strong international consensus and commitment to advance the two-state solution. The UN sees this task very seriously; in its actions on the ground and in the active role it takes in the Quartet alongside the EU, Russia and the US. However, to date I do not believe we have responded to the challenge of peacemaking with sufficient content and credibility. Given the situation in the region, it is all the more urgent and crucial that we engage the parties in serious talks including on substance and support them in finding ways back to the negotiating table. I also believe that there should be a readiness to offer more concrete suggestions for those negotiations, if that is what it takes to enable decisive progress toward peace.

At their last meeting in Munich on 5 February, Quartet Principals agreed to step up their efforts and mandated its Envoys (my level) to seek meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators and discuss with them separately how to bring about the resumption of negotiations on all core issues, including borders and security. I hope these meetings will take place later this week in Brussels. And I truly hope that both sides will find the courage to bring serious proposals to the table and help overcome the current deadlock.

Thank you very much.