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

24 June 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

Secretary-General Guterres,

I am devoting my regular briefing on the situation in the Middle East to the fourteenth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). The written report you have already received covers the period from 21 March to 4 June 2020.

Before turning to developments that have occurred since the written report, I would like to reiterate the Secretary-General's grave concern over the continuing threat of Israeli annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank – a process officials have said could begin in a matter of days or weeks.

Deliberations over this move have brought this long-standing conflict to a critical juncture.

Annexation could irrevocably alter the nature of Israeli-Palestinian relations. It risks up-ending more than a quarter of a century of international efforts in support of a future viable Palestinian State living in peace, security and mutual recognition with the State of Israel.

The Secretary-General has just unequivocally stated that any move to annex occupied Palestinian territory would have serious implications in terms of international law, the two-State solution and the prospects of a negotiated, sustainable peace.

International and regional opposition has also been widespread. European leaders continue to voice their opposition to annexation and have also affirmed that it would amount to a violation of international law. Powerful statements rejecting such a move have been issued in the past weeks by His Majesty, the King of Jordan, the Arab League, and leaders across the Arab world, including a strong message directly to the Israeli people from the United Arab Emirates.

In addition to the official statements, we have witnessed opposition to the move from Israeli and Palestinian civil society, think tanks, academics and many others.

Multiple opinion polls have indicated that Israelis are deeply divided over the issue and do not consider it a priority as the country is in the grips of an economic crisis and rising unemployment. Thousands of Israelis have protested the move at gatherings in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square and other locations across the country.

Mister President,

Recognising that both peoples have a right to live in their ancestral home, 27 years ago Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed to embark on a noble but difficult road to resolve the conflict through

negotiations, without taking unilateral action, and in order to reach a final status agreement on a just peace.

Today we are further than ever from this goal.

As the prospect of a negotiated two-State solution is undercut, the specter of anger, radicalization and violence emerges. Beyond the legal, security and economic implications, the threat of unilaterally annexing parts of the West Bank will send one message and one message alone – bilateral negotiations cannot achieve peace.

We cannot allow this to happen.

No good can come out of the breakdown of dialogue and communications.

Diplomacy must be given a chance.

All of us who believe in the legitimate right of both Palestinians and Israelis to self-determination, security and a brighter future must reject this move and consolidate efforts to preserve a sustainable two-State solution.

This is why I ask you all today to join the Secretary-General in his call for an immediate re-engagement, with no preconditions, between the Middle East Quartet – the United States, the Russian Federation, the European Union and the United Nations – and the Palestinian leadership, Israel and the countries of the region; this is in order to find a way out of the current crisis.

I believe that only by working together we can restore meaningful Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and improve stability and conditions for people on the ground.

Such discussions have been dormant for too long, letting both sides drift further apart along diverging paths. Unilateral action has made the goal appear ever more distant.

Based on shared principles and aspirations, we can identify realistic steps to avoid increasing polarisation and to advance the goal of two states, living side-by-side in peace and security, and integrated into the region.

In the interest of peace, I urge the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to take this opportunity and to return to the path of engagement.

Mister President,

In response to the threat of annexation, the Palestinian leadership declared itself absolved of all agreements and understandings with Israel and the United States. It has subsequently halted all bilateral contacts. This decision has had, and will increasingly have, a dramatic impact on all aspects of Palestinian life.

Particularly worrisome is the decision to stop accepting the clearance revenues that Israel collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Adding to the economic uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Palestinian Authority has now lost 80 per cent of its monthly revenue. This gap cannot be filled by donors.

Palestinians in Gaza, who have lived with closures and under the control of Hamas for more than a decade, are particularly vulnerable. The ending of civilian coordination will not allow them to receive life-saving treatment. Already, an eight-month-old infant has lost his life due to this situation.

Surely there must be a red line when it comes to the lives of children!

The UN and other international organizations are increasingly being asked to perform coordination responsibilities. While we are prepared to provide support on an emergency basis, the UN cannot replace the Palestinian Authority. It is critical that humanitarian and other assistance not be delayed or stopped.

Mister President,

In the coming weeks, decisions may be reached that will do irreparable damage to Palestinian and Israeli societies, to the security and economic wellbeing of both peoples.

This bleak vision, however, is not yet a *fait accompli*. The window is closing, but there is still time to avert chaos. It will require a concerted effort by all stakeholders and the will to take political risks to achieve peace.

As a first step, I join the Secretary-General in calling on Israel to abandon its plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

Mister President,

Allow me to turn briefly to significant developments since the written report has been circulated.

In terms of settlement-related activities, on 9 June, Israel's High Court of Justice struck down a controversial 2017 law that enabled wide-scale expropriation of private Palestinian land and the retroactive legalization, under Israeli law, of thousands of housing units in Israeli settlements. The Court ruled that the law was unconstitutional due to its violation of Palestinians' rights to property and equality.

Meanwhile, one Palestinian was killed, and 44 were injured, including 6 children, during demonstrations, clashes and other incidents across the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including five by live ammunition. Three Israelis were injured when stones were thrown at a bus traveling through the West Bank.

A total of 45 structures were demolished on grounds of lack of permits in Area C and East Jerusalem, displacing some 28 people and otherwise affecting an additional 250.

On 23 June, a 28-year-old Palestinian man from Abu Dis was shot dead by ISF in an apparent car-ramming attack at a checkpoint and an IDF soldier was injured. Settler-related violence incidents during the reporting period were concentrated mainly in Hebron's H2 area and the Nablus Governorate.

In Gaza, despite the relative calm, the launching of incendiary balloons and devices continued, with some 20 devices launched over the fence into Israel. On 15 June, a rocket was launched from Gaza towards Israel, landing in an open field and causing no damage. In retaliation, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) targeted several Hamas targets in the Strip.

Meanwhile the Kerem Shalom crossing for goods into Gaza has continued to operate normally. However, the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee in Gaza stopped receiving and processing permit applications for Gaza residents and ended all communications with Israeli authorities. As a result, hundreds of patients, including many children needing life-saving medical treatment have not been able to exit the Strip.

Mister President,

UNRWA's financial situation remains a serious concern to all of us. I thank Jordan and Sweden for their efforts to mobilize support for the Agency, including yesterday's pledging conference which they co-chaired, with the participation of the Secretary-General. I welcome the pledges that were announced, although they fall well short of the needs and UNRWA's funding gap remains extremely serious. I encourage Member States to support the Agency to ensure its operations can continue throughout 2020.

Mr. President,

In closing, I would like to again highlight the immense risks we face over the coming weeks and months as we confront the very real possibility of annexation and its consequences.

If implemented, these steps could dramatically alter local dynamics, triggering instability across the Occupied Palestinian Territory and maybe beyond. This conflict has been marked by periods of extreme violence, but never before has the risk of escalation been accompanied by a political horizon so distant, an economic situation so fragile and a region so volatile.

It is crucial for all stakeholders to take action that will enable the parties to step back from the brink. The goal must be to urgently re-engage in dialogue that will halt unilateral steps, chart a positive way forward and avoid a descent into chaos.

Everyone must do their part in the coming weeks to preserve and promote the prospect of ending the occupation and achieving a negotiated two-State solution, based on international law, UN resolutions, and bilateral agreements.

Thank you.