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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
23 February 2022

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

This month has witnessed a worrying continuation of the trends I have outlined repeatedly in this Council, particularly the destabilizing deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Across the West Bank, daily violence continues; tensions in East Jerusalem and the refugee camps are mounting and settler violence remains a serious concern. Illegal settlements and planning processes are steadily advancing, alongside demolitions and evictions, including in and around Jerusalem.

These factors are increasing the territorial fragmentation of the West Bank, undermining the Palestinian Authority and further eroding the prospects for peace.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority continues to face a prolonged financial crisis, which severely undermines its capacity to deliver services, and has crippled the economy. Economic and political reforms driven from inside the Palestinian Authority are a critical first step to changing this situation. The PA must be strengthened, and the international community should support actions to this end.

High-level dialogue between the Israeli and Palestinian leadership has led to welcome commitments and some economic steps, but these efforts must be rapidly turned into substantial, durable achievements and significantly expanded alongside policy changes by both sides.

Recent efforts by Israel to reduce settler violence in the West Bank and avoid further provocative steps in Jerusalem are well-noted

In Gaza, a fragile calm currently prevails. But absent fundamental change, this is only temporary. Hamas control of the Strip, Palestinian divisions and the Israeli closure regime are creating a generation who have experienced multiple wars and humanitarian crises and who have few prospects for a better life. In line with resolution 1860 (2009), Israel should further ease restrictions on the movement of goods and people to and from Gaza, with the goal of ultimately lifting them.

Mr. President,

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

In the occupied West Bank, six Palestinians, including two children, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) during demonstrations, clashes, search-and-arrest operations, attacks and alleged

attacks against Israelis, and other incidents, and 205 Palestinians, including 25 children, were injured. Israeli settlers or other civilians perpetrated 55 attacks against Palestinians resulting in 18 injuries and/or damage to Palestinian property.

In all, nine Israeli civilians, including at least one woman and two children, and eight Israeli security personnel were injured by Palestinians in clashes, shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails, and other incidents. In total, Palestinians perpetrated 108 attacks against Israeli civilians resulting in injuries and/or damage to Israeli property.

On 8 February, Israeli Security Forces (ISF) entered Nablus, in Area A of the occupied West Bank, and shot and killed three Palestinians in a car. According to Israeli authorities, the three were members of a cell that had carried out attacks on Israeli forces, were planning additional attacks and tried to shoot at ISF during the incident. The Fatah-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades later claimed the men as members. The Palestinian Cabinet and Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the killing, calling it an assassination and demanding an international investigation. Palestinians across the West Bank protested the killing and a general strike was announced in some areas.

On 13 February, a 16-year-old Palestinian boy was shot and killed by ISF in the village of Silat al-Harithiya, near Jenin. The boy was killed amid clashes that erupted after Israeli forces entered the village to demolish the family home of one of the perpetrators of a December shooting attack that killed an Israeli civilian.

On 15 February, a 19-year-old Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF in Nabi Saleh village, near Ramallah. The incident occurred near an Israeli checkpoint in a confrontation between ISF and youths, where the man was reportedly shot in the back.

On 18 February, during demonstrations in Beita village, near Nablus, 26 Palestinians were injured, including four by live ammunition. Two of the injured were first responders from the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS).

On 22 February, ISF shot a 13-year-old Palestinian boy in al-Khader area near Bethlehem. ISF evacuated the boy who was later pronounced dead. According to conflicting reports, the boy was either throwing stones or a Molotov cocktail when shot.

All loss of life is deeply regrettable, and I reiterate that children must never be the target of violence or put in harm's way. Security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when it is strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Mister President,

Settler-related violence remained a concern throughout the reporting period.

On 21 January, adjacent to Burin village near Nablus, settlers injured five Israeli activists involved in a tree planting activity with local Palestinians, set one of their vehicles ablaze and damaged another. On 7 February, three residents of the outpost of Givat Ronen were arrested for suspected involvement in the attack.

On 24 January, Israeli settlers drove a convoy through the Palestinian town of Huwwara, near Nablus, throwing stones at Palestinians, their vehicles and shops, and causing significant damage. Three Palestinians, including a 17-year-old boy, were injured. Israeli police opened an investigation and on 16 February announced the arrest of 17 Israelis in relation to the incident.

Following these incidents, several senior Israeli Government members and Members of Knesset condemned the violence carried out by settlers and pledged to act against it.

I note such constructive statements and urge tangible action in line with Israel's obligation, as the occupying power, to ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population.

I reiterate that perpetrators of all acts of violence must be held accountable and brought swiftly to justice.

Mister President,

Turning to settlement advancements, on 24 January, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced plans for some 400 new housing units in place of an existing 80 units in the settlement of Gilo in occupied East Jerusalem.

On 1 February, Israel's Attorney-General published a legal opinion allowing Israeli authorities to advance plans for a settlement in the partially evacuated outpost of Evyatar and authorizing accelerated planning procedures for this purpose. The opinion was issued following a land survey by Israel's Civil Administration. Advancement of the plan requires a decision by Israel's Defense Minister.

