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

21 December 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am devoting my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to the sixteenth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). The written report you have already received covers the period between 21 September and 10 December 2020. I will begin by providing an update on developments since the submission of the report to this Council.

On 15 December, the Palestinian Prime Minister and the Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) launched the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). The plan includes an appeal for USD 417 million, to help 1.8 million vulnerable people over the coming year. The latest humanitarian needs assessment found that 2.5 million Palestinians — some 47 per cent of the population — currently need aid.

Settlement-related developments continued after the submission of the written report.

On 13 December, the Israeli authorities announced a tender for 290 housing units in the settlement of Gilo in East Jerusalem.

On 16 December, the Israeli Knesset advanced, in a preliminary vote, a bill that sets a two-year timeframe for the legalization of 65 outposts and mandates that they should be treated as authorized settlements in the interim, with their residents receiving all municipal services.

Mister President,

Since the submission of the written report, violent incidents continued throughout the OPT.

On 11 December, a Palestinian man from Nablus, who was deaf and mute, reportedly died from complications resulting from an injury sustained from live ammunition. The man was shot by private security guards on 17 August at Qalandia checkpoint, north of Jerusalem. ISF previously stated that an investigation was opened into the incident.

On 13 December, in the context of clashes, the ISF injured two Palestinians, including a 15-year-old, in Al Shawabka north of Tulkarm. The boy was reportedly shot in the knee with live ammunition.

On 14 December, Israeli forces at the Gaza perimeter fence fired one shell that landed near the Al Bureij refugee camp, causing damage to a house. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said that the incident was accidental and have also opened an investigation.

Mister President,

I would like to focus on some observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

I remain deeply troubled by continued Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Over the past year, Israeli authorities advanced controversial settlement plans that had been frozen for years. The total number of units advanced in 2020 are on par with 2019 numbers, despite an eight-month hiatus this year. Some 50 per cent of them are deep in the West Bank, in areas crucial for the contiguity and viability of a future Palestinian State.

In the strategic location of E1, plans for some 3,500 units were advanced after an eight-year delay. If implemented, the E1 plan would sever the connection between the northern and southern West Bank. Similarly, a tender was issued for some 1,200 units establishing a new settlement in Givat Hamatos threatening to further disconnect East Jerusalem from Bethlehem and the southern West Bank. If either project moves forward it would significantly undermine the establishment of a viable and contiguous Palestinian State as part of a negotiated two-State solution.

Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, constitute a flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions and international law. Settlements entrench Israel's occupation and undermine the prospect of achieving a two-State solution. The advancement of all settlement activity must cease immediately.

The continued demolition and seizure of Palestinian structures, notably humanitarian projects and schools, is deeply concerning. I call on Israeli authorities to end the demolition of Palestinian property and the displacement and eviction of Palestinians and to approve plans that would enable these communities to build legally and address their development needs.

The continuing violence, attacks against civilians, and incitement to violence are unacceptable. All perpetrators of violence must be held accountable. I am appalled that children continue to be victims – with a particularly troubling series of incidents over the past month in the OPT. Children should not be the target of violence or put in harm's way.

I reiterate that security forces must exercise maximum restraint and may use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. Israeli and Palestinian authorities must carry out thorough, independent, impartial and prompt investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force.

The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars towards Israeli civilian population centers by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and others is prohibited by international humanitarian law, and Palestinian militants must cease this practice immediately.

I am deeply concerned at the continued settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. I call on Israeli authorities to abide by international law and protect Palestinians from violence by Israeli settlers and to ensure that farmers can access their land freely and safely.

Regrettably, the fate of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza remains an important humanitarian concern. I call upon Hamas to release them immediately.

I also remain concerned at the continued Israeli practice of holding the bodies of killed Palestinians and call for the return withheld bodies to their families, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

Human rights defenders and peace activists continue to be subject to pressure and arrest; authorities have an obligation to respect freedom of expression, association and assembly, and to facilitate and promote an enabling environment for civil society to function in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

In view of Gaza courts' continued handing down of death sentences in violation of Palestinian law and of the State of Palestine's international obligations, I call upon Hamas in Gaza to impose an immediate moratorium on executions and cease the use of military tribunals to try civilians.

Mister President,

The financial situation of UNRWA remains a serious concern. With support from partners and a loan from the CERF, a disruption of vital services was averted last month. Unfortunately, despite this support, there is a December funding gap of USD 88 million. This includes some USD 22 million to pay salaries to nearly 30,000 frontline education, health, social and other workers directly assisting Palestine refugees. In January 2021 the income forecast for UNRWA is worse and may well require more drastic measures to prevent a financial collapse of the Agency in the months to come. The Agency is not only a lifeline for millions of Palestine refugees, and fully engaged in the fight against COVID19, but is also critical for regional stability. Sufficient funding is essential for the Agency's continuity, and I renew my appeal for support.

