

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
REMARKS TO THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL QUARTERLY OPEN
DEBATE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

New York, 20 January 2025

[as delivered]

Mr. President, Excellencies,

I thank the presidency of Algeria for convening this briefing.

The Middle East is in a period of profound transformation – rife with uncertainty, but also possibility.

It is clear the region is being re-shaped. But it is far from clear what will emerge.

We have a responsibility to help make sure the people of the Middle East come out of this turbulent period with peace, dignity and a horizon of hope grounded in action.

Mr. President,

I am just back from Lebanon, where I met with the Lebanese leadership along with the UN family, including our peacekeeping troops.

A new dawn is rising in Lebanon -- with a government hopefully soon in place where all Lebanese will feel represented, and a State that will be able to guarantee security to all its citizens.

The United Nations -- including the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon and UN Interim Force In Lebanon – is fully committed to supporting the Lebanese people on this path.

Despite enormous pressure, and with considerable risk, our peacekeeping forces stood their ground for peace to help deliver a cessation of hostilities.

Here from this Council, I want to reiterate my profound gratitude and admiration to the women and men of UNIFIL.

I also extend my deep thanks to the troop-contributing countries.

During my visit to southern Lebanon, I saw firsthand the dramatic human impact and destruction caused by the conflict.

Israelis were also victims, suffering loss and displacement.

I fervently hope all from both sides will soon be able to return to the areas where they lived and resume their daily lives.

We will do all we can to relieve the suffering and support recovery.

Mr. President,

I can report that the cessation of hostilities is fragile. But it is holding.

UNIFIL troops are undertaking vital efforts to nurture this process. They are working closely with the Lebanese Armed Forces.

It is vital that the Israeli presence in the south ends as defined in the agreement, and that the Lebanese Armed Forces are present in the totality of Lebanon.

In this regard, since 27 November, UNIFIL has carried out over 730 missions in cooperation with the Lebanese Armed Forces, facilitating their redeployment in more than 50 positions.

UNIFIL has also facilitated 39 humanitarian missions -- in coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces, the Lebanese Red Cross, various UN entities, and NGOs.

Our peacekeepers need strengthened capacities – including for clearing mines and disposing of unexploded ordnance – together with adaptation of the conduct of operations within their mandate.

Resolution 1701 is clear: The area between the Blue Line and the Litani River must be free of all armed personnel, assets and weapons -- other than those of the Government of Lebanon and UNIFIL.

The parties must fully implement resolution 1701, respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, and end the violence once and for all.

The UN will continue to support all efforts to transform the cessation of hostilities into true peace.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, at long last, the ceasefire and hostage release deal offer a ray of hope.

I commend Egypt, Qatar, and the United States for their steadfast efforts to secure that deal.

Yesterday, the first three female hostages were released as part of the first phase. Ninety Palestinian prisoners were also released by Israel.

While many challenges lie ahead, we should appreciate the long-overdue relief this moment provides for Palestinians in Gaza and the hostages reunited with their loved ones.

We are doing our part to ensure the rapid scaling up of humanitarian deliveries. More than 630 trucks with humanitarian aid entered Gaza yesterday, at least 300 of them to the north.

Mr. President,

I want to repeat: Nothing justifies the appalling October 7 terror attacks by Hamas. And nothing justifies the dramatic levels of death and destruction inflicted on the Palestinian people in Gaza.

We have been relentless in calling for an immediate ceasefire. The immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. And immediate action to protect civilians and ensure the delivery of life-saving aid to all those in need.

Now the parties must make good on their commitments and fully implement the deal.

I urge the parties to ensure that this deal leads to the release of all hostages and a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

For our part, the United Nations will do all we can to advance these efforts -- in particular, to scale up humanitarian aid across Gaza, fully aware of the significant obstacles, challenges and constraints that we still face.

