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Ending the occupation and establishing the Palestinian State

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OPENING SESSION

Keynote presentation by

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“THE PATH TO A PALESTINIAN STATE”

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this gathering. I am pleased to be here with you today, at the kind invitation of the Government of Turkey. As the Secretary-General noted in his message, we value Turkey’s contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East. I am looking forward to consultations in the margins of this meeting with Foreign Minister Davatoglu and other senior Turkish officials.

The title of this meeting stems from the government programme of the Palestinian Authority: “Ending the occupation, establishing the state”. I want to speak about that programme today in its proper political context, and talk about the path to a Palestinian State.

Of course I realize that the path to a Palestinian state has been long, winding, painful and, perhaps I should add: elusive, at least so far. The polls indicate that a majority of Israelis and of Palestinians continue to support a two-state solution. They know, however, that time is not on the side of peace, and that the longer the wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not healed, the harder it will be to find a permanent cure.

As the only Quartet Envoy permanently based on the ground, I am acutely aware that Israelis and Palestinians have increasing doubts that the two State solution is achievable. Many Palestinians doubt that Israel has the will or capability to rollback the settlement enterprise, end the occupation that began in 1967, and share Jerusalem. For their part, many Israelis doubt that Palestinians have the will or capability to confer the kind of recognition that Israel seeks, to ensure that commitments to peace and security will be kept, and put a permanent end to the conflict.

Each can point to evidence which backs up their claims. Palestinians see the illegal barrier and settlements encircling Jerusalem and say that this speaks louder than any Israeli claims that they are prepared to end occupation and make the agreements needed for peace. Israelis look at the aftermath of their withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 and say that this demonstrates the danger of leaving territory unless there are real guarantees that they will not become sources of greater threat.

So many have come to doubt the feasibility of a two state solution and the challenges are enormous. But let me say at the outset that, at least for the foreseeable future, there is simply no alternative to the two state solution. For Palestinians the two state solution is the only political way forward to genuine national self-determination and freedom, and the only framework to bring about the unity of the West Bank and Gaza, a resolution of the refugee issue and an end to the daily restrictions of occupation.

For Israel, the two-state solution allows it to keep its democratic character and its identity as a homeland for the Jewish people while gaining security and legitimacy in the region. Alternatively, as Minister Barak recently warned, it would risk to become an apartheid state that would have to make more and more compromises over the basis on which it was founded, and lose legitimacy in the world at large.

So how do we overcome a situation which is neither acceptable nor sustainable in the long run? How do we overcome the deep crisis of confidence and mistrust? How can we take the current situation – a continuing Israeli occupation with a heavy military and settler presence, a fragmented Palestinian territory, and a divided Palestinian polity – and start building from there? How do we build the *only* future that could work – a sovereign Palestinian State, uniting the West Bank and Gaza, with a capital in East Jerusalem, politically plural but with one authority and one security structure, at peace with itself and with Israel within secure and recognized borders, with a just and agreed solution for the refugees and their active participation in building the State of Palestine? How do we implement the vision of Security Council resolutions, which guide me and the entire UN system in its approach to the conflict?

In my view, five things are needed -- and without all five, we won't reach this goal: real negotiations, responsible actions on the ground, relentless Palestinian state building, effective crisis prevention and intervention in Gaza, and a comprehensive regional approach. On each, I see some cause for hope, but also plenty more still to do. Let me take each in turn.

First, negotiations. I am encouraged that, after many setbacks and delays, Israel and the Palestinians are now in proximity talks. The League of Arab States has given its support to the Palestinians for these talks for a four month period, and President Abbas' engagement in the proximity talks has been backed by the PLO. Prime Minister Netanyahu is the first Likud Prime Minister to openly commit to the two State solution and to state his readiness to discuss all core issues.

