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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE
EAST – REPORT ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)**

25 SEPTEMBER 2017

Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

Today I devote my regular briefing to the Council to reporting, on behalf of the Secretary-General, on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) during the period from 20 June to 20 September.

In this third report, I will once again focus on developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on regional and international efforts to advance the peace process.

Mr. President,

During the reporting period, Israel did not “cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard,” as called for by the resolution. Since 20 June, Israel’s illegal settlement activities have continued at a high rate, a consistent pattern over the course of this year.

Activity during this period was concentrated primarily in occupied East Jerusalem, where plans were advanced for over 2,300 housing units in July, 30 per cent more than for the whole of 2016. This includes plans for some 1,600 units expanding a ring of settlements north of East Jerusalem as well as in the Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, adjacent to the Old City. While no plans were advanced in Area C during the reporting period, in early September construction resumed on the new settlement of Amihai, in the heart of the West Bank.

The reporting period witnessed the eviction of a Palestinian family in Sheikh Jarrah, residents for over fifty years, after a protracted legal battle. The building is located in a section of the neighborhood in which several settlement plans were among those promoted in July. Eviction proceedings are under way for some 180 Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, over 60 of whom reside in Sheikh Jarrah.

Meanwhile, according to OCHA, the destruction of Palestinian-owned property across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, continued, albeit at a significantly lower rate. Overall since the beginning of 2017, 344 structures have been demolished, a third of them in East Jerusalem, displacing some 500 people.

In Area C of the occupied West Bank in August, three educational facilities, serving 175 children, were demolished or confiscated, citing the lack of building permits, which are virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 25 July, in the city of Hebron, 15 Israeli families illegally occupied the Abu Rajab/Machpelah House despite ongoing legal proceedings over its ownership. On 27 August, the Israeli Government notified the High Court of Justice that it would evict the settlers within one week, however this process has been put on hold by a temporary injunction issued by the Court.

In other related developments, on 26 July an amendment to the “Basic Law: Jerusalem the Capital of Israel” passed a first reading in the Knesset. If approved, this law would further cement Israeli control over East Jerusalem.

On 17 August, the High Court of Justice issued a temporary injunction formally postponing application of the so-called “Regularisation law”.

Later this month, on 31 August, a military order was issued establishing a “civil services administration” that upgrades the status of settlements in the H2 area of Hebron, further consolidating Israeli presence there and reinforcing the existing separation and division of this highly volatile area, where some 500 Israelis live among some 40,000 Palestinians.

The United Nations considers all settlement activities to be illegal under international law and an impediment to peace. Resolution 2334 states that the international community will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed to by the parties themselves through negotiations.

Mr. President,

I will now turn to the issue of violence, which persists as one of the main obstacles to resolving the conflict. Resolution 2334 calls on all sides to prevent such acts and to strengthen efforts to combat terrorism, including through existing security coordination.

Although the reporting period was characterized by relatively low levels of fatalities, a number of incidents occurred, particularly related to the unrest following the fatal 14 July attack against two Israeli policemen in Jerusalem’s Old City.

During the reporting period, 19 Palestinians, five of whom were in Area A of the West Bank, were killed in attacks, clashes and Israeli military operations.

Eight Israelis were killed in clashes and attacks, including the three Israeli-Arab perpetrators of the 14 July attack, who were killed by the security forces.

Of the 19 Palestinian fatalities, five were killed during protests and subsequent clashes related to the unrest in Jerusalem.

On 21 July, a Palestinian brutally murdered three members of an Israeli family in a terrorist attack in the West Bank settlement of Halamish.

In a reaction to the events at the Holy Esplanade, on 21 July, Palestinian President Abbas declared a freeze of all contacts with Israel on all levels, including security coordination.

After three months of quiet, on 26 June, 23 July and 8 August – Palestinian militants fired rockets towards Israel with no injuries reported. In response, Israeli Defence Forces conducted

five airstrikes in Gaza, resulting in three Palestinians being injured. On 17 August, one Palestinian was killed by a suicide bomber, who was also killed, close to the Egyptian border in Gaza. This appears to be the first suicide bombing affecting Hamas forces in Gaza.

