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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

19 January 2022

Madam President, Foreign Minister Huitfeldt,

Excellencies,

Members of the Security Council,

In my recent briefings, I have highlighted the ongoing deterioration of the economic, security and political situation across the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Regrettably, this trend continues and urgent steps are required to prevent the situation from worsening.

The Palestinian Authority's (PA) fiscal situation continues to be dire, threatening its institutional stability and its ability to provide services to its people. Violence continues unabated across the OPT, including settler violence, leading to numerous Palestinian and Israeli casualties and increasing the risk of a broader escalation. Settlement activity, demolitions, and evictions also continue, feeding hopelessness and further diminishing prospects for a negotiated solution.

We must be frank about what is needed to reverse these trends and provide momentum towards a reinvigorated peace process. Piecemeal approaches and half measures will only ensure that the underlying issues perpetuating the conflict continue to fester and worsen over time. Unilateral steps and conflict drivers must stop. Political and economic reforms must be implemented to ensure the PA's continued ability to function effectively, while boosting donor confidence and support.

Above all, efforts by the parties and the international community to stabilize and improve conditions on the ground should be linked to a political framework.

Without a realistic prospect of an end to the occupation and the realization of a two-State solution based on UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements, it is only a matter of time before we face an irreversible, dangerous collapse and widespread instability.

Madam President,

Daily violence continued throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory during the reporting period.

In Gaza, on 29 December, a Palestinian opened fired towards the Gaza perimeter fence, injuring an Israeli civilian. In retaliation, Israeli forces fired several tank shells at what they said were Hamas observation posts in the northern Gaza Strip. Four Palestinian civilians were reportedly injured, including a 16-year-old boy.

On 1 January, Israel Defense Forces announced that two rockets fired from Gaza had landed off the coast of central Israel. Israeli forces subsequently carried out air strikes against what they said were facilities belonging to militant groups in Gaza. No injuries were reported.

In the occupied West Bank, six Palestinian men, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF), and another died in unclear circumstances, in the context of demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents, and 249 Palestinians, including four women and 46 children, were injured. Settlers and other Israeli civilians perpetrated 28 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in six injuries and damage to property. Two Palestinians were killed under unclear circumstances involving Israeli civilian vehicles.

In all, Palestinians perpetrated some 89 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians, resulting in 15 Israeli civilians injured and damage to property in clashes, shootings, stabbing and ramming attacks, as well as incidents involving the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails and other incidents. Five members of Israeli security forces were also injured.

On 21 December, a Palestinian man, who reportedly attempted to carry out a ramming attack against ISF near the Mevo Dotan settlement in the northern West Bank, was killed by ISF.

On 22 December, a Palestinian man was killed by ISF near al-Amari refugee camp near Ramallah. According to ISF, the man had opened fire from a vehicle at Israeli forces conducting a search-and-arrest operation in the area.

On 31 December, a Palestinian man reportedly attempted to carry out a stabbing attack against Israeli soldiers and civilians near the village of Salfit and was shot by ISF, later succumbing to his wounds.

On 6 January, a 21-year-old Palestinian man was killed during armed exchanges with ISF as they conducted a search-and-arrest operation in the Balata Refugee Camp near Nablus, in Area A.

On 5 January, a tow truck under the supervision of the Israeli police hit and severely injured a 70-year-old Palestinian activist man in Umm al-Kheir, south of Hebron, during a police operation to confiscate unregistered vehicles. The man subsequently died from his injuries on 17 January. Police reported that the driver was injured in the head by stones thrown at him and required medical attention.

On 12 January, an 80-year-old Palestinian man died in the context of an ISF operation near Ramallah where the victim was reportedly handcuffed, blindfolded and physically assaulted by the ISF. According to Israel Defense Forces, the man was released alive. I note that Israeli authorities have initiated an investigation and call for a swift, thorough and transparent outcome.

On 17 January, ISF reported that a Palestinian man attempted to stab a soldier with a knife near Hebron. ISF shot and killed the alleged assailant. No ISF injuries were reported. Another Palestinian, who had driven the vehicle of the alleged assailant, later handed himself over to ISF.

Madam President,

Settler-related violence remained a serious concern throughout the reporting period.

From 23 to 25 December, 156 Palestinians were injured by Israeli forces from rubber bullets and 15 from live ammunition in confrontations that erupted in and around Burqa, near Nablus, after settlers repeatedly raided the village, vandalized property and clashed with local residents. This occurred as part of settler protests against the killing of an Israeli settler in that area on 16

December and demands to reestablish the adjacent settlement of Homesh that had been officially evacuated in 2005.

On several occasions during the reporting period, ISF and Israeli settlers clashed in the context of ISF efforts to dismantle unauthorized structures set up by Israeli settlers in Homesh and other outposts, illegal also under Israeli law.

All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and brought swiftly to justice.

Madam President,

Turning to settlement-related developments, on 5 January, Israeli authorities postponed a planned discussion on objections to two plans for some 3,500 housing units in the controversial E1 area in the West Bank. A new date for the discussion has not been set.

The same day, Israeli authorities published tenders for some 300 settlement housing units in the Talpiyot East neighborhood in occupied East Jerusalem.

