

ISRAEL

SECURITY COUNCIL

Statement by:

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During open thematic debate on
“Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict”

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Mr. President,

At the outset, I would like to join my colleagues in congratulating you on assuming the presidency of this Council, and thank you for convening this open debate. We trust that under your able stewardship, you will aptly guide the work of this Council to deal with the various challenges the international community faces from around the world. I also wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Egeland for his report, and for his dedication to addressing humanitarian concerns across the globe over the past three and half years. We wish you much success in the future.

Israel assigns vital importance to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and is encouraged by the continued efforts of the Security Council and the Secretary-General and his staff in this area. We believe all individuals should live without fear of physical, sexual, psychological, and other forms of abuse stemming from conflict.

As Mr. Egeland said this morning, the international community must demonstrate it has a (quote) “a de-politicized, a truly shared interest” (end quote) to ensuring the protection of civilians. Efforts will be (quote) “judged by the extent that our actions have made a difference” (end quote). To this extent, Israel appreciates the emphasis in recent reports on protecting women and children, and believes continued grassroots efforts alongside greater governmental engagement can help end this deeply troubling phenomenon.

Mr. President,

In recent months, we have been reminded of the vulnerability and danger posed to civilians in our region by forces of extremism and instability, as evidenced by the conflict with Hizbullah in Lebanon this summer and the ongoing Palestinian terror war against Israel. We were reminded again that no side has a monopoly on victimhood or human suffering, and that the jagged shards of armed conflict can cut deep and wide, affecting all civilians – Israeli, Lebanese, and Palestinian.

Over the summer, Hizbullah terrorists operating in southern Lebanon fired some 4,000 katyusha rockets into northern Israel, explicitly targeting civilians in their homes and places of work. Hizbullah’s parade of raining rockets forced nearly one million Israeli civilians to flee their homes, causing insufferable damage to civilian life and infrastructure.

Similarly, the relentless Qassam rockets fired by Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip at Israeli communities in the south within the past year – more than 1000 rockets to date – were all direct and targeted attempts on the lives of civilians, attacks against schools and synagogues, kindergartens and classrooms, shopping malls and playgrounds.

The blatant disregard of terrorists for the value of human life is a brutal maliciousness we have seen even among their own populations. Hizbullah stored its rockets inside homes and launched attacks from positions nestled within the fabric of civilian life. In using civilians as human shields, Hizbullah sought to evade responsibility and accountability for its crimes.

Palestinian terrorists too have employed civilians as shields. Recently, Palestinian civilians in Gaza were specifically called to surround the home of a known terrorist. Human Rights Watch recorded the incident, declaring (quote) “Calling civilians to a location that the opposing side has identified for attack is at worst human shielding, at best failing to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from the effects of attack. Both are violations of international humanitarian law” (end quote).

The deliberate blurring of the distinction between terrorist and civilian is a terrorist tactic. It is a gross injustice that endangers civilians and betrays the principles of human dignity and life.

Mr. President,

It is the obligation of all nations, first and foremost, to protect their people from all harm. But it is also the obligation of all nations to ensure that they and their citizens not endanger others. It is this obligation which Israel embraces.

No doubt strategic and ethical complexities regarding counterterrorism exist; we have addressed Israel’s perspective on the issue when we last spoke before the Council on this subject. But in the quest to secure our world and protect all peoples, we must strike the proper balance. Failure to hold terrorist groups accountable gravely endangers the vitality of the human project, and will only encourage them to increase their abuse, manipulation, and exploitation of civilians.

Mr. President,

The ceasefire in our region, initiated and agreed upon by Prime Minister Olmert and Chairman Abbas one week ago, is a sign of promise for all citizens of the region – all civilians, no matter their nationality. But we must see to it as well that the underlying tensions of this conflict and Hamas’ disregard for its internationally accepted obligations – recognition of Israel, renouncing violence and terror, and abiding by previous agreements – be addressed.

The past few months have been difficult, with difficulties levied particularly on civilians. But the past cannot be changed, and the victims of the conflict cannot be returned. What remains is the course we chart together for the future.

Prime Minister Olmert reasserted this position in his remarks just last week. (quote) “All we can do today is prevent further tragedies and bequeath to the younger generation a bright horizon and hope for life” (end quote).

Let us hope all sides will keep to their commitments identified within the ceasefire, and that an authentic Palestinian partner will emerge from it, dedicated to this vision and cause of peace.

Thank You, Mr. President.