During the reporting period settler related violence also continued. Some twenty-five incidents were documented, the majority involving the vandalization of Palestinian agricultural property around Nablus, and assaults against Palestinians in or around Hebron. Meanwhile, at least 21 Palestinian attacks also took place against Israeli settlers resulting in casualties or property damage.

Punitive demolitions also continued during the reporting period with Israeli authorities demolishing five homes belonging to families of Palestinian perpetrators of attacks.

Mr. President,

The reporting period also witnessed a shrinking space for civil society and freedom of expression.

On 24 June, the Palestinian President issued, by decree, the Cybercrime Law. Since then at least six journalists, one human rights activist in Hebron and a number of others have reportedly been arrested. While most have been subsequently released, these arrests raise strong concerns that the law is being used to curtail freedom of expression.

In Gaza, a social media activist was arrested by Hamas on 3 July and detained for almost two weeks on charges of incitement against the *de facto* authorities, while a journalist was detained for more than two months on unclear allegations of “collaboration” with the authorities in Ramallah.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 called upon both parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric, and to condemn all acts of terrorism.

At the height of the July crisis around the holy sites of Jerusalem, officials and representatives on all sides employed provocative rhetoric.

In the midst of what were largely peaceful protests, Hamas and senior Palestinian Authority officials called for an escalation and a “day of rage” across the occupied Palestinian territory. Hamas and others continued to openly glorify attacks, describing the murder of three Israelis at their home in Halamish as “heroic.”

Meanwhile, President Abbas explicitly condemned the 14 July attack, and, in an attempt to calm tensions at the holy sites, some Palestinian leaders and religious authorities on both sides called on protestors to avoid violence and provocation.

With regard to settlements, Israeli officials continued to use provocative rhetoric in support of expansion. On 3 August, the Israeli Prime Minister delivered an inaugural speech at the launch of construction for 1,000 new housing units in the Beitar Ilit settlement in which he praised the achievements of his Government in promoting settlement construction. On the 28th of August, he said that “there will be no more uprooting of settlements in the land of Israel (...) we will deepen our roots, build, strengthen and settle”.

Other senior Israeli politicians also made repeated calls for annexation of the West Bank, with one Member of Knesset expressing his desire to “destroy” hopes for Palestinian statehood, and stated that “there is room to define and realize the national aspirations of one people only -- the Jewish people.”

Mr. President,

Resolution 2334 reiterated the call by the Middle East Quartet for both parties to take steps to “reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-state solution.”

On 10 July, an interim power purchasing agreement was signed between the Palestinian and the Israeli Electricity companies, energizing the first Palestinian-owned and operated sub-station in Jenin and allowing for an increase in electricity supply in the northern West Bank.

On 13 July, the United States facilitated an agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Israel allowing for an increase in water supply for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, as part of the 2013 Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project.

Mr. President,

In Gaza, the situation remains extremely fragile.

The chronic energy deficit has been substantially worsened by the decision of the Palestinian Authority to reduce electricity supply to the Strip.

While Egyptian fuel has enabled the Gaza Power Plant to resume operations, electricity supply is still down to about four hours per day.

Basic services in some 190 health, water and sanitation facilities, continue to rely on back-up generators powered by United Nations-provided fuel. As part of the Gaza Emergency Appeal issued in July, an additional USD 4 million from the United Nations Central Emergency response fund has been released to support critical services. The appeal is now 51 per cent funded.

To end the standoff, the Palestinian Authority has remained firm in its demands for Hamas to dissolve the Administrative Committee it established in March 2017, and allow the Government of National Consensus to take up its responsibilities in Gaza. On 17 September, Hamas officially accepted these conditions. It now remains to be seen whether the agreement will be implemented and electricity supply will be restored to Gaza.

Mr. President,

I just returned from a trip to Gaza and will be happy to report on developments there to Security Council members during closed consultations.

Mr. President,

During the reporting period there have been no developments related to Member States’ distinguishing, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories it occupied in 1967.