Specifically, the ceasefire must translate into at least four simultaneous actions on the ground:

First, United Nations entities – including the backbone of our humanitarian response, UNRWA – must be able to perform their functions without hindrance.

The UN must have rapid, safe and unimpeded access through all available channels and crossings to deliver food, water, medicine, fuel, shelter, and materials to repair infrastructure across Gaza, including the north.

Other humanitarian organizations -- including local and international NGOs -- and the private sector must also have unimpeded safe passage.

Visas, permits, and other enabling conditions must be in place quickly to allow a surge of desperately needed relief.

Second, scaling up the delivery of aid and essential services demands safe conditions and a conducive operating environment.

We require the necessary technical, protective and communications equipment.

To do our work, the parties must coordinate with the UN system in a timely and effective manner.

This also includes the restoration of public order and safety to prevent the looting of humanitarian supplies.

Third, people must be able to access life-saving aid.

This includes medical evacuations for those who need it – and I urge Member States to take in those patients.

Sufficient commercial supplies must also be allowed to enter Gaza to meet the overwhelming needs of the population.

Fourth, and fundamentally, civilians must be protected, and those seeking to return to their communities must have safe passage.

Explosive ordnance must be removed. The recovery of human remains must be conducted with dignity and respect.

I urge the Security Council and all Member States to support all efforts to implement this ceasefire, bring about a permanent cessation of hostilities, ensure accountability, and create the conditions for recovery and reconstruction.

The international media must also be allowed into Gaza to report on this crucial story on the ground.

Mr. President,

We must seize the opportunity presented by the ceasefire deal to intensify efforts toward addressing governance and security frameworks in Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority has said it stands ready to assume its role and responsibilities in Gaza.

I urge collective support for the creation of security and governance arrangements that will enable Gaza to be re-unified politically, economically, socially, and administratively with the West Bank.

Regrettably, the situation in the West Bank continues to worsen – with clashes, airstrikes, and unabated illegal settlement expansion and demolitions.

I am deeply concerned about an existential threat to the integrity and contiguity of the Occupied Palestinian Territory of Gaza and the West Bank.

Israeli administrative changes over the past two years have streamlined and accelerated the settlement approval process.

As a result, control over many aspects of planning and daily life in Area C of the West Bank has been transferred to Israeli civilian authorities.

Senior Israeli officials openly speak of formally annexing all or part of the West Bank in the coming months.

Any such annexation would constitute a most serious violation of international law.

It is clear that greater stability in the Middle East requires irreversible action toward a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side-by-side in peace and security, in line with international law, relevant UN resolutions, and previous agreements, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

The United Nations will continue to support every effort to advance peace, stability and a more hopeful future for Palestinians and Israelis – and the broader region.

Excellencies,

Finally, with respect to that broader region, allow me to say a few words about Syria.

For centuries, Syria has been a crossroads of civilizations. Now it stands at a crossroads of history.

Following the fall of the brutal previous regime and years of bloodshed, there is a possibility of promise for the people of Syria.

We cannot let the flame of hope turn into an inferno of chaos.

The United Nations is committed to working with Syrians and the international community to support a Syrian-led process that ensures a credible and inclusive political transition, in line with the key principles of Security Council Resolution 2254.

I welcome the steps taken by Member States showing solidarity with Syrians.

But much more significant work in addressing sanctions and designations will inevitably be necessary, particularly in light of the country's urgent economic needs.

Advancing an inclusive political transition is the most effective means to ensure that Syria receives more support.

As Syria travels a new path and seeks to rebuild its institutions and political systems, we will support an inclusive process in which the rights of all are fully respected, and that paves the way towards a united and sovereign Syria with its territorial integrity fully reestablished.

Mr. President,

In Lebanon, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, and beyond, let us keep working for peace and security.

As the region is undergoing a profound transformation, we must spare no effort to help shape it in the form of more justice, dignity, human rights, and peace for all the people of the Middle East.

Thank you.

[END]