Both leaders in fact showed courage in reaching this point, prevailing over much skepticism and opposition on their own side. As leaders they each face multiple challenges, and on each side are powerful constituencies who will oppose the compromises necessary for peace. So their courage will be tested anew at the table. With the core issues presently under discussion in proximity format, the early challenge is to reach enough substantive agreement to transition to direct negotiations. It is important that the talks progress between now and September, when both the Israeli settlement restraint and the Arab authorization for proximity talks are set to expire. I urge the parties to engage in these negotiations in good faith, and to discuss the core issues in earnest.

It is natural that skepticism will continue about the ability of these talks to produce progress until progress is actually achieved. There are no guarantees of success. But it is guaranteed that without negotiations, there is no chance whatsoever of a breakthrough. I particularly welcome the fact that the United States is actively mediating these talks and has signaled its readiness to play a substantive role. All members of the Quartet are closely supporting these efforts and are closely engaged with the United States in the details of the process. I believe the international will and creativity exists to help shepherd the parties to an

agreement with an active third party role. The goal remains a comprehensive agreement reached within the coming two years, as stated by the Quartet in Moscow. I do not intend to speculate on what options would come on the table if this goal could not be achieved. It suffices to say that the status quo cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

This brings me to my second point: the need for responsible actions on the ground. As we have seen over the past 15 months, gaps in confidence undoubtedly remain, and at this fragile stage it is important that both parties adhere to previous agreements and obligations and in particular the Roadmap, to promote an environment conducive to successful negotiations. In short: stop doing negative things, and start doing more positive ones.

In the West Bank, the Palestinians should continue and intensify their ongoing security in accordance with the Roadmap. The recent reaffirmation by President Abbas of his commitment to combat incitement is important and welcome.

For their part, the Israelis have undertaken a settlement restraint policy in the West Bank. This has not stopped settlement construction, which is illegal and should be frozen in accordance with Israel's Roadmap commitments, but it has led to a decline in the amount of construction. There has also been a gradual easing of closures in the West Bank and a reduction in the number of obstacles to movement. But much more now needs to be done.

I am particularly concerned about the recent rise in violence from extremist settlers. The burning of mosques or the murder of Palestinians by settlers is unacceptable. I welcome Israel's condemnation of these actions. But what we really need to see are adequate and sustained steps by Israel to enforce the law against extremist settlers. Both the Palestinians and Israel must act against extremists on their own side who seek to use violence.

In Jerusalem, where I am based, the need for prudence and responsibility is especially acute. We continue to bring to the attention of the Security Council every month, as I did last week, developments on the ground, as an essential component of monitoring the parties' performance. In Moscow in March, the Quartet declared that it would closely follow developments in Jerusalem in particular, and keep under review any additional steps that may be required to address the situation on the ground. President Obama has made publicly clear his intention to hold accountable either party for provocations during the talks. These are significant statements, and there is a strong sense of international purpose and unity behind them.

We saw an example of this at work after Israel announced plans to build 1600 additional housing units in the Ramat Shlomo settlement in March. Following strong international intervention, Israel has now publicly committed that there would be no construction in Ramat Shlomo for two years. Despite threatening statements, there have been no house demolitions in East Jerusalem so far this year.

However, there continue to be provocations, such as the recent beginning of 14 housing units in Ras Al-Ahmud, and the continuing activities by settlers in places like Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan. Continued exclusivist statements about Jerusalem, and affirmations of Israeli intentions to continue building settlements there, are deeply unhelpful. So is the continued closure of

Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, contrary to the Roadmap. As we recognize positive steps taken by Israel, let us also be clear that more needs to be done.

This brings me to my third point: the need for a relentless and creative pursuit of the Palestinian statebuilding agenda, the essential “bottom up” complement to negotiations. In recent years, we have seen a near transformation of the situation within Palestinian towns and cities in the West Bank, where, despite the occupation, the Palestinian Authority has delivered security and services, built new confidence in its finances and commitment to reform, and grown the economy.

