

The Secretary-General Mr. Kofi Annan

**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Tuesday, 12 December 2006

Let me start, Mr. President, by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to present my report on the Middle East (S/2006/956). We are happy to see you here, Mr. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs.

As I told the General Assembly in September, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just one regional conflict among many. No other conflict carries such a powerful symbolic and emotional charge, even for people far away. Yet, while the quest for peace has registered some important achievements over the years, a final settlement has defied the best efforts of several generations of world leaders. I, too, will leave office without an end to the prolonged agony.

The Middle East today faces grim prospects. The region is in profound crisis. The situation is more complex, more fragile and more dangerous than it has been for a very long time.

It was with this in mind that I took the initiative of preparing the report that is now in the Council's hands. My aim is to help us get out of the present morass and back to a viable peace process that will respond to the region's yearning for peace.

Mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians has reached new heights. The Gaza Strip has become a cauldron of deepening poverty and frustration, despite the withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlements last year. In the West Bank, too, the situation is dire. Settlement activity and construction of the barrier continue. Israeli obstacles impede Palestinian movement throughout the area. The Palestinian Authority, paralysed by a debilitating political and financial crisis, is no longer able to provide security or basic services.

Israelis, for their part, continue to live in fear of terrorism. They are dismayed by the inadequacy of Palestinian efforts to halt rocket attacks into southern Israel. And they are alarmed by a Hamas-led Government which is, at best, ambivalent about the two-State solution and, at worst, refuses to renounce violence and rejects the basic tenets of the approach to the conflict consistently favoured by a majority of Palestinians and enshrined in the Oslo Accords.

In Lebanon, the country's political transformation is incomplete, and its leaders face a campaign of intimidation and destabilization. As last summer's fighting between Israel and Hizbollah showed, Lebanon remains a hostage to its own difficult history and captive of forces from within and from beyond its borders that wish to exploit its vulnerability.

Casting our glance to other parts of the region, we see the Syrian Golan Heights still under Israeli control and concerns about Syria's relations with militant groups beyond its borders. Iraq is mired in unrelenting violence. Iran's nuclear activities and possible ambitions have emerged as a source of deep concern to many in the region, and beyond it as well. All of this feeds, and is fed by, an alarming rise in extremism.

Each of these conflicts has its own dynamics and causes. Each will require its own specific solution and its own process to produce a solution that will endure. In each case, it is the parties involved who bear the primary responsibility for peace. No one can make peace for them; no peace can be imposed on them. No one should want peace more than they do.

At the same time, the international community cannot escape its own responsibility to use its influence. The various conflicts and crises in the region have become ever more intertwined. Though deeply separate and distinct, the various arenas affect and shape each other, making conflict resolution and crisis management more difficult. The international community must develop a new understanding of the uncertainty engulfing the Middle East and then shoulder its full responsibility in resolving it and stabilizing the region.

I would therefore like to offer a few thoughts on what the parties themselves and outsiders — from the Quartet to this Council and other United Nations bodies — might do differently in search for peace, in particular peace between Israelis and Palestinians, which, while no panacea, will go a long way toward defusing tensions throughout the region.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the apparent inability of many people on both sides to understand the position of the other and the unwillingness of some even to try. As a true friend and supporter of both sides, I would like to address frank messages to each.

It is completely right and understandable that Israel and its supporters should seek to ensure its security by persuading Palestinians, and Arabs and Muslims more broadly, to alter their attitude and behaviour toward Israel. But they are not likely to succeed unless they themselves grasp and acknowledge the fundamental Palestinian grievance, namely, that the establishment of the State of Israel involved the dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian families, turning them into refugees, and was followed 19 years later by a military occupation that brought hundreds of thousands more Palestinians under Israeli rule.

Israel is justifiably proud of its democracy and its efforts to build a society based on respect for the rule of law. But Israel's democracy can thrive only if the occupation over another people ends. Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon acknowledged as much. Israel has undergone a major cultural shift since the days of Oslo — all of Israel's major political parties now acknowledge that Israel needs to end the occupation, for its own sake and for the sake of its own security.

Yet thousands of Israelis still live in territories occupied in 1967, and over a thousand more are added every month. As Palestinians watch this activity, they also see a barrier being built through their land, in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, as well as more than 500 checkpoints to control their movement, and the heavy presence of the Israel Defense Forces. Their despair at the occupation only grows, as does their determination to resist it. As a result, some tend to invest much of their trust in those who pursue the armed struggle rather than a peace process that does not seem to yield the coveted goal of an independent State.

I agree with Israel and its supporters that there is a difference — moral as well as legal — between terrorists who deliberately target civilians, and regular soldiers who, in the course of military operations, unintentionally kill or wound civilians despite efforts to avoid such casualties. But the larger the number of civilian casualties during these operations, and the more perfunctory the precautions taken to avoid such losses, the more this difference is diminished. The use of military force in densely populated civilian areas is a blunt instrument that only produces more death, destruction, recrimination and vengeance. And, as we have seen, it does little to achieve the desired goal of stopping terrorist attacks.

Israelis may reply that they are merely protecting themselves from terrorism, which they have every right to do. But that argument will carry less weight so long as the occupation in the West Bank becomes more burdensome and the settlement expansion continues. Israel would receive more understanding if its actions were clearly designed to help end an occupation, rather than to entrench it.

We should all work with Israel to move beyond the unhappy status quo and reach a negotiated end to the occupation based on the principle of land for peace.

It is completely right and understandable to support the Palestinian people, who have suffered so much. But Palestinians and their supporters will never be truly effective if they focus solely on Israel's transgressions, without conceding any justice or legitimacy to Israel's own concerns, and without being willing to admit that Israel's opponents have themselves committed appalling and inexcusable crimes. No resistance to occupation can justify terrorism. We should all be united in our unequivocal rejection of terror as a political instrument.

