

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL

New York, 13 April 2018

[As delivered]

Mr. President,
Excellencies,

The situation in the Middle East is in chaos — to such an extent it has become a threat to international peace and security.

The region is facing a true Gordian knot – different fault lines crossing each other and creating a highly volatile situation with risks of escalation, fragmentation and division as far as the eye can see with profound regional and global ramifications.

We see a multiplicity of divides. The first is the memory of the Cold War. But to be precise, it is more than a simple memory. The Cold War is back — with a vengeance but with a difference. The mechanisms and the safeguards to manage the risks of escalation that existed in the past no longer seem to be present.

Second, the Palestinian-Israeli divide.

Third, the Sunni-Shia divide, evident from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. It is important to note that apparent religious divides are normally the result of political or geo-strategic manipulations.

Finally, a wide range of different factors — from opposing attitudes in relation to the role of the Muslim Brotherhood or the status of the Kurds, to the dramatic threats to communities that have been living in the region for millennia and are part of the rich diversity of Middle Eastern societies.

This multiplicity of divides is reflected in a multiplicity of conflicts with different degrees of interconnection, several of them clearly linked to the threat of global terrorism.

Many forms of escalation are possible.

We see the wounds of the Palestinian- Israeli conflict deepening once again.

The recent violence in Gaza has resulted in many needless deaths and injuries.

I repeat my call for an independent and transparent investigation into these incidents. I also appeal to those concerned to refrain from any act that could lead to further casualties and, in particular, any measures that could place civilians in harm's way.

This tragedy underlines the urgency of revitalizing the peace process for a two-state

solution that will allow Palestinians and Israelis to live in two democratic states side by side in peace and within secure and recognised borders.

I reaffirm the United Nations' readiness to support these efforts.

In Yemen, we are witnessing the worst humanitarian disaster in today's world.

There is only one pathway to ending the Yemeni conflict and addressing the humanitarian crisis – a negotiated political settlement through inclusive intra-Yemeni dialogue.

My Special Envoy Martin Griffiths is doing everything possible to facilitate that political settlement — and he will brief the Council next week.

In Libya, I encourage all parties to continue to work with my Special Representative Ghassan Salamé, as he engages in the political process with a broad range of Libyan interlocutors across the country to implement the UN Action Plan.

It is high time to end the Libyan conflict.

Iraq demonstrates that progress is possible with concerted local, regional and global commitment.

With the defeat of Daesh, and after overcoming the risk of fragmentation, the Government of Iraq must now focus on reconstruction, reforms and reconciliation. I hope the upcoming elections will consolidate this progress.

At the recent Paris and Rome conferences, the international community reaffirmed its support for Lebanon's sovereignty, stability and state security institutions. It is absolutely essential to avoid a new Israel-Hezbollah conflict that could inevitably result in many more victims and much greater destruction than the last war.

I reiterate the critical importance to act on key principles and commitments on Lebanon, including Security Council resolutions such as 1701, and the policy of disassociation.

The dangers of the links to the Syrian conflict are evident in the recent confrontations between Iran and Israel in Syria.

Mr. President,
Syria indeed today represents the most serious threat to international peace and security.

In Syria, we see confrontations and proxy wars involving several national armies, a number of armed opposition groups, many national and international militia, foreign fighters from everywhere in the world, and various terrorist organizations.

From the beginning, we have witnessed systematic violations of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international law *tout court* — in utter disregard of the letter and spirit of the United Nations Charter.

For eight long years, the people of Syria have endured suffering upon suffering.

I reiterate: there is no military solution to the conflict.

The solution must be political through the Geneva intra-Syrian talks, as stipulated in resolution 2254 of the Security Council, in line with the consistent efforts of my Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

Syrians have lived through a litany of horrors: atrocity crimes, sieges, starvation, indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, the use of chemical weapons, forced displacement, sexual violence, torture, detention and enforced disappearances. The list goes on.

In a moment of hope, the Security Council adopted resolution 2401 demanding that all parties cease hostilities without delay for a durable humanitarian pause.

Unfortunately, no such cessation of hostilities ever really took place.

That is the bleak panorama of Syria today.

In this panorama, I am outraged by the continued reports of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

I reiterate my strong condemnation of the use of chemical weapons by any party to the conflict and under any circumstances. Their use is abhorrent and a clear violation of international law.

The seriousness of the recent allegations requires a thorough investigation using impartial, independent and professional expertise.

In this regard, I reaffirm my full support for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons – the OPCW -- and its Fact-Finding Mission in undertaking the required investigation into these allegations.

The Fact-Finding Mission should be granted full access, without any restrictions or impediments to perform its activities. I take note that the Syrian government has requested it and committed to facilitate it.

The first team of the OPCW is already in Syria.

A second is expected today or tomorrow.

But we need to go further.

In a letter to the Council two days ago I expressed “my deep disappointment that the Security Council was unable to agree upon a dedicated mechanism to attribute responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria”, following the end of the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, or JIM.

I want to repeat today that the norms against chemical weapons must be upheld.

As I wrote in the same letter:

“Ensuring accountability for a confirmed use of chemical weapons is our responsibility, not least to the victims of such attacks.

A lack of accountability emboldens those who would use such weapons by providing them with the reassurance of impunity. This in turn further weakens the norm proscribing the use of chemical weapons and the international disarmament and non-proliferation architecture as a whole.

I urge all Member States to act responsibly in these dangerous circumstances.

I appeal to the Security Council to fulfil its duties and not give up on efforts to agree upon a dedicated, impartial, objective and independent mechanism for attributing responsibility with regard to the use of chemical weapons. I stand ready to support such efforts.”

Increasing tensions and the inability to reach a compromise in the establishment of an accountability mechanism threaten to lead to a full-blown military escalation.

In my contacts with you — especially with the Permanent Members of the Security Council — I have been reiterating my deep concerns about the risks of the current impasse and stressed the need to avoid the situation spiralling out of control.

Mr. President,

This is exactly the risk we face today – that things spiral out of control.

It is our common duty to stop it.

Thank you.