Mister President,

The situation in Gaza remains fragile amidst the immense suffering of the people. The risk of a major escalation remains. Taking into consideration its legitimate security concerns, I urge Israel to ease the restrictions on the movement of goods and people to and from Gaza. Only by fully lifting the closures, in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), can we hope to sustainably resolve the humanitarian crisis.

It is deeply regrettable that agreement has not been reached on the holding of long-overdue Palestinian presidential and legislative elections. I continue to encourage the parties to overcome outstanding differences in line with Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

With regard to the wider peace process, Mister President,

I join the Secretary-General in urging Israelis, Palestinians, regional States and the broader international community to take practical steps to enable the parties to re-engage. Such steps must also be accompanied by concrete actions to restore a legitimate political horizon to end the conflict. The Middle East Quartet – alongside Arab partners – and Israeli and Palestinian leaders, must work together to return to the path of meaningful negotiations.

I hope that recent developments will encourage Palestinian and Israeli leaders to re-start meaningful negotiations, with the support of the international community, and will create opportunities for regional cooperation. As we have seen in statements from around the world, the commitment to the two-State solution, in line with UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements, continues to be affirmed by broad regional and international consensus.

Mister President,

I would like to highlight some progress and opportunities following the Palestinian Authority's decision to restart civil and security coordination with Israel that I briefed to you on last month.

The Palestinian Government has received some 900 million USD in back-revenues vital to the fight against the COVID19 pandemic and deteriorating financial situation.

In meetings with leaders on both sides, I have strongly encouraged them to seize this moment to begin a process of updating their economic and administrative relationship. I am encouraged by recent technical-level exchanges between the Ministries of Health and encourage high-level discussions between the Ministries of Finance. An agreement on relevant reforms would not only have notable humanitarian, economic and development benefits, but also represent an important first step on the path back to meaningful negotiations.

I again encourage Israel to maintain its commitment to backstopping the PA's finances up to a minimum monthly transfer of revenues for the duration of the emergency and to take concrete steps such as granting permits to Palestinians from Gaza to work in Israel and the West Bank when adequate health precautions are in place. It remains vital to also ease dual-use restrictions for imports into the Gaza Strip, and grant construction permits in Area C of the occupied West Bank.

Similarly, I reiterate, my call on the Palestinian Authority to take important steps toward mitigating future risk to its banking sector and revenues by aligning its expenditures to recommendations made by the World Bank and UNSCO in June, including for the introduction of a single basic income support scheme. I note President Abbas' decision to form a committee on this issue. Reforming the system of payments to Palestinian prisoners, their families, or the families of those killed or injured in the context of attacks would not only mitigate risk, but could remove a significant obstacle to some donor support and talks on more substantive steps to modernize the economic relationship.

All sides can take immediate steps to facilitate the movement of goods in and out of Gaza and to allow trade to increase between the Gaza Strip, Israel and the West Bank.

Our support as the international community is vital. In addition, it is important to ensure support to the inter-agency humanitarian response plan and the UN Country Teams' and the Palestinian Authority's socioeconomic response plans. I have also encouraged donors to support a few critical initiatives that could be implemented immediately. They would create some 20,000 jobs in Gaza for at least 12 months, accelerate critical infrastructure initiatives in the water, sanitation, energy and health sectors, and support small and medium-sized enterprises.

Mister President,

Daily violence has continued throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory; settlement expansion and the demolition of Palestinian-owned structures continue unabated, raising tensions on the ground and further undermining the viability of a two-State solution; intra-Palestinian division remains unresolved; a humanitarian, economic and health crisis in Gaza has grown increasingly dire amidst debilitating closures, political division and militant activity.

It is in this context that we must persevere in our efforts to prevent violent escalation and encourage leaders on both sides to take steps toward enabling a return to negotiations, not a retrenchment of the conflict. We remain guided by the clear and unwavering UN position that only a two-State solution that realizes the legitimate national aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements, can lead to sustainable peace between the two peoples.

In addition, over this past year, the pandemic that has upended life around the globe has exacerbated many of these negative trends, bringing crucial economic and humanitarian systems to the brink of collapse. I wish to thank and commend the frontline health workers on the ground and my United Nations colleagues for their tireless commitment to helping the Palestinian people weather yet another storm. While the cost in lives and livelihoods has already been too great, I am certain that without the swift and robust interventions by health authorities, civil society organizations, donors and UN agencies the crisis would have proved deeper still.

I remain hopeful that next year we will not only turn the corner on the pandemic, but that, by facing this challenge together, we will find renewed confidence in the path towards a sustainable solution to this conflict.

