

Kingdom of Belgium

Speech by H.E. Mr Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve,
Ambassador, Permanent Representative

To the United Nations Security Council

**The Situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian
question**

New York, 22 January 2019

Mr President,

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank the Special Coordinator, Mr Nickolay MLADENOV, for his briefing and for the work carried out by him and his team.

Belgium supports the statement which will be made on behalf of the European Union. Mr President,

Since this is my first statement on this item as a member of the Council, I would like to underscore some points crucial for Belgium.

For Belgium, there is no other option than a negotiated solution based on the coexistence of two states, with the city of Jerusalem as future capital of these two states, in line with agreed international parameters. All of these parameters must be respected. International law and the pertinent resolutions of this Council, including resolutions 181 and 478 on Jerusalem as well as resolutions 1860 and 2334, must be the foundation of any comprehensive, fair and lasting plan for peace. It is only when Israel's security needs are met, as well as the Palestinians' aspirations for a sovereign state, that a just and lasting peace will be achieved. For Belgium, all credible diplomatic initiatives must be based on these parameters, which should enjoy international consensus. We call on all parties to demonstrate the political will to negotiate a solution sincerely, and to promote it on their own side.

My statement today will focus on international efforts to facilitate the two-state solution which is the only way to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians in a lasting manner. But Belgium does not lose sight, however, of the fact that this two-state solution requires an international, and in particular regional environment, that is peaceful, and this is a far cry from the developments

that we have seen in recent weeks, on which Belgium and the other members of the Security Council will need to state their opinion in the coming weeks.

In this context, Belgium reiterates the key role of the Security Council as the guarantor of any lasting solution, in line with its previous resolutions and in full respect of international law.

In line with our cross-cutting commitment to support respect for international law, I also confirm that Belgium will pay particular attention to respect for international humanitarian law and human rights.

Mr President,

2018 confirmed a trend started in 2017 of a relentless pursuit of the settlement policy, including in the heart of the West Bank, in areas that are strategic for the territorial continuity of a future Palestinian state. In this regard, I would like to express my deep concern regarding the decision to demolish the Bedouin village of Khan Al Ahmar. This decision has not yet been implemented, but is still pending. Settlement activity is also continuing in particularly symbolic sites such as the Old City of Hebron or Jerusalem, with increased pressure to evict Palestinian families, particularly in the Sheikh Jarrah and Batan El Awa areas of East Jerusalem. Belgium is also worried about the fact that ongoing settlement activity on the ground is being coupled with legislative initiatives to facilitate the spread of this settlement activity.

In line with resolution 2334, we are resolutely opposed to this settlement policy and the measures taken in this context, such as forced displacements, evictions and demolitions, which were also on the rise in 2018, particularly in East Jerusalem. Settlement activity is illegal in the eyes of international law. It also undermines the establishment of the necessary trust in any peace process, and it fuels tensions. We would urge the Israeli authorities to reconsider and revert their decisions in this respect.

Furthermore, we note, with concern, that there has been a worrying increase in the use of violence by settlers, but also towards settlers themselves. We would like to reiterate our firm condemnation of all use of violence, regardless of who the perpetrators are.

These developments bring us closer to a point of no return for the two-state solution, and diminish the prospects of peace that are already precarious between the two parties.

Mr President,

The situation in the Gaza Strip continues to receive our full attention. Demonstrations have become more intense in recent weeks, with violent incidents. However, while we recognise the right of Israel to provide for its own security, we condemn the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force. We would urge Israel to respect the right of the Palestinians to demonstrate peacefully and respect its legal obligations to protect civilians.

However, irresponsibly inciting the inhabitants of Gaza to cross the perimeter fence towards Israel to cause damage should not be tolerated either. We condemn acts of provocation and incitement to violence. Demonstrations must strictly remain non-violent, and must not be exploited for other purposes. We firmly condemn the rocket fire towards Israeli territory and we urge all stakeholders to demonstrate restraint in order to avoid a new cycle of violence.

I would like to draw our attention to the fate of the most vulnerable in this conflict. In 2018, 57 children were killed, most of whom in the context of the "Great March of Return" to Gaza. In none of the cases did there appear to be any imminent threat that could justify the use of live fire. We are concerned by this number, which is much higher than in 2017. Belgium would urge Israeli leaders to strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms, which must include, inter alia, in-depth and independent investigations for each child killed.

The humanitarian and socio-economic situation in the Gaza Strip must be urgently improved and we support the efforts of the Special Coordinator in this regard. All parties must ensure free humanitarian access at all times, also taking into account the gender dimension and the specific needs of women and girls. In this respect, I would like to acknowledge the indispensable role of the UNRWA, whose mandate and efforts on the ground Belgium continues to support.

But a humanitarian response alone is not enough. A fundamental change in the situation in Gaza is necessary, including the lifting of the blockade and a complete opening of crossing points, while taking into consideration the legitimate concerns of Israel regarding its own security. A political solution to the crisis also requires this territory being returned to Palestinian Authority control. An escalation of tensions between Palestinian factions is not conducive to finding a solution. We regret the fact that the intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks seem to be deadlocked, and we would urge all parties to invest in dialogue. To this end, we commend the efforts of Egypt. We take note of the dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council and express our concern at this development, since it is an elected body of the Palestinian Authority. We encourage Palestinian leaders to strive to build strong, inclusive, accountable and democratic institutions based on respect for the rule of law and human rights.

It is also crucial to ensure the effective and meaningful inclusion of women as equal and active participants. We would urge the Palestinian Authority to work

towards credible and democratic elections.

Mr President,

I would like to conclude my statement by repeating that there is no other solution than the two-state solution. It is only by meeting the legitimate aspirations of each party that lasting and fair peace is feasible. Recent developments show that the current situation is not tenable. Far from being the status quo, the situation is deteriorating and is creating an instability that the region does not need. We will continue to work along these lines, together with our Palestinian and Israeli friends.