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

19 October 2021

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

At the outset, I welcome the ongoing engagement between senior Israeli and Palestinian officials. I strongly encourage a further expansion of such efforts which can improve conditions on the ground and pave the way towards re-invigorating the peace process.

But we should have no illusions about the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) continues to deteriorate and we have seen no progress towards realizing a two-State solution.

This political stagnation is fueling tensions, instability and a deepening sense of hopelessness.

The security situation in Gaza remains fragile and the security dynamics in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are deteriorating, including growing tensions in and around the Holy Sites.

Settlement activity, evictions, demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property, ISF military operations, particularly in Area A, and movement and access restrictions, including the severe closures on Gaza, further feed the cycle of violence.

A large number of Palestinians, including children, continue to be killed and injured by Israeli security forces. Settler-related attacks against Palestinians and their property – including in the presence of Israeli security forces – continue.

Israeli civilians continue to be subjected to attacks by Palestinians that have caused deaths, injuries and damages.

Israeli and Palestinian civilians are suffering and paying a steep price for the persistence of the conflict, including the protracted occupation.

In addition, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is facing an unprecedented fiscal and financial crisis. A strengthened PA and PA institutions are needed in order to implement necessary reforms and eventually return to Gaza.

I am concerned that these negative trends are occurring simultaneously across the West Bank and Gaza and should not be left unaddressed.

Mister President,

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

In Gaza, while a relative calm largely prevailed, on 30 September, a Palestinian man was killed by ISF as he approached the perimeter fence. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that the man approached the fence in the central Gaza Strip with two other men, carrying a suspicious bag and digging in the ground. Relatives of the man disputed this account, saying he was hunting birds.

In the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, clashes, attacks, search and arrest operations, and other incidents resulted in the death of three Palestinians, and injuries from live fire and rubber-coated metal bullets to 66 Palestinians, including nine children and one woman. Four Israeli civilians and two soldiers were injured in the course of these events.

On 30 September, a Palestinian woman was shot and killed by ISF after reportedly attempting to stab ISF officers in Jerusalem's Old City. The same day, ISF shot and killed a Palestinian man in the village of Burqin, near Jenin. According to ISF, the man had opened fire at Israeli troops as they were conducting an arrest operation. Palestinian Islamic Jihad later claimed the man was one of their members.

On 14 October, ISF shot and killed a 14-year-old Palestinian and wounded another while they were allegedly throwing Molotov cocktails at civilian vehicles west of Bethlehem.

The same day, a Palestinian man drove his vehicle into and injured an IDF soldier near Qalandiya checkpoint. Israeli forces fired on the vehicle, and injured and arrested the driver.

In addition, since 8 October, we have witnessed near nightly clashes between Palestinians and Israeli civilians as well as Israeli security forces in and around the Old City.

Meanwhile, settlers and other Israeli civilians perpetrated 26 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in 18 injuries and damage to property. Palestinians perpetrated 31 attacks against Israeli settlers and other civilians in the West Bank resulting in injuries in four cases and in damage to property in the rest.

On 28 September some 70 Israeli settlers attacked the Palestinian villages of Om Mfaggara, Rakeez, and al-Tuwani in the South Hebron Hills. The settlers injured nine Palestinians, including children, killed livestock and damaged vehicles and homes, as well as community infrastructure. A three-year-old Palestinian boy, hit in the head with stones as he slept, was hospitalized with a skull fracture. In related clashes, 20 Palestinians were injured by Israel Defence Forces. Palestinians also threw stones towards Israelis during the incident, injuring one soldier.

On 29 September, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid condemned the attack, tweeting "this violent incident is horrific and it is terror." He called the perpetrators "a violent and dangerous fringe" and said Israel had "a responsibility to bring them to justice."

ISF arrested at least six Israelis in relation to the incident, including two children, as well as three Palestinians. The Palestinians and at least four Israelis have reportedly since been released. An investigation by Israeli authorities is ongoing.

I welcome the swift condemnations of the attack from the Israeli Foreign Minister and underscore that all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and swiftly brought to justice.

Since the annual olive harvest began a week ago, over 1,200 olive trees have reportedly been vandalized by settlers. On 15 October, some 40 settlers attacked Palestinian farmers east of Yasuf village north of Salfit, injuring a Palestinian woman with pepper spray and three others by throwing stones.

I call on Israel to take all necessary steps to fulfil its obligation to protect Palestinian civilians from violence, including by Israeli settlers, and to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for such attacks.

Mister President,

On 4 and 18 October, the Israeli Civil Administration held discussions on objections to two settlement housing plans for a total of nearly 3,500 units in the strategic E1 area in the West Bank.

I am concerned that Israeli authorities continue to consider plans for construction in E1. If constructed, these units would sever the connection between the northern and southern West Bank, significantly undermining the chances for establishing a viable and contiguous Palestinian State as part of a negotiated two-State solution.

I reiterate that all settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace.

On 5 October, the Jerusalem Magistrates' Court granted the appeal of a Jewish Israeli who was expelled from the Holy Esplanade for praying, in violation of Israeli police regulations that allow only Muslims to pray at the site. The Court's decision was condemned as a violation of the *status quo* by the Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian Governments, by Palestinian factions, and by Muslim and Christian leaders in Jerusalem and throughout the region.

The police appealed the decision to the Jerusalem District Court, which overturned the lower court decision and reinstated the appellant's temporary visitor ban on 8 October. In a statement released the same day, Israel's Public Security Minister reiterated that "the *status quo* must be observed," adding that any change to the existing arrangements "would endanger public safety and could cause a flare-up."

I welcome this statement by the Israeli Minister and I reiterate that all sides must respect and uphold the *status quo* at the Holy Sites.

