

Ms. Raemer:

I thank you, Madam President, for inviting me to address the Security Council today. It is an incredible honour, and while I speak to the Council representing the residents of the Eshkol region in Israel along the frontier with Gaza, my views and opinions are my own and reflect my personal experiences living in Kibbutz Nirim on the border with the Gaza Strip since 1975.

Has anyone here ever had to literally run for their life? When I hear the red-alert early-warning system for incoming rockets, I know that I have from 5 to 10 seconds to get to someplace safe, regardless of where I am in my little kibbutz house. From my kitchen, I can sprint to the safe room in about three seconds. If it catches me while I am in the shower, I am out of luck. There is no way I can jump out and make it to the safe room before impact without slipping. If I am out walking my dogs, I either throw myself down next to a wall or just lie down wherever I am, cover my head and hope that whatever falls does not fall too close.

Until two years ago, we did not have the Iron Dome system to protect us. Now we do, but that brings its own dangers of deadly, falling debris when it makes impact with the rocket. Every siren means that something — be it rocket impact or an intercept — will explode nearby, and, during the 11 rounds of escalated rocket fire that we have had in the past year and a half, there were numerous alerts every single day. One thousand eight hundred rockets were launched at our communities in the Eshkol region alone during that period — 1,800. What would anyone here do if that number of projectiles were launched over their country's border?

On 26 August 2014, on what was to become the final morning of the last major operation — Operation Protective Edge — my bedroom was invaded by deadly shrapnel from a mortar that exploded just outside and ripped through the walls. The electricity of our entire community was knocked out in that same barrage, which could have killed me had I been in my bedroom rather than in my safe room. And here I am, five and a half years after that bloody summer, speaking before this great international body, and nothing has changed. If anything, it has gotten worse.

My community was a paradise for raising children when mine were growing up, but today, as my two little granddaughters romp on our lawns, I do not have the same sense of security for them that I had when raising my children. Just last week, I stood with Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations, Danny Danon — and possibly others in attendance here today — in the bowels of a now-neutralized terror tunnel, a mere five minutes' jog from my house. It is sinister and frightening, built with a complex infrastructure for communications and electricity that was developed solely for purposes of death.

Can those here imagine how our children feel when they know that terrorists could come bursting through a tunnel under our community at any time? Thanks to technology, that threat will soon be eliminated, but there are other threats that throw a shadow over our lives here in what we like to refer to as “95 per cent paradise and 5 per cent hell”.

Within the past two years, Hamas has been organizing weekly riots along the border — every Friday after the group's prayers. The Great March of Return is, in fact, weekly, violent riots, which involves throwing Molotov cocktails and grenades, vandalizing our border fence and attempted infiltrations, which often spiral into retaliatory rocket fire after someone is killed from among the rioters.

Every Friday, rather than welcoming in the peaceful Sabbath, as most of the Jewish world does, we on the border brace ourselves for the possible escalation of violence and rocket fire. In fact, we never know when we will wake up to find our lives put on pause and roads and schools closed for one to two days, or possibly longer, owing to rocket and mortar fire. Just last night, the people in my community were on alert as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) killed another armed terrorist attempting to cut through the border fence and infiltrate Israel through our fields, as Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov mentioned earlier.

During the past two years, we have also had to live with a new threat — balloons, kites and drones that have brought over flaming coals and incendiary explosives that detonate overhead or ignite our crops. They have burned down 35 square kilometres of agriculture, forests and nature reserves. That is comparable to igniting a little more than half the island of Manhattan. They have sent over balloons attached to explosive booby-trapped books and toys. During the past two years, 17 more terror tunnels have invaded our borders and have been discovered and neutralized.

As a result, the rate of people seeking psychological aid in our region has risen by 231 per cent in the past five years, since Operation Protective Edge. More than half of them have been children. Yet despite everything and against all odds and seeming logic, our region continues to grow and thrive. Our 95 per cent heaven comprises an award-winning educational system, innovative agricultural endeavors and beautiful expanses of desert, which come alive with red poppy blooms in late winter. All that, in addition to a strong sense of community pride, encourages young families to come and settle here despite the challenges.

