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Statement on the situation
in the Middle East by
H.E. Stephen Lewis,
Ambassador and Permanent
Representative of Canada to
the 41st Session of the
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Mr. President

For over forty years the United Nations and its member states have devoted substantial time and resources to the problems of the Middle East. Millions of words have been spoken. Hundreds of resolutions have been passed both in the Security Council and the General Assembly.

We have had some notable successes. I number among these Security Council Resolution 242 and our peacekeeping efforts, including many with which Canada has been associated. Beyond this the U.N. has served as a forum which has enabled views to be expressed and opinions heard.

In providing an ultimate court of appeal to world opinion this Assembly, over the years since it was created, has often given encouragement and hope to all those prepared to follow the path of negotiation and compromise.

We have however accomplished less than we had hoped for. Often we have been unable to set aside our differences. We have been unable to come to grips constructively and in an open-minded manner with the conflicts and the tensions which afflict the region. Indeed, Mr. President, I regret to say that on many occasions debate in this body may have exacerbated rather than assuaged regional problems. Through indulgence in base partisanship we have too often opened old wounds. When we do so we must understand that we may only be encouraging further suffering and violence.

For nearly forty years the dispute between Israel and its Arab neighbours has embittered relations between two historic peoples who have contributed richly to humankind in the arts, in science and in philosophy. Conflict and bloodshed have been lamentably frequent.

Mr. President, in human terms this dispute has caused untold hardship. Generations have come to maturity in the refugee camps of the Middle East. More must be done to assist those whose entire lives have been spent in deplorable conditions. They must be ensured a better future. They have legitimate aspirations. The international community, through its contributions and moral support, must help them. My Foreign Minister, Mr. Clark, devoted special attention to the tragedy of the refugees during his recent visit to the Middle East and to the concrete steps which might be taken to assist them. Canada is determined to continue to take practical measures to assist these men and women to live in dignity and to raise their children in a climate of hope.

Despite the efforts of the international community many of the younger generations among the refugees have become radicalized. Unable to satisfy legitimate grievances and resolve problems through dialogue and the political process they have turned to other means: the gun and the bomb. Our failure to help them realize their legitimate political aspirations has created an atmosphere in which it has been

possible for some, under the pretext of supporting the Palestinian cause, to preach and practise violence and terrorism. These actions cannot be justified - they are beyond the pale. Canadians profoundly abhor these methods and we will continue to struggle against terrorism. We cannot ignore however that the resolution of the Palestinian problem, and especially that people's legitimate right to a homeland, is essential if justice is to be attained and regional stability achieved.

Continuing tension has made the Middle East a focal point for East-West rivalries. These have led to a widespread and well founded concern that the region could provide the spark that would ignite a general conflagration. Mr. President, this is no idle concern. As you know, the Secretary General has noted in his last report, "there is a grave danger that if the present deadlock in the peace process is allowed to persist, major hostilities will break out again in the area".

Mr. President, the Middle East impasse should not and cannot be allowed to continue. There must be reconciliation between Israelis and Arabs. The path has been illuminated by those courageous Egyptian and Israeli leaders who nine years ago forsook the ways of war and embraced the principle of exchanging land for peace. We must exert all our efforts to assist their successors and others in the region who are prepared to take risks for peace.

Those who accept both Israel's right to live within secure and recognized boundaries and the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to a homeland within a clearly defined territory, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, must be supported. The stakes are too high for members of this Assembly to be influenced by old quarrels, by recollections of past injustices or by considerations of national advantage. We must deal with problems as they exist, in the here and now, seeking solutions on the basis of justice for all.

My Minister during his Middle East tour had occasion to meet with numerous Middle East leaders, both Israeli and Arab. He found in all the countries he visited a willingness among statesmen to rise above differences. He found a willingness to take the risks necessary to achieve a just and lasting peace. But peace remains sadly elusive. We must do all we can to encourage Middle East leaders to overcome the hesitations born of a generation of conflict.

My government believes that a truly just and lasting peace must be arrived at through direct negotiations between the parties themselves. We shall do all in our power and support all constructive initiatives which contribute to the achievement of that goal. We do not discount the impetus which

an international conference could give to the peace process. Its aims however must be accepted by all the parties to the dispute. It must facilitate, not hinder, direct negotiations among them.

Mr. President, were the Arab-Israeli dispute the sole source of tensions in the region it would require our undivided attention. Unfortunately the Middle East is beset by other grievous conflicts.

