Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Calling for full respect of international law and dialogue in the Middle East

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Thank you, Mr President, and thank you for being with the Council once again and for convening this important debate. Mr Secretary, thanks to you too, for taking the time to join the Council today. And a welcome also to State Secretary de Michaelis.

Mr President, last year we commemorated the centenary of the end of the First World War that did much to shape the modern Middle East. Many of the conflicts in the region have their origins in the First World War and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The end of the First World War also led to the establishment of the League of Nations. This, in turn, laid the foundation for the United Nations and many of the conflicts that have wrought so much destruction in the region; from Syria to Yemen, Libya to Gaza, continue to feature heavily on this Council's agenda. The region's current trajectory is troubling and it is fraught with the risk of still further conflagration and conflict. Mr Biotti mentioned the difficulty of managing escalation in today's world. And while our efforts at multilateral solutions have not always worked out as well as we might have hoped, the alternative looks decidedly worse. Experience tells us that however imperfect, de-escalation and dialogue, political processes and support for the rules-based international system are the best means to address tensions that risk undermining our collective interests in security, stability and prosperity. We know this is true round the world. It's so true of the situation in the Middle East today. And that's why the United Kingdom remains a steadfast supporter of the UN and this Council's efforts to resolve international conflict.

Mr President, Secretary Pompeo, State Secretary de Michaelis mentioned the importance of regional efforts, and a number of members of this Council have in recent weeks - most recent been our Russian colleagues - mentioned also the importance of finding a way to address collectively some of the underlying challenges. This may well, Mr President, be an idea whose time is yet to come, not least because the region itself needs to be ready for such work. But we believe it's important that we look at an exploratory way at what might be possible and where we might start. One option might be to start with the most recent trouble spot, the Strait of Hormuz and to start serious, inclusive dialogue between regional international actors, as the State Secretary from Germany set out.

Mr President, Secretary Pompeo touched today on Iran's role in the region. My country has great respect for the Iranian people. We respect Iran's culture; it is an ancient culture and one that features alongside the great developments in classical history in Europe. We accept that Iran has a legitimate role in the Middle East and we accept that - like all of us - she has a right to self-defense. But we cannot ignore the fact that the way she pursues her national interests contributes to several of the regional problems we're discussing today.

When I addressed the Council in the 2231 format in June, I reiterated that the priority of UK policy towards Iran was to prevent Iran achieving a nuclear capability that would threaten the stability and security of the Middle East region and beyond. And as the German Representative set out, we continue to judge that this objective is best served by efforts to preserve the nuclear deal, the JCPoA. We urge Iran to return to full compliance with the deal. It is in none of our interests to see the deal unravel. It's an essential part of the global nonproliferation architecture and it is critical for our national security and for the shared security of our partners and allies. There is no better solution. There is no alternative.

The UK, with France and Germany, has been consistently clear that we will work to support the deal. We remain fully committed to the delivery of the INSTEX mechanism, ensuring that legitimate trade with Iran can continue. We continue to participate in core projects within the deal, including taking on the role of co-chair of the Arak Modernisation Project. And we welcome President Macron's efforts to find a way through to dialogue in close coordination with the E3.

Mr President, the JCPoA is not a license for Iran to roam free across the conflicts in the Middle East. Iran continues to support proxies across the region that undermine the regional security and violate this Council's resolutions, whether Security Council Resolution 1559 in Lebanon or 2216 and the arms embargo on Yemen. And we regret that rather than backing a political solution in Syria, in line with Resolution 2254, Iran has instead chosen to support Assad in pursuing a military solution, including through organising and sending sectarian militia to Syria, which has helped fuel that conflict. This pattern of Iranian behaviour poses a serious danger to peace and stability.

Secretary Pompeo mentioned that on 19 July, a British flag tanker, STENA IMPERO was boarded by Iranian forces while transiting through the Straits of Hormuz inside Omani territorial waters. The STENA IMPERO remains seized. As the Chef de Cabinet noted, it is imperative that we defend freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz to reassure the global shipping industry and to deter further attacks. This is not just the British aim, Mr President; it's in every nation's interest. And it requires the coming together of international nations to support maritime security in the Gulf.

I won't touch much today, Mr President, on Syria, because this Council has very many meetings on that sad conflict. But I will simply note that there can be no reconstruction

without a sustainable UN-led political process on the basis of Resolution 2254.