All of the residents in our region, both on the Israeli side and the Gazan side, are hostages of Hamas — some even more literally than us. I am referring to the two

Israeli citizens being held in Gaza and the bodies of our two fallen soldiers, Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul. Eleven times in the past two years, I personally have been held hostage by Hamas rockets. My life was put on hold. Work, routines and plans were cancelled. Hamas, and Hamas alone, decides when there will be a ceasefire. Even today, Hamas chooses to construct terror tunnels rather than buildings to house their people or factories to generate industry. They keep their population poor and unemployed by funnelling funds from the international community into their own pockets rather than to those for whom the aid was intended — their citizens. Luckily for me, Israel builds safe rooms to protect its citizens. Every home within 7 kilometres of the border has a reinforced, rocket-proof safe room built on its premises paid for by the Government of Israel. Hamas, on the other hand, builds safe rooms to protect its weapons. Hamas brings Gazans, including women and children, to the border riots to lose life or limb. Hamas aims its rockets at Israeli civilian communities, including my own, from within schools, mosques and homes, knowing full well that the IDF is reluctant to retaliate where there are innocent civilians nearby who could be harmed.

I know that not all Gazans are part of Hamas. I know that most Gazans want the same things that I do — safety for their children, food on their tables and to enable their children to have a horizon of hope. I have that horizon because I have seen it. When I came to live in my kibbutz, we used to drive to the beach or the market in Gaza, and Gazans used to come to my area. I have that horizon because I am personally in contact with Gazans who want to educate their children to have different hopes and realities. I have that horizon because I have spoken with Gazans and worked with them recently on educational projects, for which they risk their lives. I have even had a chance to hug a Gazan woman who lives just on the other side of our border from my home, a couple of weeks ago,

right here in Tel Aviv, while taking part in the women's leadership seminar, run by the Geneva Initiative.

It is only a fence that divides us. We all know that Gaza and the western Negev mirror each other, with the same climate, fauna and flora. A border fence can keep people in or out, but it cannot stop the pollution that threatens the underwater aquifers that supply water to both sides of the border, due to the crumbling sewage system in Gaza caused by the conflicts of recent years and by Hamas's failure to prioritize civilian infrastructure.

In preparation for this talk, I spoke with our mayor, Mr. Gadi Yarkoni, who lost both legs in one of the rocket attacks on the last day of Operation Protective Edge. Mr. Yarkoni said that he knows that the only solution is for us to live together. He told me that he and the other mayors of the region have extended their hands in peace, cooperation and collaboration. I asked him how they did that. That is when he told me about the plans that we have for building an electricity plant to provide electricity to Gaza, with the backing of Arab and European investors. He also described the plans that they have for another collaboration to answer the needs of Gazans, a plant for treating sewage in Gaza and turning it into electricity, because Gazans do not have electricity 24/7, thanks to the infighting between Fatah and Hamas. The people of our region in Israel know that if we want our lives to be good and that for our region to thrive and prosper, we need to see to it that our neighbours, too, can thrive and prosper.

I live in the shadow of the threat of rockets and attack tunnels, and I know only too well that until the Gazans have something to live for, they will only have reasons to die for. I understand that until the unemployment level drops and their ability to put food on their tables increases, our safety will remain compromised. I have no doubt that until Palestinians in Gaza are able to construct housing, they

will continue to construct tunnels and rockets, and that until they are able to raise their children in homes rather than in the rubble of the conflict, they will be raising another generation of Israel-haters, and my grandbabies will not be able to play outside without their mother worrying about the eventuality of a blaring siren.

Coexistence begins with education and responsibility. I hold Hamas responsible for finding a way to stop investing in terrorism and incitement to hatred, and to start making choices that will enable the people of Gaza to thrive and prosper. I call on my Government and the leaders of the Palestinian side to get to the table to work out a long-term political agreement. I call on the countries of the world and their representatives, the members of the Security Council, to compel Hamas to abandon its path of violence and empower all the people in our region, on both sides of the border, and provide them with the conditions they need to live in a way in which the human rights of all of us will be truly respected.

We all need to be able to raise the next generation to respect our neighbours, not to fear them. That is clearly not a conflict that can be resolved by weapons. It can be resolved only by courageous leaders and diplomacy. I warmly invite you, Madam President, and the Ambassadors in attendance today to come visit me in my 95 per cent heaven and see it first-hand.