These achievements, for which Prime Minister Fayyad deserves particular credit, have built new confidence among Palestinians and their international partners alike – and in Israel too, I believe – that there is a government that is delivering, and there is a genuine and able Palestinian partner for peace. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that, in the Palestinian Authority today, we have more than a partner – we have an active player. Both the Quartet and the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee – the key donor forum in support of the Palestinian Authority – have endorsed the government’s programme. Prime Minister Fayyad’s goal is to be institutionally ready for statehood in the second half of 2011, and in this he has the United Nations’ full support.

While this is clearly a Palestinian-led process of self-empowerment, I would like to emphasise the ongoing commitment of the United Nations to this agenda. UN agencies will continue to align with, and support, the priorities of the PA institutions. One way in which the UN is seeking to be a “force multiplier” of the Palestinian Authority’s agenda is to focus our efforts on areas like Gaza, Area C, East Jerusalem, and the “seam zone” between the wall and the 1967 line. For each of these areas we have set out a number of steps to support PA state-building efforts despite the political limitations. These steps include vital infrastructure and socio-economic projects, as well as a humanitarian response plan focusing on the education, water and shelter sectors. We are working to ensure the necessary financial support to these efforts through a joint PA/UN trust fund. We also count on the international community to help meet the financial requirements for recurrent budgetary support for the reform agenda.

We also count on Israel to continue and enhance its partnership in facilitating the institution-building endeavour of the Palestinian Authority. Ongoing security cooperation has been an important enabler of improvements on the ground, as have an easing of some movement restrictions. But much more can now be done to further ease movement, and also to enable Palestinian development and security efforts to expand to more territory where Palestinians currently live. This is the way for Palestinians to see that the occupation is being rolled back, not deepened; and for Israelis to see that the Palestinians deliver security for both sides when they have security control in Palestinian areas.

A major challenge to the agenda of negotiations and statebuilding is, of course, Gaza. This brings me to my fourth point: the need for a different and more positive strategy for Gaza. The multiple dimensions of the Gaza crisis – security, socio-economic and political – need to be addressed. No one pretends this is easy, and no one has the magic solution for Gaza. But it is

clear where a different strategy starts: with a fundamental easing of closure and an end to the blockade.

I see myself from visiting Gaza regularly and talking to a wide range of interlocutors that the current approach of blockading the Strip is as unacceptable as it is counter-productive. Those who gain from this approach are smugglers and militants who control illegal tunnel trade under the border with Egypt. Those who are disempowered are those who promote political moderation and legitimate commercial activity. And whatever Israel's concerns about Hamas, they do not make it acceptable to impose closure on an entire population, half of them under 18, for years on end, particularly after the kind of damage inflicted by Operation Cast Lead.

I can, however, report a small but important piece of good news. In March, the Israeli government agreed with the Secretary-General to facilitate the implementation of a number of priority projects in Gaza and to enable the entry into the Gaza market of a wider range of commodities. I was able to inform the Security Council last week that this package is now being implemented. Trucks have entered Gaza to complete a small water treatment project this month and to begin completion of 151 housing units by September. A key water treatment facility will be constructed in the period ahead. Wood, glass, and aluminium have been allowed into the market.

But let me be very clear: this is nowhere near enough. The UN, in close cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, is seeking larger and more strategic interventions to address needs in Gaza. These efforts enjoy strong support from Quartet and regional partners. We are in active dialogue with the Israeli authorities in pursuit of this objective. I intend to test Israel on its intentions. I believe we must move forward with urgency on several fronts:

- First, major water and sanitation interventions cannot wait. The aquifer underlying Gaza is collapsing, and is expected to be completely unusable within two years. The salinity of water available is reducing agricultural productivity, while raw sewage continues to flow at alarming levels into the sea – as bad for Gaza's neighbours as it is unacceptable for Gaza itself. The UN has already presented a full program of the work required in this sector.
- Second, UNRWA needs to build 100 schools in Gaza, starting with at least 15 straight away. The student population in UNRWA schools will have increased by 15,000 above the classroom capacity since the imposition of the closure in June 2007. Without new schools, UNRWA cannot meet a rapidly expanding demand for quality education for the next generation of Gazans.
- Third, there are key construction needs in the health sector, along with needs for additional equipment.
- Fourth, a significant increase in both the quantity and range of commercial traffic through legitimate crossings is required to restore market conditions. As we have seen with the recent imports of glass, restoring functioning market conditions is

the way to meet needs, lower prices, combat smuggling, and empower legitimate business activity.