On 10 January, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced a plan, pending revisions, to build some 800 housing units in place of an existing 182 units in the East Jerusalem settlement of Gilo.

On 17 January, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced a plan for some 1,200 housing units next to Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in the southern Jerusalem area, a significant number of which are intended for construction across the Green Line in East Jerusalem.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace. I call on the Government of Israel to cease the advancement of all settlement activity immediately.

Madam President,

Israeli authorities demolished, seized, or forced owners to demolish 54 Palestinian-owned structures, in Area C and 23 in occupied East Jerusalem, displacing 102 Palestinians, including 26 women and 47 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 19 January, Israeli forces evicted a Palestinian family and demolished their home in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, displacing 12 Palestinians, and reportedly resulting in a number of arrests. According to the Jerusalem Municipality, the structures were built illegally in recent years and the land was cleared to build a special needs school to serve Palestinian children from East Jerusalem.

I still remain concerned by the potential eviction of a number of Palestinian families from homes they have lived in for decades in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and the risk that such actions pose for escalating violence.

I call on Israeli authorities to end the displacement and eviction of Palestinians, in line with its obligations under international law, and to approve additional plans that would enable Palestinian communities to build legally and address their development needs.

Madam President,

On 28 December, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz for the second time in four months. Following the meeting, Israel announced several measures, including updating the registration of some 9,500 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, an advance of 100 million Israeli Shekels against clearance revenues Israel collects on the PA's behalf and additional entry permits for Palestinian officials and businesspeople.

I welcome the ongoing high-level engagement between Israeli and Palestinian officials and the recent steps announced. I urge both sides to continue and expand this engagement to encompass underlying political issues.

Following the designation by Israel of six Palestinian NGOs as terrorist organizations, the United Nations continues to engage with all relevant parties to receive more information about the allegations and their implications.

On 12 January, the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) concluded voter registration for the second phase of local council elections scheduled for 26 March. However, on 17 January, the Palestinian Cabinet postponed local council elections in Gaza over procedural disputes.

On 14 January, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet met virtually to discuss the latest political development and the situation on the ground.

Madam President,

Turning to Gaza, during the month of January 2022, Israeli authorities completed the issuance of permits to some 10,000 Gazan merchants and traders, of some 12,000 approved permits, the highest number in years.

I welcome the stated willingness of the Government of Israel, in line with commitments made in the November 2021 at the AHLC meeting in Oslo, to increase the movement of goods and people in and out of the Strip and the steps taken in this regard. At the same time, I reiterate that more such moves are needed for durable economic benefits to materialize. I urge both parties to engage with the UN to find concrete ways to further enhance access and trade, including facilitating the entry of dual-use materials for key sectors of the economy under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism.

On 27 December, the State of Qatar announced that it had signed an agreement with the Palestinian Authority and the Gaza Electricity Distribution Corporation to advance construction of a natural gas pipeline from Israel to Gaza. The pipeline aims to reduce costs and increase efficiency and electricity generation at the Gaza Power Plant. I urge all parties to facilitate implementation of this important project.

On 28 December, UNRWA announced the start of a cash assistance allocation of USD 8.2 million to families whose homes were damaged during the May 2021 escalation.

Thanks to exceptional financial contributions, an advance on 2022 contributions, a CERF loan and debt carried into 2022, UNRWA was able to sustain critical education, health care and humanitarian services to millions of Palestine refugees in the OPT and throughout the region. For

2022, UNRWA is again presenting a zero-growth core Programme budget despite increased needs of Palestine refugees. The Agency is confronted with a serious financial existential threat that can affect the rights and wellbeing of refugees and regional stability. I, therefore, urge Member States to continue, and to expand, their contributions to UNRWA.

Madam President,

Turning briefly to the region, on the Golan, while the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained, violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties continue, increasing tensions. It is important that the parties respect their obligations under the terms of the Agreement and refrain from taking unilateral steps on the occupied Golan that further erode peace and stability in the region.

During a visit to Lebanon in December, the Secretary-General expressed solidarity with the Lebanese people in the context of the country's difficult socio-economic situation and reiterated the need for political leaders to work together urgently to find solutions to the crisis. Parliamentary elections have been announced for 15 May. The full reactivation of the Cabinet will be important, including to reliably support election preparations.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained relatively stable, despite isolated incidents of aggressive behavior against peacekeepers. UNIFIL remains engaged with the parties to contain incidents and defuse tensions along the Blue Line.

Madam President,

In closing, allow me to reiterate the urgent need for a coordinated approach to address political, economic and institutional obstacles blocking the way to a meaningful peace process.

Alongside key reforms and steps by all parties to defuse tensions, we must focus on providing a political context that will ensure that the positive engagement we have witnessed in recent months is not squandered. Partners, including those in the region, have a vital role to play.

Efforts must also continue to encourage all Palestinian political factions towards political consensus and bringing Gaza and the occupied West Bank under one legitimate, democratic Palestinian authority. Gaza remains integral to a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.

Short-term challenges and urgent crises must be addressed. Yet, at the same time, we must ensure that the solutions put in place advance our ultimate goal: an end to occupation and the achievement of a two-State solution on the basis of UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

The UN will continue to actively engage, along with its counterparts in the Middle East Quartet, with regional and international partners, and with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reach a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Thank you.