Meanwhile, the international community has continued its efforts to advance the goal of peace as well as the deteriorating situation in Gaza.

The Envoys of the Middle East Quartet continue to meet to discuss current efforts to advance peace as well as the deteriorating situation in Gaza. In August, a US delegation travelled to the Middle East and met with regional interlocutors, with a focus on reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. All parties agreed to continue working toward a sustainable peace and to promote security and stability across the region.

Shortly thereafter, on August 27th, the Secretary-General arrived in the region for his first official visit to Israel and Palestine. He strongly reaffirmed the United Nations position that there is no alternative to the two-state solution and suggested a three-track approach to end the occupation and advance the prospects for peace: firstly, a serious political process with a clear end goal — two states living side-by-side in peace and mutual recognition; secondly, a simultaneous effort to improve the socio-economic conditions of Palestinians; and thirdly, active engagement with regional partners. He conveyed his personal commitment to help the parties return to meaningful negotiations, based on relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

In September, Egypt hosted delegations from Hamas and Fatah in an effort to advance Palestinian unity, which led to the breakthrough decision by the de facto-Gaza leadership to dissolve the Administrative Committee and invite the Government to return to the Strip.

On 18 September, Norway convened the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee in New York with Palestinian Deputy Prime Minister Ziad Abu Amr, PA Minister of Finance and Planning Shukri Bishara and Israeli Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzahi Hanegbi, in attendance. The meeting agreed that additional concerted action was needed to make progress on fiscal sustainability, economic development and Gaza reconstruction and recovery. It was also noted that socio-economic conditions cannot be adequately addressed without progress in the peace process.

Mr. President, members of the Council,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations on the reporting period.

Continuing settlement expansion, most notably during this period in occupied East Jerusalem, is making the two-state solution increasingly unattainable and undermining Palestinian belief in the international peace efforts. In addition to illegal settlements, the practice of demolishing Palestinian structures in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and displacing Palestinians undermines the prospects of peace.

Continued violence against civilians and incitement perpetuate mutual fear and suspicion, while impeding any efforts to bridge the gaps between the two sides. I once again urge both parties to demonstrate their commitment to rejecting violence, inflammatory rhetoric and provocative actions.

The Jenin agreement was an important first step towards a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian power purchasing agreement that would lead to greater Palestinian energy autonomy. I encourage Israelis and Palestinians to fully implement the Red Sea-Dead Sea agreement to enable delivery of much-needed water to the West Bank and Gaza.

While all initiatives to improve the Palestinian economy are welcome, much more needs to be done, as part of a political process aimed at establishing a Palestinian state. Economic development, critical as it is, is no substitute for sovereignty and statehood. As the Secretary-General has called for, efforts aimed at achieving both must proceed in parallel.

Intra-Palestinian reconciliation remains critical to preventing the continuing militant buildup and restoring hope for the future. In this respect, I welcome the recent statement by Hamas

announcing the dissolution of the Administrative Committee in Gaza and agreement to allow the Government of National Consensus to assume its responsibilities in the strip.

I commend the Egyptian authorities for their tireless efforts in creating this positive momentum. All parties must seize this opportunity to restore unity and open a new page for the Palestinian people. This should facilitate the removal of Israeli closures on Gaza, in line with Security Council Resolution 1860.

The United Nations, as always, stands ready to assist all efforts in this process.

It is critical that the grave humanitarian situation in Gaza, most notably the crippling electricity crisis, be addressed as a priority as well.

In closing, Mr. President,

I would like to emphasize that collective and determined action by the parties, the region and the international community is needed to initiate a serious political process, drawing upon all relevant UN resolutions, that will realize a two-state solution, ending the occupation and resolving all final status issues.

As the Secretary-General said on his recent visit, “the international community cannot simply turn away and allow the situation to deteriorate. We have a role and a responsibility to support the parties in resolving this conflict.” With that responsibility comes an obligation, an obligation to do what is necessary to establish a peaceful, prosperous and secure future – for Palestinians, for Israelis and for the entire region.

Thank you.