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

Mister President,

Israeli authorities demolished, seized or forced owners to demolish 72 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and seven in East Jerusalem, displacing 73 Palestinians, including 32 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

I remain particularly concerned by the potential eviction of a number of Palestinian families from homes they have lived in for decades in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in occupied East Jerusalem.

On 30 January, Israeli authorities authorized the eviction of a Palestinian family comprising 11 people, including four children, from their home in Sheikh Jarrah during the month of March. In the wake of this decision, tensions increased in the neighborhood, with numerous reports of violent altercations and damage to property. The already-sensitive situation escalated on 13 February, when a far-right Israeli Knesset Member set up a makeshift office near the family's home and called for supporters to come to the neighborhood. On 22 February, an Israeli court suspended the eviction pending consideration of an appeal by the family, and contingent on the family's depositing some USD 8,000 as collateral.

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

Mister President,

From 6 to 9 February, the Palestinian Central Council met for the first time since 2018, electing a new leadership for the Palestinian National Council and new members for vacant positions in the PLO Executive Committee. In its final statement, the PCC called for a halt to security coordination and the suspension of recognition of Israel until it recognizes the Palestinian State based on the June 1967 borders and halts settlement activity, reiterating decisions from the previous PCC meeting.

I again underscore that the fiscal condition of the Palestinian Authority remains dire. Revenues are not keeping pace with needed expenditures, leading to accumulated debt, and investment in important sectors including health, education and infrastructure is virtually non-existent.

Urgent action is required by the PA, Israel and donors to avert the fiscal collapse of the PA and to pave the way for long-term fiscal reforms.

To this end, I welcome the current work of the IMF mission to support the PA's important work on fiscal stability and reform. The IMF is expected to provide its report to the AHLC later in the spring.

I also welcome ongoing efforts by Israel to facilitate greater access for Palestinian workers from Gaza and the West Bank to the labor market in Israel, which should be continued.

Mister President,

Turning to Gaza, the further easing of restriction on access of materials into Gaza remains a key priority.

I welcome the parties' engagement in this regard over the past weeks, including the entry of white cement to Gaza required for reconstruction, but more needs to be done.

The UN continues to highlight to the Government of Israel priority items that need to enter Gaza, largely for United Nations health, water and sanitation projects – some of which were requested over a year ago. Significant delays in approval of items under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) impact humanitarian operations and should also be resolved without delay.

I hope the resumption of technical-level trilateral meetings on the GRM will lead to improvements to facilitate reconstruction and much-needed development projects.

I urge both parties to build on recent momentum to continue to enhance access and trade.

I am, however, concerned that recent steps taken by Hamas authorities risk compromising the Palestinian banking system, with potential repercussions for humanitarian and development activities conducted by the international donor community.

With funding from Qatar, the gradual reconstruction has begun of housing units that were totally demolished during the May 2021 escalation, thus far reaching some 115 households. Reconstructing destroyed homes remains a priority and needs to be scaled up. Similarly, UNRWA has completed the repair of nearly 7,000 housing units and is currently working with 700 families whose homes were totally demolished with the help from the US and Germany.

Let me reiterate the Secretary-General's call to provide UNRWA with predictable, sustained and sufficient funding to provide essential assistance to Palestine refugees in the region. If we act early enough in the year, we can prevent a financial crisis of the scale of last year and the risk that millions of refugees be left without education, health services and lifesaving cash and food assistance. Any reduction or disruption of services can have significant humanitarian, political and security consequences for the region and beyond. Preserving UNRWA services is a joint responsibility of all UN Member States.

Mister President,

Turning to the region, while the ceasefire between Israel and Syria has been generally maintained, the situation remains volatile with continued violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement by the parties. This includes firing by the Israel Defense Forces into the area of separation and the continued presence of the Syrian armed forces in the area of separation. It is important that the parties respect their obligations under the Agreement and support the liaison with UNDOF to de-escalate the situation during heightened tensions.

In Lebanon, following a three-month stalemate, the Cabinet reconvened on 24 January and shortly thereafter passed the 2022 state budget, now with Parliament for approval. Preparations are ongoing for the 15 May parliamentary elections, although resources have not yet been fully allocated.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remained relatively calm notwithstanding a number of incidents. UNIFIL remains engaged with the parties to contain incidents and defuse tensions, including through a tripartite meeting on 11 February.

Mister President,

While we have seen some encouraging economic initiatives, we must push beyond the paradigm of managing, rather than resolving the conflict. Economic steps alone – while essential and desperately needed – will not put us on the path toward a just and lasting peace. There is no substitute for a legitimate political process that will resolve the core issues driving the conflict.

Nevertheless, we must begin somewhere. There is a need for a package of incremental steps – which are significant and durable – that would reflect a more coherent strategy to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and clearly chart the way toward a two-State reality.

Getting there requires political leadership. I urge Israelis, Palestinians, regional States and the broader international community to take firm action to enable the parties to re-engage on the path towards meaningful negotiations.

Only an end to the occupation and the achievement of two States, living side by side in peace and security, based on the 1967 lines, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements, will resolve this conflict.

I remain actively engaged in advancing these efforts with my counterparts in the Middle East Quartet, key regional partners and Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Thank you.