Mister President,

Israeli demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian homes and other structures continued during the reporting period.

Overall, Israeli authorities demolished, seized, or forced owners to demolish 18 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and seven in occupied East Jerusalem, displacing five Palestinians, including three women and one child. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 29 September, Israel's High Court of Justice granted a request by the State of Israel to postpone to March 2022 its response to a petition to implement eviction orders against the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar in Area C of the West Bank. In its request, the Government cited the COVID-19 pandemic and the "current diplomatic-security situation," adding that there had been "significant progress" toward an agreement that could avoid a demolition.

On 4 October, Israel's Supreme Court presented a proposal to four Palestinian families facing eviction in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and to the Israeli settler corporation seeking to evict them. The proposal would significantly postpone eviction efforts, while requiring the families to pay a nominal annual rent to the settler corporation. The Court specified that the agreement would in no way prejudice ongoing legal proceedings to determine ownership of the properties. If the parties do not reach an agreement by 2 November, the Court stated that it will issue a ruling.

I urge Israel to cease demolitions and evictions in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

In a welcome development, earlier today, Israeli and Palestinian officials announced that some 4,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank without proper documentation would be registered in the Palestinian population registry and receive identity documents.

Mister President,

The PA's fiscal situation is reaching a breaking point. Expenditures far exceed revenues, and the gap is growing. Donor support, including direct budget support, continues its multi-year decline.

Estimates suggest that the PA will have a 2021 budget deficit of around USD 800 million. This would nearly double the 2020 gap, even with donor support and emergency measures we will have this situation continue. The borrowing capacity of the PA with the banks has been exhausted.

Along with other longstanding fiscal leakages that are contributing to the financial crisis, Israel continues to deduct millions of US dollars per month from clearance revenue transfers, in response to Palestinian payments to security prisoners, their families and the families of those killed in the context of attacks. Israel's recent loan of 500 million Shekels against future Palestinian revenues was critical, but only delays temporarily the looming crisis and does not address the structural impediments imposed on the Palestinian economy.

Significant reforms and policy changes—by both Israelis and Palestinians—must be implemented to address the structural challenges. Such reforms could and should be met with increased support from the international donor community. This will form a key part of the upcoming AHLC meeting scheduled in Oslo in November.

Mister President,

Efforts continued to stabilize the situation in Gaza and support recovery and reconstruction following the May escalation.

The UN has launched reconstruction efforts for severely damaged housing units. Preparations for additional reconstruction have begun with assistance from Qatar and after the lifting of some restrictions on the entry of construction materials by Israeli authorities. Up to 1,800 of the more than 2,000 destroyed or severely damaged homes will be rebuilt in the first phase. In addition, Egypt began repairing one of Gaza's main coastal roads in late September.

During the month of September, nearly 7,000 truckloads of goods entered Gaza through the Israeli-controlled Kerem Shalom crossing, some 80 per cent of the pre-escalation monthly average. About 2,000 truckloads entered through the Egyptian-controlled Rafah Crossing, marking one of the highest recorded volumes of entering goods.

In addition, as of 18 October, more than 6,000 permits were issued for Gaza merchants and traders to enter Israel, a critical contribution to boosting the local economy, which can be expanded.

While I welcome the issuance of permits and improvement in the movement of goods into and out of the Strip, much more is needed to facilitate sustainable access. I reiterate that the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism remains best placed to enable the entry and accountable delivery of items and materials that would otherwise not be allowed into the Strip.

I remain concerned by UNRWA's continued budget shortfall. I welcome the recently announced contributions from key donors, however, UNRWA still lacks the necessary funds to sustain its critical programmes for the rest of this year. UNRWA remains indispensable for regional stability and must have the necessary resources to fulfil its mandate.

Mister 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. Both parties' adherence to the terms of the Disengagement Agreement is important for preserving stability.

In Lebanon, a new Government was formed on 10 September by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, ending a 13-month caretaker period. The 24-member Government, which includes one woman Minister, vowed to reach an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, tackle the energy crisis and hold 2022 elections on time. The investigation into the Beirut port explosion faced setbacks as a result of reported intimidation of the judge in charge of the investigation. On 14 October, deadly clashes erupted in Beirut during a protest calling for his removal.

Mister President,

We can no longer lurch from crisis to crisis. Our approach cannot be to address the current situation piecemeal – incident by incident, on a short-term day-to-day basis as stand alone issues.

A broader package of parallel steps by the Government of Israel, the PA and the international community is needed. Such a framework should begin to address key political, security and economic challenges that are preventing progress. These efforts are urgent and will require a clear

political commitment and involvement from the Government of Israel, from the PA and from the international community. We must begin to restore hope in a peaceful, sustainable, negotiated resolution of the conflict.

Despite the enormity of the current political, economic and humanitarian challenges, we cannot afford to be pessimistic or passive.

I welcome the efforts of the envoys of the Middle East Quartet, including in-the call held on 14 October.

I encourage both Parties to urgently implement positive and significant policy shifts to address the security situation, improve the Palestinian economy and strengthen Palestinian governance and institutions.

I also urge Israeli and Palestinian authorities to find additional avenues for cooperation, including on the implementation of existing agreements.

This is not the end game, but rather key steps in a process that can, and must, lead us back to genuine negotiations and end the occupation and allow for the realization of a two-State solution, on the basis of 1967 lines, international law, UN resolutions, and previous agreements.

We must build consensus in support of a broader framework for engagement or face an increasingly desperate reality shaped by extremist voices and unilateral actions that will heighten the risk that Palestinians, Israelis and the region get into a more severe conflict. The United Nations is actively engaged in advancing these efforts, including through the Middle East Quartet, key regional partners, and Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Thank you.