Mr. President,

As this will be my last briefing to the Council, I would like to share a few parting thoughts.

Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs have lived with conflict for too long. The painful reality of their struggle has affected every single family for generations. Loss and displacement is part of the personal history of every single household. Palestinians have been upended from their homes, forced to seek refuge across the region. Jews have been upended from across the region, forced to seek refuge in Israel. This conflict is not just a conflict over land, for both peoples have the right to call Israel and Palestine their home. It is not only a conflict over history – personal and collective. It is a conflict over the very right of two nations to co-exist.

In 1994, the leaders of Israel and the PLO agreed on something that has rarely been done in the troubled history of the Middle East – they agreed to end the conflict not through war, not by declaring one side a winner and the other side a loser, but through peaceful negotiations. Surely that was not an easy decision. It was a decision that faced opposition from all sides. Yet it was a decision that was so bold, so visionary, so fragile that the international community came together immediately to protect it, to nurture it and to help them advance it.

Sadly, today that vision remains unachieved. It is a vision that has been marred by intifadas, continuing occupation and rapidly diminishing will to reach an agreement that is just and sustainable. Over the course of the past five years, I have met almost no Palestinian who doesn't

believe that negotiations are only a façade for the loss of more land. Neither have I met an Israeli who does not believe that every round of negotiations will lead to more violence and terror.

You know the realities of the conflict only too well -- our monthly Security Council briefings serve as a testament to the situation on the ground.

As I depart from this office, I remain firmly convinced that the world cannot leave the situation unattended. The UN Security Council has over the years passed a set of resolutions speaking to key aspects of how the conflict can be resolved. Bilateral agreements have been signed and ratified. The Middle East Quartet has been created. In the last two years, the U.S. has put forward a vision, albeit different from the broad consensus in this Council. Despite the differences, no one in the international community has questioned the foundation that any resolution of the conflict must be based on two-States, with the appropriate security and economic arrangements, achieved through direct negotiations and facilitated by the international community.

For all our collective efforts, the only way forward out of the one-State reality that we increasingly face on the ground is through engagement between the parties and not through violence.

Perhaps today is not the time for big international initiatives, but the time for steps – maybe small, sometimes maybe bold -- that protect that goal of two-States, side by side in peace and security, and create the conditions for agreement.

Perhaps today is not the time for grandstanding or symbolic victories.

Perhaps today is the time to admit that both Israelis and Palestinians must look inwards and see what they can do, both in coordination and independently of one another, to protect the goal of sustainable peace. In 2016, the UN, together with its partners in the Middle East Quartet, produced a joint report on what some of these steps may be. I encourage you to look at that report again as its recommendations remain valid.

Perhaps today is the time to admit that there are real opportunities for agreement, ones that come from the fact that we face a global COVID-19 pandemic, that we all need to work together to protect our societies from radicalization, religious extremism and economic implosion and to build on the new opportunities created by the Abraham Accords in the region.

It is not going to be easy, in fact it will be very, very hard, painstaking work to stitch back together what is necessary to allow the leaders on both sides to engage in a meaningful process.

Yet for all the goodwill in the world that the Palestinian and Israeli people can count on, rekindling the hope that the conflict can be resolved through peaceful negotiation cannot be imposed from the outside. It must come from within, from both peoples and from their freely elected leaders.

Mr. President,

In the absence of meaningful negotiations, I have worked on upholding the international consensus that the goal is of a two-State solution, I have warned of the dangers of the eroding status quo,

[As Delivered]

supported intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts, and, most of all, focused on preventive diplomacy. Together with Egypt, and with critical support from Qatar and others in the international community, the United Nations has played a pivotal role in preventing another devastating war in Gaza.

I have spoken out against injustices. I have condemned terror.

I firmly believe that the goal of a just and lasting peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples remains achievable through negotiations that can be mediated by the Middle East Quartet and critical Arab partners.

I would like to thank, Mr. President, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, their Governments, their civil servants and all interlocutors in Israel and Palestine for their open engagement with the United Nations. Surely on many occasions we have not seen eye-to-eye, however, their openness and willingness to engage has helped put the UN, in a unique position to mediate and talk to all sides of the conflict.

I want to thank the Security Council for your relentless engagement and support to our work and to the Secretary-General and the services of the Secretariat for your steadfast guidance.

Finally, I want to thank my colleagues at UNSCO for their outstanding professionalism and friendship.

UNSCO is in an excellent position to deal with the challenges of the future and to use the opportunities presented to advance the goal of a just and lasting peace on the basis of two States, in line with UN resolutions. In January, my successor Tor Wennesland should take over this mission. He is one of the most capable diplomats I have ever worked with. I wish him every success in the years ahead and hope that you will extend to him your full support, as you have done to me.

Thank you.