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

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Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

I would like to begin today by thanking the Council for your support, expressed during the previous briefing for the work of UNSCO on the ground under challenging circumstances as the situation in Israel and Palestine, unfortunately, continues to deteriorate.

International focus on the Question of Palestine may have been overtaken by the tragedy in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, but it cannot be allowed to be relegated to a secondary problem.

Sadly, settlement announcements, outbreaks of violence and terror, and the absence of visionary leadership continue to define the conflict. The inability to see beyond the horizon and grasp the benefits of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, of ending the occupation, of establishing a two-state solution that meets the national aspirations of both Palestinians and Israelis alike, is a historic loss to the region as a whole.

The absence of progress has led to growing anger and frustration among Palestinians and profound disillusionment among Israelis. It has strengthened radicals and weakened moderates on both sides.

On October 9<sup>th</sup>, a Palestinian opened fire, killing two Israelis and injuring six others in a terror attack in occupied East Jerusalem. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families of the victims.

Deplorably, Hamas and many others chose to justify and glorify the attack and its perpetrator.

This tragic incident once again underscores an undeniable truth – if Palestinians genuinely hope to reach the long-overdue goal of statehood and an end to the occupation, this will not be achieved through violence, but must be reached through negotiations.

In separate incidents, during recent clashes in East Jerusalem, a 20-year-old Palestinian civilian died after being shot by Israeli security forces. Separately, an unarmed 12 year old girl was also shot in the legs by security guards while approaching a checkpoint.

Mr. President,

During the reporting period, Israel has continued with settlement planning, including the recent promotion of an initial 98 out of 300 housing units in Shilo, located deep in the occupied West Bank. If implemented, this plan will drive a wedge between north and south in the West Bank and jeopardize the contiguity of a future Palestinian state. Israeli officials have defined this move as an attempt to relocate settlers from the illegal Amona outpost, which has been slated for demolition by the Israeli Supreme Court.

I once again reiterate the position of the Secretary-General that settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the two-state solution.

Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Adding to this troubling overall picture, Palestinians have again been unable to exercise their democratic rights after local council elections in the West Bank and Gaza were postponed. The political bickering, mutual accusations, legal challenges and counter-challenges that followed have left the people of Gaza and the West Bank feeling more apart.

I am concerned by recent calls by Hamas legislators in Gaza for the Hamas led government to resume its work in Gaza. Such a step would seriously undermine the Palestinian Government of National Consensus and would also make the reconciliation almost impossible.

Mr. President,

In August, I raised UN and international concerns about the steady continuation of Israel's policy of expanding its presence in the occupied West Bank. Today, I wish to discuss another impediment to a negotiated solution — the security, humanitarian and political situation in Gaza. Three deadly conflicts in the past eight years have eroded both Palestinian belief that Israel wants anything more than Gaza's destruction and Israeli conviction that their Palestinian neighbours desire peace.

Fueling Israeli fears is that Gaza is controlled by a de facto authority whose overtly anti-Semitic Charter equates resistance with violence, rejects peaceful solutions and aspires to the obliteration of Israel.

Israel accuses Gaza militants of continuously seeking to obtain money and military matériel, including by smuggling in civilian boats, concealing components for the production of rockets inside commercial shipments and diverting construction materials from needy beneficiaries. The United Nations has been informed by Israel of at least 41 serious smuggling attempts which have been intercepted since the beginning of 2016. Although the UN lacks the capacity to independently confirm the smuggling accusations, if accurate, they show the intention to continue attacks against Israel.

Mr. President,

Last week, I travelled to Gaza where I witnessed warehouses, empty of construction materials, as the reconstruction process is significantly slowing down. And this is due to limitations of imports. No new residential reconstruction projects have been approved since March. In the recent days the approval of some 80 projects – some of which had already been started - has been revoked by Israel.

I saw residential buildings half built. I met with families whose projects have been cleared for reconstruction, yet have not received any cement for months. I heard from those that have tried to navigate the web of rules governing the import of materials considered 'dual-use' with no luck or response.

I stand with the people in Gaza who have suffered through conflicts, closures and continue to face unimaginable suffering.

At current rates, it will take more than one year to catch up on the backlog of approved projects and years to address the full housing and reconstruction shortage in Gaza.

These trends are worrying and I call on the parties to the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism to recommit once again to ensuring its smooth operation. Failing to do that will put in question the viability of the mechanism and undermine the precarious calm in Gaza today.

Mr. President,

According to some estimates, in the last decade, militants in Gaza have fired nearly 16,000 rockets and mortars at Israel. Some 200 projectiles have been fired since the end of the last conflict. While since 2014 there has been little damage or injury, there is an ever-present risk of a potentially catastrophic escalation that neither wants nor needs.

During the 2014 conflict, Israel discovered and destroyed 14 tunnels crossing into its territory and, in May of this year, detected and destroyed two more.

Allow me to reiterate the joint position of Russia, the United States, the European Union and the Secretary-General of the UN as stated in the Quartet report: the illicit arms build-up and militant activity in Gaza must be terminated. Such actions increase the risk of a new escalation of hostilities, keep thousands of people on both sides of the border under constant threat of attack, and undermine the reconstruction process.

The militant threat, however, should not serve as an excuse for Israel to indiscriminately harm civilians in Gaza. In addition to the continuing severely restrictive closures, I am concerned by persistent incursions and the almost daily firing and shelling by Israeli forces into Gaza along the fence and at sea.

Mr. President,

The vicious cycles of conflict in Gaza must end. To do so, control of Gaza must return to the Palestinian Government of National Unity committed to the PLO principles. The closures on Gaza must also be lifted in line with Security Council resolution 1860. Palestinians and Israelis both deserve the right to lead a normal life in freedom and security, with their human rights respected.

Since Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007 40 per cent of Palestinians living in the occupied territory are beyond the control of the legitimate Palestinian government.

Israel's closure policy and severe restrictions have brought social, cultural and economic interaction between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to a virtual standstill. The widening chasm that has emerged between both parts of the occupied Palestinian territory undermines the national state-building enterprise and threatens the very viability of establishing a unified Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution. Unity is, therefore, critical.

I encourage Hamas to pursue reconciliation with Fatah in line with the PLO principles and to consider redefining its political stance.

Turning briefly to the Golan, Mr. President, I remain concerned by the volatile situation which undermines the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement and jeopardises the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. It remains critical that the parties to the Disengagement Agreement maintain liaison with UNDOF in the first instance, exercise maximum restraint and refrain from any action that could escalate the situation across the ceasefire line and the already volatile regional environment.

Mr. President,

Returning back to the Question of Palestine, let me close my briefing by issuing two warnings.

Firstly, to those who believe that the people of Gaza can be punished by closures or by imposing restrictions on the entry of construction materials that are vital for the economy. They should know that the temperature in Gaza is rising.

Allow me to also be abundantly clear to those who build tunnels, fire rockets, smuggle military materiel, profit from the black market or seek to create confrontation. Their actions are dangerous and irresponsible. They are stealing from their own people and risk the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike.

We must all avoid the risk of sleep-walking into another violent conflict at a time when the region as a whole needs moderate forces to unite and stand up to the radicalisation that we see across the Middle East.

Gaza's future is inextricably linked to the future of the Palestinian people and their goal of establishing an independent state. But the longer its population continues to suffer under the intolerable weight of Gaza's current dynamics, the further Palestinians are from realizing that objective, and the closer we are unfortunately to the next major escalation.

Thank you.