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

21 July 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today as Palestinians and Israelis are grappling with a complex and potentially destabilizing three-pronged crisis:

An escalating health crisis as both struggle to contain the rapid spike of COVID-19 cases.

A spiraling economic crisis as businesses close, unemployment soars, protests increase, and the economy suffers the financial impact of months of lockdowns and restrictions.

And finally, a mounting political confrontation, driven by the threat of Israeli annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank, and the steps taken in response by the Palestinian leadership.

These developments are not happening in a vacuum. The unfolding dynamics have shed a stark light on the daily reality of the conflict and the imperative to resolve it through negotiations between the parties. They have further exposed the unsustainability of the occupation and the need to update agreements that define the relationship between the two sides in the interest of peace.

In recent weeks, the region and the broader international community have continued to express their firm rejection of annexation. Among these, on 1 July, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom published an Op-Ed in a leading Israeli newspaper expressing his opposition to annexation and asserting that such a step would violate international law and run “contrary to Israel's own long-term interests.” Two joint statements issued on 7 July – one by the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan, and the second by Foreign Ministers of nine Arab States and the Secretary-General of the Arab League – stressed their staunch opposition to the move and called for a return to negotiations based on UN resolutions and international law.

On 2 July, leaders from Fatah and Hamas held a rare joint video press conference, in an effort to restate their opposition to annexation and to commit to a unified Palestinian front against it.

Palestinian and Israeli women are also making their voices heard. On 9 July, I engaged with some 100 Palestinian women in a high-level dialogue organized by UN Women, marking the 20th anniversary of the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325. Participants shared their deep concern and uncertainty in the face of both COVID-19 and annexation threats. Ten Palestinian women leaders, supported by 180 women, issued a joint appeal against annexation, calling for the right to live in a democratic state of their own in freedom, dignity and equality.

(As Delivered)

A separate appeal issued by 22 Israeli women leaders, and later signed by over a hundred others, highlighted that annexation plans pose an irreversible danger to Israelis, Palestinians, and regional stability. Responding to both initiatives 45 global women leaders signed a joint call against annexation and for peace, highlighting the importance of heeding women's voices in situations of conflict.

The Secretary-General and the United Nations will continue efforts to resuscitate a dialogue among all stakeholders, with no preconditions, and in the interest of peace and a negotiated resolution to the conflict. For these efforts to stand a chance of success, there must be political will from all parties. Otherwise, the path to a negotiated solution risks quickly becoming unnavigable, moving instead towards a one-state reality of perpetual occupation and conflict.

Mister President,

Regrettably, the situation on the ground is rapidly being affected by the dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel.

To contain the pandemic, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has re-imposed movement restrictions across the West Bank as well as some closures in the worst-hit governorates. Israel has also re-imposed limitations on gatherings and certain non-essential businesses, as well as lockdowns in specific areas. Movement between Israel, the West Bank and Gaza remains heavily restricted, and the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt has been closed in both directions since 15 May.

The challenge of confronting the rapid increase in cases in the West Bank and boosting prevention efforts in Gaza has been significantly compounded by the ending of coordination between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The PA's refusal to accept any clearance revenues transferred by Israel has exacerbated an already concerning fiscal crisis and impacted service provision. It has effectively blocked the ability of patients to travel from Gaza for treatment outside of the Strip and has led to delays in delivering humanitarian assistance and materials intended for the COVID-19 response and other health support and services.

In response, the United Nations has engaged with all sides to ensure the continued and unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance. The UN has reached agreements with the PA to make exceptions for coordinating humanitarian deliveries and with Israel to streamline its administrative procedures, considering the COVID-19 crisis. I want to thank the authorities for their openness and cooperation with the United Nations on these challenges. Having said this, I am also concerned that we are far below the level of coordination that existed in the beginning of the year, when the first wave of the virus hit. This situation could have serious repercussions on the ability to control its spread and its impact on people's lives.

Over the past weeks, because of the unprecedented circumstances, the UN has offered to increase its intermediary role between the parties. This includes COVID-19 response as well as a greater role in the facilitation of patient referrals from Gaza. Nevertheless, there are limitations to what the UN and other organizations can be expected to do. Any increased responsibilities in this context should be limited and time-bound and not designed to replace the roles and responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority or the Government of Israel.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the breakdown in cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities have raised new concerns and complicated the speedy transfer of patients outside of Gaza, it is important to recognize the long-standing, underlying fragility of Gaza's own healthcare system.

Mister President,

On the economic side, the Palestinian Ministry of Finance announced on 2 July that it would pay partial Government salaries for the month of May. The May salary payments were delayed due to an 80 per cent reduction in Palestinian revenues stemming from the economic impact of COVID-19 and from the PA's refusal to accept the monthly transfers of its clearance revenues. It is unclear whether the Palestinian Government will have sufficient resources to make any future salary payments or, indeed, to continue to carry out its governing functions in the coming months.

The suspension of coordination between the PA and Israel has also impeded the ability of Palestinian Security Forces (PSF) to move through Areas B and C of the West Bank, undermining their capacity to enforce COVID-19-related restrictions.

Mister President,

During the reporting period, daily violence continued throughout the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Overall, one Palestinian was killed by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) and 65 Palestinians, including ten children, and two Israeli soldiers were injured in various incidents.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza organized protests against Israel's plan to annex parts of the West Bank. Overall these protests remained peaceful. On some occasions Israeli Security Forces used rubber-coated bullets and tear gas, declared closed military areas and set up checkpoints near protests.