I also believe that the actions of some United Nations bodies may themselves be counterproductive. The Human Rights Council, for example, has already held three special sessions focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict. I hope that the Council will take care to handle the issue in an impartial way, and not allow it to monopolize attention at the expense of other situations where there are no less grave violations, or even worse ones.

In the same vein, those who complain that the Security Council is guilty of a double standard — applying sanctions to Arab and Muslim Governments, but not to Israel — should take care that they themselves do not apply double standards in In the same vein,

those who complain that the Security Council is guilty of a double standard — applying sanctions to Arab and Muslim Governments, but not to Israel — should take care that they themselves do not apply double standards in the other direction, by holding Israel to a standard of behaviour that they are unwilling to apply to other States, to Israel's adversaries or, indeed, to themselves.

Some may feel satisfaction at repeatedly passing General Assembly resolutions or holding conferences that condemn Israel's behaviour. But one should also ask whether such steps bring any tangible relief or benefit to the Palestinians. There have been decades of resolutions. There has been a proliferation of special committees, sessions and Secretariat divisions and units. Has any of that had an effect on Israel's policies, other than to strengthen the belief in Israel and among many of its supporters that this great Organization is too one-sided to be allowed a significant role in the Middle East peace process?

Even worse, some of the rhetoric used in connection with the issue implies a refusal to concede the very legitimacy of Israel's existence, let alone the validity of its security concerns. We must never forget that Jews have very good historical reasons for taking seriously any threat to Israel's existence. What was done to Jews and others by the Nazis remains an undeniable tragedy, unique in human history. Today, Israelis are often confronted with words and actions that seem to confirm their fear that the goal of their adversaries is to extinguish their existence as a State and as a people.

Therefore, those who want to be heard on Palestine should not deny or minimize that history or the connection that many Jews feel with their historic homeland. Rather, they should acknowledge Israel's security concerns and make clear that their criticism is rooted not in hatred or intolerance, but in a desire for justice, self-determination and peaceful coexistence.

Perhaps the greatest irony in this sad story is that there is no serious question about the broad outline of a final settlement. The parties themselves, at various times and through various diplomatic channels, have come close to bridging almost all of the gaps between them. There is every reason for the parties to try again, with principled, concerted help from the international community. We need a new and urgent push for peace.

The road will be long, and much trust will have to be rebuilt along the way. But let us remember where this effort needs to take us: two States, Israel and Palestine, within secure, recognized and negotiated boundaries based on those of 4 June 1967; a broader peace encompassing Israel's other neighbours, namely, Lebanon and Syria; normal diplomatic and economic relations; arrangements that would allow both Israel and Palestine to establish their internationally recognized capitals in Jerusalem and would ensure access for people of all faiths to their holy places; a solution that respects the rights of Palestinian refugees and is consistent with the two-State solution and with the character of the States in the region.

Reaching that destination is not as impossible as some might imagine. Most Israelis genuinely believe in peace with the Palestinians — perhaps not quite as the Palestinians envision it, but genuine nevertheless. Most Palestinians do not seek the destruction of Israel, only the end of occupation and their own State — perhaps in a slightly larger territory than Israelis would wish to concede, but a limited territory nevertheless.

Our challenge is to convince the people on each side that these majorities exist on the other side, while showing that spoilers and rejectionists are a distinct minority.

I believe that the fundamental aspirations of both peoples can be reconciled. I believe in the right of Israel to exist, and to exist in full and permanent security — free from terrorism, free from attack, free from even the threat of attack. I believe in the right of the Palestinians to exercise their self-determination. They have been miserably abused and exploited, by Israel, by the Arab world, sometimes by their own leaders and perhaps even, at times, by the international community. They deserve to see fulfilled their simple ambition to live in freedom and dignity.

The Road Map, endorsed by the Council in its resolution 1515 (2003), is still the reference point around which any effort to re-energize a political effort should be concentrated. Its sponsor, the Quartet, retains its validity because of its singular combination of legitimacy, political strength and financial and economic clout. But the Quartet needs to do more to restore faith not only in its own seriousness and effectiveness, but also in the Road Map's practicability, and to create the conditions for resuming a viable peace process. It needs to find a way to institutionalize its consultations with the relevant regional partners. It needs to engage the parties directly in its deliberations. The time has come for the Quartet to be clearer at the outset on the parameters of an endgame deal. And it will have to be open to new ideas and initiatives.

Tensions in the region are near the breaking point, I need not tell you, Mr. President. Extremism and populism are leaving less political space for moderates, including those States that have reached peace agreements with Israel. Welcome moves towards democracy, such as elections, have simultaneously posed a quandary in bringing to power parties, individuals and movements that oppose the basis of current peacemaking approaches. The opportunity for negotiating a two-State solution will last for only so long. Should we fail to seize it, the people who most directly bear the brunt of this calamity will be consigned to new depths of suffering and grief. Other conflicts and problems will become that much harder to resolve, and extremists the world over will enjoy a boost to their recruiting efforts.

The period ahead could well prove crucial. Every day brings defeats in the struggle for peace and reasons to give up. But we must not succumb to frustration. The principles on which peace must be based are known to all of us. Even the contours of what a solution would look like on the ground are well mapped out. I believe that we can break the current stalemate and make new strides towards peace.

The United Nations and the Middle East are closely intertwined. The region has shaped this Organization like no other. The situation, the people and the thirst for peace are all very close to my heart. I know that they are close to yours as well. As a matter of urgency, let us match that concern with concerted action.