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## **Seven Memorable "Guterres Moments" for Israel during the UN Secretary-General's First Seven Months**

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UN Secretary-General António Guterres is scheduled to visit Israel for the first time in late August 2017, seven full months after assuming the prestigious post in January 2017. In ascending to the position of the world's top diplomat, Guterres prevailed in an election process that was unprecedented in its accessibility to the world's citizenry through social media and, consequently, in the public interest that the process generated.

In his personal manifesto, published as part of the elections process, Guterres chose to relate to the need to eliminate anti-Semitism in one of the issues of his five-point plan toward the UN's engagement in a culture of preventing crises. It is perhaps this fact, along with positive engagements between Guterres and Israeli leaders over the years that spurred hope for a change in the UN's bias toward Israel under his leadership. In assessing the extent to which the Secretary-General's actions have matched or mismatched Israel's hope, the following chronological milestones are worth considering:

1. Reaffirmation of the Jewish bond to Jerusalem: Against the backdrop of ongoing and systematic efforts by UN bodies such as UNESCO to ignore Jewish heritage and connection to Jerusalem, in January, Guterres reaffirmed the Jewish linkage to the city by noting that the temple destroyed by the Romans in Jerusalem was a Jewish one—a statement for which he was harshly criticized.
2. Potential appointment of an Israeli representative to the position of UN Under Secretary-General: Guterres reportedly considered Member of Knesset Tzipi Livni for the position of UN Under Secretary-General; this move publicly surfaced against the backdrop of the possible appointment of Salam Fayyad, the former prime minister of the Palestinian Authority to the position of UN Envoy to Libya. These developments stirred a debate about whether there was a deal for the double appointment of Israeli and Palestinian representatives. Since the issue first

- surfaced in February, the United States vetoed Fayyad’s appointment and to date, Livni’s appointment has not proceeded.
3. The removal of a report accusing Israel of apartheid from a UN website: In March, the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) accused Israel of apartheid in a public report published on its website. The report was commissioned by eighteen Arab countries and authored by two outspoken critics of Israel, Professor Virginia Tilley and Professor Richard Falk. At Guterres’ request, the report was removed from ESCWA’s website, leading to the resignation of UN Under Secretary-General Rima Khalaf. Khalaf argued that the United States and Israel had pressured Guterres to dissociate the UN from the report and accept her resignation.
  4. The assertion that denying Israel’s right to exist amounts to anti-Semitism: In addressing the World Jewish Congress in April, Guterres asserted that the denial of the right of the State of Israel to exist is a modern form of anti-Semitism. As such, Guterres, in his capacity as the UN’s top diplomat, de facto endorsed the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-Semitism and may have laid the groundwork for the European Parliament to adopt the same definition in June. On the same occasion, Guterres related to the UN bias against Israel, fully acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon as well as his restraint, noting that although he will not always agree with Israel’s governmental positions, Israel has the right to be treated like any other UN member state.
  5. Statement regarding the 1967 War: In the statement released in early June, Guterres noted the heavy humanitarian and development burden that Israel’s occupation imposes on the Palestinians, with little or no prospect of a better life for their children; and remarked that while the State of Israel was established almost seven decades ago, the world still awaits the birth of a Palestinian state. Pro-Israel civil society criticized Guterres for his choice to focus on the war’s impact while omitting the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict and the reasons why the war broke out.
  6. Reaction to the commemoration of “fifty years of the Israeli occupation” by the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People: Held at the UN Headquarters in New York at the end of June, the event hosted representatives of Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Both organizations are on the US State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations. In response to an appeal sent to Guterres by Israel’s Minister of Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan, the Secretary-General distanced himself

from the convention, with his spokesman confirming that Guterres has no authority over the committee responsible for organizing the event.

7. Decision to visit Israel: Guterres’ trip to Israel comes after some forty official trips abroad, including eight trips to the region (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates). In comparison, his predecessor Ban Ki Moon traveled to Israel a mere three months after assuming the position of Secretary-General (i.e., in March 2007). Kofi Annan, who served as UN Secretary-General between 1997 and 2006, made his first visit to Israel in March of 1998—fifteen months into the position. Guterres’ visit to Israel comes at a time of increased tension after a terror attack on the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif), followed by the stabbing to death of three Israelis by a Palestinian assailant in the West Bank and the killing of three Palestinians by Israeli security forces in protests against new security measures that Israel had placed on the Temple Mount. Guterres issued condemnatory statements in response to both events. Coverage of these developments, however, implied that the statement in reaction to the West Bank stabbing came only following Israeli calls for a UN response.

Guterres’ actions, rhetoric, and statements on Israel-related issues create the impression that he is not only aware of the UN institutional shortcomings but is truly committed to bettering the situation. The handling of the commemoration of the 1967 war in the UN; his arrival in Israel after a considerable number of journeys to the region; or the slight delay in the statement regarding the West Bank terror attack should not be perceived as overshadowing his active efforts to reduce the anti-Israel bias in the UN. This is because of far more significant actions taken by the Secretary-General such as affirming the Jewish bond to Jerusalem, countering accusations that Israel is an apartheid state, speaking out against anti-Semitism, and working to integrate Israeli diplomats in senior UN positions. Additional strides in this positive direction would include the appointment of a UN envoy for the struggle against global anti-Semitism and more active efforts by Guterres himself and the UN establishment which he heads, toward returning the fallen Israeli soldiers held by Hamas since 2014.

Given these refreshing developments, which align with the manifesto Guterres presented in his elections campaign, Israel would do well to continue its current policy of engaging the UN arena to proactively improve its standing therein. Such an improvement can play a crucial role in weakening the common zero-sum perception within Israel of a hostile international arena united against the Jewish state. A change in this baseline perception is perhaps the first and most basic step needed for embarking upon a sustainable journey, which will require compromises from Israel, on the long road to eventually resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.