On 9 July, ISF shot and killed a 34-year-old Palestinian man and shot and wounded a 17-year-old Palestinian in the central West Bank village of Kifl Hares. ISF released a CCTV video allegedly showing the two throwing Molotov cocktails toward a military patrol and soldiers opening fire in response.

Meanwhile, settlers perpetrated some 13 attacks against Palestinians, resulting in nine injuries and damage to property, about half the number of such incidents recorded during the previous month.

There were some 25 incidents also in which Palestinians threw stones or Molotov cocktails at Israeli-owned vehicles, injuring seven Israeli civilians, including one child, and causing damage to property.

In Gaza, while the relative calm continued, Palestinian militants fired five rockets towards southern Israel. One fell short inside Gaza, one was intercepted by the Iron Dome system and the others hit in open areas in Israel, causing no injuries or damage. On all occasions, the IDF carried out retaliatory strikes against Hamas targets, including underground infrastructure in the Strip, with

(As Delivered)

no injuries reported. Over the month, militants also test fired an unusually high, 69, rockets and mortars towards the sea, with 44 projectiles launched on 1 and 3 July, alone.

Economic tensions brought out dozens of Palestinians on 5 July, who demonstrated in front of the Legislative Council in Gaza City against the deteriorating situation, poverty and unemployment.

Mister President,

In the past month, the Israeli authorities demolished 48 Palestinian-owned structures due to a lack of Israeli-issued building permits. Another five structures were self-demolished by their owners following the receipt of demolition orders. Of the buildings demolished, 39 were in Area C and 14 in East Jerusalem. Consequently, 34 people, including 17 children and ten women, were displaced and over 250 people were otherwise affected.

I note that the latest information available from Israeli authorities indicates that, as of 31 May, the number of Palestinian detainees, including minors, in Israeli prisons is at its lowest level in years. The number of Palestinian minors in Israeli prisons has declined by some 30 percent, from 201 in February to 142 in May. While still too high, I welcome this development, particularly in light of the recent calls to release detainees and reduce their numbers during the COVID-19 crisis.

Mister President,

Turning briefly to the region, in Lebanon, the economic situation continues to deteriorate, with inflation rising as the Lebanese lira falls against the U.S. dollar. As the health and education sectors come under increased stress, and with growing concerns over food insecurity, the Government and the International Monetary Fund remain engaged in talks over a potential assistance package. In parallel, Lebanon has witnessed a spike in daily COVID-19 infections, with 2,542 confirmed cases as of 15 July.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained mostly stable, notwithstanding several instances of weapons being pointed between Israel Defense Forces and Lebanese Armed Forces along the Blue Line. On 2 July, under COVID-19 restrictions, the UNIFIL Head of Mission and Force Commander chaired a tripartite meeting attended by senior delegations of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the IDF to prevent tensions along the Blue Line.

On the Golan, while generally calm, the situation remained volatile, with the continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. On 15 July, the Alpha side informed UNDOF that they had “eliminated” a position within the area of separation which they believed was a violation and a threat. UNDOF did not observe this activity but observed an explosion in the area of separation consistent with the report from the Alpha side.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to emphasize that confronting the current crises requires unity of effort, strength of purpose, and a clear understanding of the multifaceted risks we are facing.

(As Delivered)

The ferocity of the COVID-19 virus and its devastating human and economic toll demand extraordinary measures – measures that must rise above politics-as-usual. Immediate efforts to curb the virus and to mitigate its impact must be prioritized.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have a duty to protect the lives and livelihoods of their populations.

With unemployment in Israel surging to over 20 per cent, and with thousands of Israelis taking to the streets to demand greater financial support from their Government, many have highlighted the staggering financial and, potentially, human cost of moving forward with potential annexation plans.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call on the Israeli Government to abandon plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

With an 80 per cent reduction in its income, the Palestinian Authority faces the risk of a total collapse at a time when Palestinians throughout the occupied territory need the services and support of their Government more than ever.

I call on both sides to work with the United Nations in ensuring that those forms of civil and security coordination that are vital to preventing the continuing spread of the corona virus are reinstated immediately. This should be done without prejudice to the political position of either party. It is necessary to do that in order to protect lives in the face of rapidly growing infection rates.

We will continue to work with all sides to ensure that humanitarian and health needs are met.

For the United Nations, protecting lives will always remain our highest priority.

The complexities of the pandemic also require us to examine how we arrived at this pivotal, and destructive, point in the history of the conflict and what it will take to reverse the current course.

Last week, I spoke with representatives of Palestinian and Israeli civil society organizations engaged in peacebuilding efforts. Their resilience, creativity and commitment to a peaceful solution are deeply inspiring, and we, in the international community, would do well to follow their lead.

Today, however, it is not enough to restate our opposition to annexation. Today we should discuss what can and must be done to improve the situation on the ground, preserve the prospect for a two-state solution, increase the chances of meaningful negotiations for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and protect these efforts from spoilers, radicals and extremists.

To this effect I reiterate today the Secretary-General's call to the members of the Middle East Quartet, the Arab countries, the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to urgently re-engage.

We need to restart diplomacy!

(As Delivered)

Over these past years, these types of discussions have been dormant for too long, allowing both parties to move further apart along diverging paths. Unilateral action and the threat of unilateral action have made the goal appear ever more distant. Only by engaging together, based on shared principles and aspirations, can we identify realistic steps to avoid increasing polarisation and advance the goal of two states, living side-by-side in peace, security, mutual recognition, integrated into the region.

We must use the opportunity presented by the current crises to move forward, to and to regain the path towards a negotiated two-state solution, built on a just and sustainable resolution to the conflict in line with relevant UN resolutions, bilateral agreements and international law.

Thank you.