

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S WRITTEN INTERVIEW WITH AL-QUDS NEWSPAPER
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1) What is the purpose of your first visit to Palestine and Israel?

I have made several visits in the past to both, but this is my first trip as Secretary-General and I have been looking forward to returning. This trip provides me with an opportunity to engage directly with Israeli and Palestinian people and their leaders about the current situation and on the need to work together towards finding a long overdue peaceful resolution to the conflict. I am also here to convey the United Nations' strong commitment to the two-state solution. We stand ready to support and facilitate peace efforts that will bring an end to the occupation that began in 1967 and see the establishment of a viable, independent and sovereign Palestinian state, in accordance with all relevant United Nations resolutions and previous agreements, living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition with the State of Israel.

2) What is your position on the Israeli occupation and settlement enterprise in the West Bank and occupied Jerusalem?

For 50 years, the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis have been shaped by the occupation. The imposed restrictions impact all aspects of daily life. This situation causes enormous suffering and has fueled violence, incitement and retribution - which must be stopped, starting with the words and actions of leaders on both sides. The occupation has sent the message to generations of Palestinians that their dream of statehood risks to remain just that, a dream; and to Israelis that their desire for peace, security and regional recognition seems unattainable.

As my predecessors and I have repeatedly stressed, settlements are illegal under international law, and they are a major obstacle to peace. Expanding settlements, appropriating land for exclusive Israeli use and obstructing Palestinian development in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are among the key negative trends that erode the viability of a two-state solution and risk creating a one-state reality of perpetual violence. I have also always appealed to all Palestinian leaders to do everything to avoid violence and incitement. I commend President Abbas for his permanent clear condemnation of terrorism.

The choices to be made here are unequivocal, for the sake of Israelis and Palestinians alike. And I strongly believe that reason will eventually prevail.

3) You pledged to make 2017 a year for peace. How can this slogan be achieved here in this region?

No one wins today's wars or conflicts. They bring only devastation to civilian populations. The Middle East Peace Process has been stalled for too long; we have seen no progress on negotiations for over three years, as negative trends continue and trust between Israelis and Palestinians further fades. But I am encouraged by the most recent polls which show that public support for a peace agreement and a two-state solution remains strong on both sides and that this support would rise significantly if a genuine peace process were to be launched.

The 2016 Report of the Middle East Quartet lays out a clear analysis of the current obstacles to peace and recommends tangible steps that the sides can take in the short-term to bring us closer to a solution. In the absence of a political process and as a means to build conditions for meaningful final status negotiations, the sides can begin moving towards two states right now by changing realities on the ground in line with previous agreements and relevant United Nations resolutions.

The United Nations stands ready to help the parties to return to meaningful negotiations. While we cannot impose a solution, we can and must try to help Palestinians and Israelis take steps towards a just, comprehensive and lasting resolution of the conflict that would establish a Palestinian state. In this process, we also have a responsibility to help the Palestinian people to build the institutions necessary for independence. They deserve our full support. To them I have one very clear message: not giving up your quest for statehood, never give up your belief that peace can be achieved through negotiations and non-violence.

At the same time, a future Palestinian state must be able to deliver on expectations and promises. This requires making sure that the political continuum is nurtured and that democratic principles are upheld. It further includes a strong commitment from Palestinian political leaders to intra-Palestinian reconciliation which can pave the way for a democratic unity government politically robust enough to shoulder its state responsibilities. This sometimes requires bold political decisions. The current situation in Gaza resulted in a decrease of trust that needs to be overcome.

4) What is your reaction to what happened in Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque recently after Israel's attempts to make security changes in the mosque?

When the situation was unfolding, I followed the crisis very closely. Beyond the necessary political contacts, I asked Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov to visit the old city during the protests and speak to the Muslim religious authorities. The United Nations Security Council met twice to discuss Jerusalem. I made several statements reiterating my position that the sanctity of the holy sites to the three monotheistic religions must be respected, and that the status quo in Jerusalem must be preserved.

I welcome the efforts of all relevant parties during the recent crisis to urge restraint, reject violence, and restore calm. They prevented an extended escalation that could have been catastrophic for Palestinians and Israelis, for the region and beyond. I am hopeful that all parties can find solutions that balance legitimate security concerns with the need to preserve the status quo at the holy sites.

5) In one of your speeches, you reassured leaders of international Jewish organizations that you will confront any perceptions of bias against Israel within the UN. Are you still determined to achieve this?

I was referring to the actions of the UN Secretariat that is under my authority. It was nothing more than the reflection of the principle of impartiality required of the Secretary-General. This does not mean that the UN Secretariat will avoid addressing the critical issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation, or agree with the policies and actions carried out by the Israeli Government. The same applies to the Palestinian side.

6) Do you think the idea of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict still exists? Noting that the Palestinians and the international community warn of its erosion due to Israeli practices and measures on the ground?

I firmly believe that there is a solution and I remain convinced that this can only be through the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian state, living side-by-side with Israel in peace, security and mutual recognition. There is no plan B to the two-state solution. It is the only outcome that meets the legitimate historic and national aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians. The alternative is an open-ended occupation and perpetual conflict. I have come out strongly against any unilateral action that presents an obstacle to achieving this through imposing facts on the ground, and I will continue to do so.

7) The UN has suspended many activities in Gaza for financial and other reasons. What are you doing to address this?

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is extremely worrying. I have on several occasions stated that the devastating impact of the closures, combined with continued militant activity and internal divisions, threatens the fragile calm. Ensuring adequate living conditions in Gaza is a shared responsibility. Immediate action is needed to reverse these trends and prevent a situation in which Gaza becomes unlivable or in which we see another violent escalation with ruinous consequences.

Overall, the financial impact of shifting donor priorities in the region has added to the range of obstacles that humanitarian organizations, including the United Nations, face in their ability to deliver aid. Despite this, the United Nations continues to provide key services to the Palestinians in Gaza and serves as a lifeline for people there. UNRWA provides healthcare, education and other basic services. The Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, established with UN support in the aftermath of the conflict, has, to date, been vital in the repair the schools, hospitals, water and energy facilities damaged or destroyed in 2014, as well as the completion of some 40 per cent of totally destroyed homes.

The situation has become worse in the past months. Palestinians in Gaza live with less than five hours of electricity per day, hospitals struggle to function and the entire sewage system has stopped. The situation could have been worse had it not been for the diesel supplied by Egypt for the Gaza Power Plant. The United Nations is deeply invested in trying to improve the situation. Special Coordinator Mladenov, with the support of various UN agencies on the ground, spares no effort talking to all sides and attempting to create understandings that allow for an alleviation of the crisis. The United Nations is also providing emergency fuel supplies so that critical health, water and waste management services are available, and is working with other partners in the region to secure additional support for Gaza's humanitarian needs.

Gaza is an integral part of the future Palestinian state and I am concerned about the impact of the division that is continuing for more than 10 years now. All Palestinians should be united under one legitimate, democratic government.

Q8) What is your position on the continuation of the siege on the Gaza Strip?

It is essential to create the conditions for all people in Gaza to live dignified, healthy and productive lives in peace and security and that the current downward spiral is reversed. That requires immediate action by all parties – by Israel, the PA, Hamas and the international community – towards a more sustainable development, reinvigoration of Gaza's productive sectors, improvement of freedom of movement for both people and goods, as well as respect for human rights and international humanitarian law.

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