As the UN pursues this urgent agenda, we are deeply aware that the underlying political questions must be resolved too. Hamas is largely holding a ceasefire but it does not de-legitimise indiscriminate violence against civilians. The early resolution of a prisoners exchange agreement would be in the overwhelming interest of both Israel and the people of Gaza and begin alleviating tension. Fateh and Hamas need to complete an agreement on Palestinian unity based on the principles of the PLO, as proposed by Egypt. A united Palestinian Authority must be in a position to support a negotiated two State solution and meet the commitments of the Palestinian Authority as it tries to build a Palestinian State. Continued division only plays into the hands of those who oppose the creation of a Palestinian State and continue to pursue violence.

Only last Sunday a group of armed and masked men attacked and set fire to an UNRWA summer games facility for children under construction on the beach in Gaza city. The Secretary-General condemned the action as an attempt to intimidate and harm the most defenceless in Gaza, and he called upon the de-facto authorities to ensure the safety of the UN's operations and allow UNRWA to go about its essential work unhindered. I wish to express my solidarity with UNRWA Gaza director John Ging and his staff working under very difficult circumstances.

I can only express the hope that, if we begin to make more meaningful progress in negotiations, if the state building gains further and further traction, and if we can begin to shift the dynamics in Gaza as I have described, that these three factors together will begin to bring Gaza – and Hamas itself -- into the fold of Palestinian, regional and international legitimacy. We give this message to Hamas directly, as do many others. But Hamas needs also to take steps forward of its own if it wishes to become part of the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

My last point is perhaps the most important of all: the need for a conducive regional environment and a comprehensive approach to Arab-Israeli peace. Let us be frank about this. Everyone needs to play their part in ensuring that regional dynamics help Palestinians unite on sensible terms, help the Palestinians build the institutions of a state, and help Israelis and Palestinians negotiate on all core issues. A partial Israeli or international approach to peace creates disincentives for regional players to be supportive. But equally, continued efforts within the region to undermine even fragile steps towards peace will make it harder for a comprehensive approach to be sustained. The search for Arab-Israeli peace must be inclusive and comprehensive and I commend Turkey for the important role it is playing in this regard. The Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese tracks, and indeed the framework provided by the Arab Peace Initiative, must be fully integrated into an overall effort for comprehensive peace, as recognized by the Quartet in Moscow. Everyone has to face up to their responsibilities in this regard.

Let me conclude:

After many setbacks and delays, we are entering what may be our last opportunity to reach a just, lasting and comprehensive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, based on the two state solution. As is clear from what I have said, the path to a Palestinian state is fraught with challenge, but it is still achievable. However, let us all realize that we do not have the luxury of

time. If, as I firmly believe, the two state solution is the only political way forward and ultimately in the best interests of both Israel and the Palestinians, the region and the world at large, we cannot afford to waste our time in the 24 months ahead. It is too late for yet another partial or incremental approach to peace.

That is why negotiations need to address the core issues and cannot be allowed to stagnate. Equally, the process must be sustained by positive actions on the ground – including in Gaza and Jerusalem, and in the further empowerment of Palestinian state-building in the West Bank. And we must ensure that these dynamics also begin to facilitate reunification among the Palestinians, within the framework of a regional and inclusive approach to peace. This is an ambitious agenda which should be vigorously pursued, because success is by no means guaranteed. The consequence of failure is only likely to increase the risk for the region to slide backwards into conflict.

Thank you.