The war between Iran and Iraq has now entered its seventh year. That conflagration has cost hundreds of thousands of lives. It has led to unconscionable waste of national wealth and blighted the futures of millions. It shows no sign of abating. Indeed there is good reason to believe that the coming months may bring an acceleration of the bloodshed. The effects of the conflict have not been confined to the combatants but have also been felt by neighbouring states. They have been subjected to acts of violence. There have been strikes against merchant ships serving their ports and the shelling and bombing of civilian targets which have claimed innocent victims.

All of this do we know, we must not allow the Gulf war to become an endless conflict with untold consequences for the peoples of the region and the world generally. It must not be allowed to undermine the stability of states who wish only to be left in peace. This institution, through the office of the Secretary General, has made repeated attempts to end this wasteful and tragic war. So too have the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Mr. President, both parties to that conflict must accept the repeated calls which have been made in Security Council Resolutions 582 and 588. They must lay down the implements of war. They must turn to the negotiating table. They must bring this senseless conflict to an end.

I turn, in this sad litany, Mr. President, to the tragedy of Lebanon. Over the past decade we have witnessed the shattering of a worthy experiment. Lebanon once stood as a beacon. Lebanon was founded on the concept of cooperation among the communities comprising its social fabric. This achievement has been rent asunder. Undoubtedly some of Lebanon's problems are indigenous. They have been exacerbated by the failure to adapt institutions to changing circumstances. But I also submit that Lebanon is a victim. It is a victim of the generalized malaise which has afflicted the Middle East and radicalized much of the region's youth. It is a victim of tensions in the region and the interference in Lebanon's internal affairs which these have engendered.

The recent attacks upon UNIFIL* in Southern Lebanon are especially disturbing. They are indicative of how fragile is the situation on Lebanon's southern border and the dangers posed therein for a further major escalation of regional tensions. UNIFIL must be allowed to function effectively. Agreement must be reached which will ensure the withdrawal of all foreign forces, not there at the specific request of Lebanon, and which will guarantee respect by all parties for the international border.

Mr. President, Canada calls upon all members of this Assembly to give their strongest support to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Lebanon. We must give every encouragement to a political solution which will result in true national reconciliation in that war-torn country.

This brief survey of the Middle East, albeit glum in parts, reveals some elements of hope, and I note the willingness among far-seeing leaders in countries such as Jordan, Israel, Egypt and Morocco to engage in sustained efforts to achieve a solution to the Arab/Israeli dispute. It is after all the regional actors themselves who hold the keys to the resolution of their conflicts. We must act quickly and decisively to support those actively seeking peace before further deterioration makes still more difficult the task we face. I am especially concerned about the further which tensions adverse economic circumstances are likely to generate. The decline in oil production and prices has significantly affected employment opportunities. It has also had major negative connotations for the economies of many of the labour surplus states in the region. We must act now lest a concomitant climate of political discontent thwart efforts to bring peace.

For Canada's part we shall not slacken in our efforts or our resolve nor shall we shirk our responsibilities. My country has a long history of positive and cooperative involvement in the region through UNRWA* and various peacekeeping efforts including UNDOF*, UNTSO* and the MFO*. We have also endeavoured to contribute, within our means, to improving economic conditions within the region.

My Foreign Minister has been particularly concerned that we vigorously support, economically as well as politically, those who are actively working for peace. Most recently, for example, we have moved both to strengthen Canada's economic cooperation with Jordan and to provide additional funding for small developmental projects intended to assist the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We believe that concrete measures such as these can make a real contribution to sustaining a positive and supportive climate for those who are actively seeking peace.

Mr. President, it is all a little overwhelming, we must not allow ourselves to become discouraged by the seeming intractability of the region's problems. For centuries Western Europe was the scene of conflicts and tensions as deeply rooted in history as those of the Middle East. The shock of World War II provided the stimulus which enabled Western Europeans to set aside their differences. It enabled them to work together to achieve common goals. In the space of a generation borders have been flung open and ancient hostilities have been all but erased from memory.

I do not hesitate to predict that the Middle East too will witness a general reconciliation among peoples and without, we are certain, a major international conflict. One day this difficult period in its history will be studied with incomprehension by generations accustomed to placing emphasis upon bonds of mutual interest rather than narrow differences. Our task is to advance that day as rapidly as humanly possible.

- *UNIFIL United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
- *UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
- *UNDOF United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (Middle East)
- *UNTSO United Nations Truce Supervision Organization
- *MFO Multinational Force and Observers