With regards to the Iranian vessel, Grace One, we have welcomed Gibraltar's recent actions and legal proceedings to implement EU sanctions. And these are in place to pressure the Assad regime towards negotiations. We understand that Iran has provided assurances to the government of Gibraltar that the vessel and its cargo will not go to an EU-sanctioned entity like Syria. Iran needs, Mr President, Iran needs to abide by these assurances.

In Idlib, we urgently need a ceasefire to prevent further suffering. And we need answers, Mr President, as to why and how international humanitarian law is being so flagrantly violated by the regime and its allies. And I want to recall, if I may, that such crimes confer individual and personal responsibility on the perpetrators. The violations also continue to create space for radicalisation and further extremism. And Daesh continues to pose a serious threat across the region.

In Iraq, we cannot take for granted the progress that's been made providing security and stability for the Iraqi people. The United Kingdom, alongside the international community, will continue to support the government of Iraq to ensure that the conditions that gave rise to Daesh are tackled.

Situation in Libya is in danger of deteriorating still further, and over the past four months, it's become clear neither side can win a military victory. The only winners of the current conflict are the terrorist and extremist groups who look to exploit the chaos and instability for their own ends.

As others have said, Mr President, the way forward is for the parties to comply with their obligations under international law and to commit to political dialogue and a lasting ceasefire. Likewise, a political solution is urgently needed in Yemen, not only to end the conflict, but to alleviate the immense humanitarian suffering. We urge the parties to agree the latest UN proposals to allow for wider political discussions. The concerning events in Aden highlight the need for an inclusive political process. And we welcome the initiative taken by His Majesty King Salman to resolve the situation.

Mr President, in the context of heightened tensions in the region, it's more important than ever that the Lebanese government and all Lebanese parties implement Lebanon's policy of disassociation from regional conflicts. We call on all parties to implement the relevant resolutions in full, particularly 1559 and 1701. For our part, Mr President, we will continue to help build the strength and capacity of the Lebanese state to resist encroachment by Hezbollah. We will help Lebanon achieve its economic stability, making swift progress on implementing the commitments made at the CDRE conference. I want to take this opportunity to commend UNIFIL's role in maintaining common stability along the blue line. But I stress at the same time the importance of enabling UNIFIL to deliver its mandate unimpeded. It is

unacceptable that UNIFIL is still unable to access Hezbollah tunnel sites in southern Lebanon.

Mr President, other speakers have addressed the question of a sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a Chef de Cabinet said, it's the longest running international peace and security issue here. For the United Kingdom, our position on the two-state solution remains unchanged. We urge the US administration to bring forward its detailed proposals for a viable peace agreement that addresses the legitimate concerns of both parties.

US efforts to support the development of the Palestinian economy are very welcome and it's essential that political progress is made in order to unlock economic opportunities. But as we've said in the Council before, until there is political progress, steps do need to be taken to address the constraints imposed on the Palestinian economy by the Israeli occupation. We want to see increasing trade opportunities for the Palestinians' external trade and we want to see the financial sustainability of the Palestinian Authority realised.

Mr President, only a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state based on 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as a shared capital of both states, can bring a lasting solution.

Mr President, I've concentrated today on the geopolitical and international peace and security aspects as the most immediate challenges that face us. But you, Mr President, and a number of other speakers, rightly drew attention to the vital importance of economic and social development, notably for women. And I share the importance of this area. But I do want to make clear it is not an excuse, though, for certain governments to divert funds that could better be spent at home on the very real things that help build the state into violence, persecution and adventurism.

You spoke about good governance, education and youth. I want to stress our new Prime Minister's interest in advancing girls education in particular. But it is also true that investment, equality before the law and rule of law are also fundamental. And Secretary Pompeo set out how the Warsaw process includes economic and public policy factors.

To come back to where I started, Mr President, we cannot see the countries of the Middle East exploit fully the opportunity to modernise their economies when we see this sort of pushback on women's rights, as the Chef de Cabinet mentioned. The current tensions and instability in the Middle East serve no one. I want to call again for de-escalation, for full respect for international rules and for engagement and dialogue through which the region can discuss its problems transparently and in the interests of the populations there who have suffered so much.

Thank you.

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