Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary comments on situation in Gaza and southern Israel

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Dermot Murnaghan (DM)

: Well I'm joined now from Darlington by the Foreign Secretary William Hague and a very good morning to you Mr Hague. Now we know that the British Government has urged both sides to de-escalate this conflict. Given what we've seen and the comments we've heard this morning from Benjamin Netanyahu about being ready to significantly expand the operation, things seem to be going in the wrong direction.

Foreign Secretary William Hague (WH)

: Well yes that's right we're obviously gravely concerned about this situation. We are in touch with the Israelis directly, the Prime Minister spoke to the Israeli Prime Minister last night and I spoke to the Israeli Foreign Minister, also with the Egyptians efforts are going on to negotiate a cease fire, to come to an agreed cease fire, but clearly those have not been successful so far. We support those efforts. We call on Hamas again to stop the rocket attacks on Israel. It is Hamas that bears, as, as I've said before, the principle responsibility for starting all of this and we would like to see an agreed cease fire, an essential component of which is an end to those rocket attacks.

In the absence of that cease fire we of course are calling on all involved to de-escalate, to avoid civilian casualties and to abide by international humanitarian law.

DM

: Well in the absence of an end to the rocket attacks from Gaza do you unequivocally support Israel in its determination to stop those and if necessary by putting troops in to Gaza?

WH

: Well that of course is a different proposition and the Prime Minister and I have both stressed to our Israeli counterparts that a ground invasion of Gaza would lose Israel a lot of the international support and sympathy that they have in this situation, that of course it's much more difficult to restrict and avoid civilian casualties during a ground invasion, and that a large ground operation would threaten to prolong the conflict.

So we have made our views on that very clear to Israel just as we have made very clear our view that the barrage of rockets from Gaza on to Southern Israel is an intolerable situation for the Israelis and it's not surprising they have responded to that. But a ground invasion is much more difficult for the international community to sympathise with or support, including the United Kingdom.

DM

: From Israel's point of view it's about stopping, primarily stopping, those rocket attacks on Israeli citizens. And if they see the way to doing that is to get in there, to discover the weaponry, to find the route which it gets in to Gaza and to seal those tunnels once and for all, surely you must support them in that?

WH

: Well of course that is the argument and that is what they will be considering, but set against that Israel also has to understand the disadvantages of larger civilian casualties, of a more prolonged operation, of the impact on wider tensions in the region because we have not only the Gaza conflict going on at the moment but the appalling situation in Syria, rising tensions with Iran over their nuclear programme, so it's very important to see the full strategic context of this.

It's also very important to be able to get the Middle East Peace Process going again in a serious way in the coming weeks and months and it's important not to do things that make it even more difficult to do that. Because when we stand back from all of this, from the hour to hour news, what we really need is Palestinian factions to reconcile with each other, Hamas to turn away from terrorism, Israel to seize the opportunity of starting negotiations again and the United States and the rest of the international community to really make a huge effort in the coming months to push the peace process forward.

DM

: But do you detect the hand of Iran behind a lot of this, particularly in Gaza, as the Chief Rabbi seemed to be saying the other day?

WH

: Well there is, clearly a lot of weapons get into Gaza, hundreds of rockets have been fired at Israel just in the last few days, so a large quantity of weapons get in there. Iran of course is a country which we all suspect is a prime mover behind that and supplier of such weaponry and, and attempts to supply other weaponry. So yes there is Iranian involvement and, as I say, that's why in Israel, for Israel and all of us we have to keep the wider picture in mind.

This is part of a bigger picture in which it's necessary to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict and to resolve the important questions about the Iranian nuclear programme.

DM

: Looking at the wider picture, in particular at the Palestinian issue, do you think it would help reconciliation, help the Palestinians to the negotiating table, if they were given some form of UN recognition? As we know Mahmoud Abbas wants to try again at the UN.

WH

: I think it would be a mistake for the Palestinians to try at this moment, to try in the next few weeks to win observer status at the United Nations, that is what is now being talked about, because it would be so divisive among all the people whose help they need to get the peace process going. We need the United States, and I've made this point, we've made this point in the Government, to President Obama, to Hillary Clinton, my counterpart, to American senators, over the last few days, we really need the United States to show the strong leadership on the peace process that alone in the world can really bring the parties together in to, in to new negotiations.

And it would be a mistake to do things that make it harder for the United States to do that by pushing for recognition at the UN at this moment. That could get an adverse reaction in the US Congress, it could lead to Israel cutting off revenues to the Palestinian authority and to the almost to the collapse of that authority. So that wouldn't be the right thing to do today. We want to see a Palestinian state, we want to see one based on 1967 borders with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both countries with a just settlement for Palestinian refugees. But going to the United Nations at the moment is not the way to bring that about.

DM

: And Foreign Secretary the other big crisis in the region, you touched on it, Syria. You met opposition groups last week. Did you form the opinion that, one, they can be trusted, two, that the more moderate elements will prevail within them and, three, that they are actually now a cohesive organisation?

WH

: Well, well broadly yes to, to all of those questions. These are good people, I had a good discussion with them on Friday and they are people with the interests of their country and its people at heart. I think they are clearly much more cohesive than we've seen the opposition so far so that is a big step forward, this has been an important mile stone in developments in Syria. One of the things that Russia for instance has always said to us is, who do we

negotiate with on the other side? Who does Assad or the Assad regime negotiate with? Well now there is someone and now there is a coherent opposition.

So I will speak in Parliament later this week about our approach to them, I want to discuss it first of all with the other European Foreign Ministers who I'll meet in Brussels tomorrow but this is a big step forward and I think we'll be able to give them a lot more support.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-comments-on-situation-in-gaza-and-southern-israel