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

21 December 2021

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am devoting my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to the twentieth report on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016). The Secretary-General's written report that you have already received covers the period between 29 September and 9 December 2021.

Before turning to developments that have taken place since the submission of the written report, I would like to express my continued concern over recent developments in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in particular the deteriorating security situation.

Clashes, attacks, military operations – including in Area A – and high levels of settler-related violence have continued, alongside calls by Palestinian militant factions for increased confrontations with Israel. Continued unilateral steps -- including Israeli settlement advancement, evictions, and demolitions – and the severe fiscal and economic crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) further exacerbate the situation and undermine the PA's institutional stability.

If left unchecked, I am concerned that not only may the situation in the West Bank further deteriorate, but these dynamics could also impact the security situation in Gaza and undermine the cessation of hostilities that has held since May 2021.

It is crucial that all parties take immediate steps to lower tensions and restore calm.

Mister President,

Violent incidents have unfortunately continued throughout the OPT.

Overall, since 29 September, 12 Palestinians, including one woman and four children, were killed by Israeli security forces during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged attacks against Israelis, and other incidents across the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and 306 Palestinians, including three women and 53 children, were injured, including 16 by live ammunition. Thirty-nine Palestinians, including four children were injured by Israeli settlers or other civilians, who also perpetrated 121 attacks resulting in damage to Palestinian property.

In all, two Israeli civilians were killed and 39 Israelis — 30 civilians, including two women and two children, and nine members of the Israeli security forces -- were injured by Palestinians in clashes, shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks, as well as incidents involving the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails and other incidents. Palestinians perpetrated 105 attacks resulting in damage to Israeli property.

On 10 December, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF during clashes near the West Bank town of Beita, near Nablus. The man was the ninth Palestinian fatality in the same area this year since protests began in May in the vicinity of Beita against the neighboring Evyatar settlement outpost, partly evacuated in July.

On 12 December, clashes erupted in Ayda Camp, Bethlehem, between Hamas supporters and Palestinian Security Forces during a celebration for a released prisoner. Two Palestinian officers were injured by an explosive device.

On 13 December, ISF conducted a search-and-arrest operation in Nablus that was followed by an exchange of fire with armed Palestinians. One Palestinian man was killed and two others injured in unclear circumstances. Later that day, a general strike took place in Nablus to protest the incident. Clashes between Palestinian Security Forces and other armed Palestinians were reported during the man's funeral.

On 16 December, a 25-year-old Israeli was shot and killed by armed Palestinians near the evacuated settlement of Homesh, near Nablus. Two other Israelis were injured in the attack. On 17 December, settlers entered Qaryut village, south of Nablus, and severely beat a Palestinian man and damaged property. On 19 December, Israeli security forces arrested six Palestinians in the village of Silat al Harthiya, near Jenin, on suspicion of involvement in the shooting.

On 19 December, hundreds of settlers attempted to enter the Homesh outpost and set up illegal structures, breaking through ISF barricades and using violence against Israeli soldiers, including hitting one soldier with a vehicle. On 20 December, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz condemned violent acts by Israelis against Palestinians and ISF, saying that these attacks would not be accepted or tolerated.

Mister President,

Some affirmative steps have been taken since the submission of the written report.

On 11 December, the Palestinian Central Election Commission (CEC) conducted the first round of local council elections in several hundred small communities in the West Bank, with over 66 per cent of eligible voters participating. Over 25 per cent of candidates were women, with nine heading electoral lists. Their representation in local councils will amount to some 22 per cent, close to the minimum legal requirement for at least two seats per council. On 12 December, the CEC announced the start of preparations for a second round of municipal elections in larger West Bank communities and all local councils in Gaza set for 26 March.

On 14 December, U.S. and Palestinian officials met virtually to renew the U.S.-Palestinian Economic Dialogue, the first such meeting in five years.

Mister President,

I will now turn to several observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) during the reporting period.

Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, remains deeply concerning, particularly the consideration and advancement of plans in highly

controversial areas, crucial for the contiguity of a future Palestinian State, including in E1, Atarot and Givat Hamatos.

Israeli settlements constitute a flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions and international law and I call on the Government of Israel to cease the advancement of all settlement activities immediately.

I 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 occupied East Jerusalem.

I call on Israeli authorities to end the displacement and eviction of Palestinians, and to approve plans that would enable these communities to build legally and address their development needs.

In this context, I welcome the advancement of plans for several thousand housing units for Palestinians in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhood of al-Issawiya and in Area C.

I urge Israel to continue regularly advancing such plans and to issue building permits for all previously approved plans for Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem.

Mister President,

The continuing violence, incitement to violence and attacks against civilians, including acts of terrorism and settler-related violence, exacerbate mistrust and undermine a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

There can be no justification for such acts; they must be condemned by all. I reiterate that the violence must stop, and all perpetrators must be held accountable.

Mister President,

The deterioration of the security and socio-economic situation across the Occupied Palestinian Territory is deeply worrying and the situation must be reversed. It is essential that the parties avoid unilateral steps that change the reality on the ground, reduce flashpoints and violence across the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Concerted efforts by the parties – more than we have seen to date - are required to maintain calm, strengthen Palestinian institutions and restore hope. Furthermore, steps by all parties are urgently needed to shore up the economic and institutional stability of the PA, including through the implementation of needed reforms.

I note that the situation in Gaza also remains fragile. While constructive measures initiated during this reporting period are encouraging, further steps are required to solidify the cessation of hostilities and meet the population's needs in the Strip.

For any durable stability, movement and access in and out of the Strip must be improved, with a view to a full lifting of the closures in line with UN Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).

Furthermore, it is critical that Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts continue. I call on all Palestinian factions to re-double efforts to ensure the reunification of Gaza and the West

Bank, including East Jerusalem, under a single, democratic, national government. Gaza is, and must remain, an integral part of a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.

I also note the high turnout in the 11 December municipal elections, echoing the level of public engagement leading to the campaign period for planned elections earlier this year. I look forward to the second round of local council elections on 26 March and encourage all parties to respond positively to calls by the CEC to allow local elections across the OPT, including in Gaza.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to emphasize that the rising levels of violence we have seen in recent weeks should be a clear warning to us all.

If left unaddressed, the festering conflict drivers described in my briefing today and in the latest written report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) will drag us into yet another destructive and bloody round of violence. We must act now to prevent that from happening.

Strengthening the Palestinian Authority is critical to maintaining stability on the ground. Financial support is essential but not enough. I urge positive steps from all parties and necessary reforms that increase the PA's ability to deliver for the Palestinian people. At the same time, negative actions that undermine its authority need to stop.

This has been a year of significant shifts in the political context affecting this conflict, resulting in one of the most challenging set of circumstances to face the Palestinian Authority since its establishment. Nevertheless, I look ahead to next year with a determination that we will find opportunities to reverse the negative trajectory and work toward a constructive engagement by the parties – with the support of the international community – and to restore a political horizon. The UN remains committed to supporting Palestinians and Israelis to resolve the conflict and end the occupation through the achievement of a two-State solution, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

We will continue our intensive engagement with the parties, the Quartet, and regional and international partners to advance this goal.

Thank you.