**At the UN Special Session on Palestine**

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Last week I addressed a special United Nations Security Council Session on Palestine, invited by the president of the Security Council, UAE UN Ambassador HE Lana Nusseibeh.
My briefing focused on the importance of addressing Palestinian human rights. No concrete action has been taken to restrain Israeli behavior during the 56 years of the occupation, resulting in tragic deformities that have transformed both the Israeli and Palestinian political cultures. Israelis, operating with a sense of impunity, are increasingly hardline and racist toward Palestinians. Palestinians are rejecting moderate leadership, despairing of a peaceful resolution, and increasingly supporting violence as the way forward. Urging restraint from all sides, calling for negotiations, and reiterating support for a two-state solution isn’t enough. I proposed specific actions that member states can take, noting that:
“Actions, not statements, will contribute to restoring Palestinian hope, ending Israel’s sense of impunity, and empowering those Palestinians and Israelis who seek a peaceful future…Israelis need to know that there are red lines which, if crossed, have consequences. And Palestinians need to know that they are not alone, and violence is not the answer…Only after we’ve changed the political dynamic helping to cure the political deformities infecting both societies can a political horizon occur.”
Then, the UN Special Envoy on the Middle East Peace Process spoke, as did ambassadors representing the Security Council’s 15 member-states. Common themes emerged: condemnation of Israel’s announcement of massive settlement expansion and settler attacks on Palestinian villages, which many called acts of terrorism and incitement. Several envoys called attention to UNWRA’s dire financial shortfall and appealed for funding for Palestinian refugees.
The US envoy’s remarks were more direct than expected and roundly critical of Israel’s recently announced massive settlement expansion and escalating settler violence.
Instead of beginning the recounting of the current violence with the June 20th Palestinian attack that took the lives of four Israelis, the envoys from France, Switzerland, and Mozambique cited the June 19th Israeli invasion of Jenin in which seven Palestinians, including two children were killed. They noted that this assault violated international law and the principle of proportionality.
The UAE ambassador directly challenged Israeli officials who called for more settlements and the killings of Palestinians, referring to this as “dangerous and irresponsible incitement to violence.” Citing concern with Israel’s incursions into Palestinian cities and the recent aerial bombardment in the West Bank, she said, “Violence begets violence and security is ephemeral in the absence of justice, rule of law, and accountability.”
After the ambassadors spoke, it was clear that Israel was isolated for its behavior and the actions of extremist settlers. Undeterred, the Israeli envoy mounted a defense involving a bewildering contortion of reality. Beginning with a compelling personal story of a young Israeli girl murdered in a recent terrorist attack, he noted that no one had mentioned her, implying that the focus on Palestinians was somehow an insult to Israelis.
He then challenged the idea that settlements violate international law, incite violence, and are an obstacle to peace. The land, he claimed, is not “occupied territories,” but “disputed,” as there was never Palestinian sovereignty over that land. It’s “Judea and Samaria,” the ancient home of the Jewish people who have a legal and moral right to live there.
Palestinians don’t hate us, he said, because we build on this land; they hate us because they are taught to from birth. The source of the conflict, he insisted, isn’t what Israelis have done to Palestinians—the “cancerous hatred which has poisoned their minds…is the root of the conflict.”
The challenge before the UN member states is clear. The illegality of Israeli actions and the danger posed by increasingly out-of-control extremist settlers must be addressed by more than words. As the UAE ambassador noted, there must be justice, rule of law, and accountability. That requires more than statements of concern. It requires action.