

As Delivered

TOR WENNESLAND
SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
25 April 2022

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Allow me to begin by wishing all Muslims a blessed Ramadan. I also extend my best wishes to all Christians and Jews who celebrated Easter and Passover.

When I briefed the Council in March, I expressed my hope that this month and its holy days would be a peaceful and celebratory time. Sadly, this period has been marked by violence in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and terror attacks in Israel, which have killed and injured scores of civilians. In Jerusalem, the situation remains relatively calm despite inflammatory rhetoric and violent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli Security Forces (ISF) that have taken place at the Holy Sites.

In Gaza, the launching of rockets is undermining the fragile stability that has prevailed since May.

Let me be clear: there is no justification for acts of terrorism or violence against civilians.

Violence, provocations and incitement must stop immediately and be unequivocally condemned by all.

I also reiterate that political, religious and community leaders on all sides must continue do their part to reduce tensions, uphold the status quo at the Holy Sites, and ensure their sanctity is respected by all.

In this regard, I welcome statements by senior Israeli officials reiterating Israel's commitment to upholding the status quo and ensuring that only Muslims would be allowed to pray on the Holy Esplanade.

Madam President,

At this sensitive and volatile moment, Israeli and Palestinian leaders have made some commendable efforts to ease tensions, condemn attacks and rein in violence. Regional and international partners, such as Egypt, Jordan and UN, have engaged to help restore calm at the Holy Sites and ensure continued access for Muslim worshippers. These efforts should continue.

Madam President,

Daily violence escalated sharply in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and in Israel.

In the occupied West Bank and Israel, 23 Palestinians, including three women and four 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 541 Palestinians, including 30 women and 80 children, were injured. Israeli settlers or other civilians perpetrated some 66 attacks against Palestinians resulting in nine injuries and/or damage to Palestinian property.

In all, 12 Israelis, including two women, as well as three foreign nationals, were killed and 82 Israelis, including some six children and four women, as well one foreign national, were injured by Palestinians in shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks, clashes, the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails, and other incidents. In total, Palestinians perpetrated 104 attacks against Israeli civilians resulting in injuries and/or damage to Israeli property.

Over two weeks, four terrorist attacks took place inside Israel – the deadliest such attacks in years. On 22 March, an Arab Israeli man killed four Israeli civilians, including two women, in an attack in the Israeli city of Be'er Sheva, before being shot and killed by Israeli civilians. A week later, two Israeli Arab men carried out a shooting attack in the Israeli city of Hadera, killing two Israelis and injuring four others before being shot and killed by ISF.

On 29 March, a Palestinian man from the West Bank shot and killed three Israelis and two foreign nationals, injuring ten others in a shooting attack in the city of B'nai Brak in central Israel. The assailant was shot and killed by Israeli police. On 7 April, a Palestinian from the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank carried out a shooting attack in the center of the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, killing three Israeli civilians and injuring 14. Following an intensive manhunt, the assailant was shot dead by ISF on 8 April.

Following the attacks in Israel, Israeli authorities significantly reinforced ISF presence along the Separation Barrier and increased military operations inside the occupied West Bank.

On 31 March, two Palestinians, including a 16-year-old boy, were killed during clashes and armed exchanges in Jenin during an ISF search-and-arrest operation; and 20 Palestinians were injured.

On 10 April, ISF shot and killed an unarmed Palestinian woman with a vision impairment who ran with raised arms towards an ISF checkpoint near Husan. Israeli authorities said they were investigating the incident.

On the same day, ISF shot and injured a 16-year-old Palestinian boy who later died of his injuries.

On 13 April, a 14-year-old Palestinian boy was shot dead by ISF during clashes in Husan. ISF said that boy had attempted to throw a Molotov cocktail at ISF when he was shot, an account disputed by Palestinian eyewitnesses.

Palestinians were also killed by ISF during search and arrest operations, exchanges of fire and clashes including on 2 April and 9 April in Jenin; 10 April in Bethlehem and Jenin; 13 April in the village of Silwad, near Ramallah and in Nablus; 14 April in Kafr Dan, near Jenin and 18 April in the village of Yamoun, near Jenin.

Other Palestinians were shot and killed, reportedly in the context of attacks or attempted attacks, by ISF or Israeli civilians on 31 March near the settlement of Neve Daniel and on 10 April in Hebron.

On 15 April, during the early morning hours, a large number of Palestinians gathered at the Al Aqsa compound. Some Palestinians threw stones, fireworks and other heavy objects towards Israeli Security Forces, and ISF used stun grenades, sponge-tipped bullets and batons, including against some bystanders. In the midst of these clashes, several dozen Palestinians entered a mosque in the compound, with some continuing to throw stones and fireworks towards ISF. Following a standoff with those inside, Israeli police entered the mosque and arrested those barricaded inside. During the clashes, some damage was caused to the structure of the mosque.

Some 160 Palestinians were injured, including four women, 27 children and at least one journalist, while some 400 were arrested, most of whom were released later that day. According to ISF, three policemen were injured during the clashes. The conduct of Israeli forces has raised concerns about possible excessive use of force.

Importantly, though, noon prayers subsequently took place that day without major incident.

Over the following days, there have been additional, though more limited, clashes at the Holy Sites and in and around the Old City. Some 52 Palestinians were injured by ISF in these incidents and ten Israelis were injured by Palestinians in two separate incidents. On 19 April, Israeli authorities decided, in line with past practice, that non-Muslims would not be allowed to visit the Holy Esplanade between Friday, 22 April and the end of the month of Ramadan.

Despite the tensions, overall, hundreds of thousands of Muslims, Jews and Christians have been able to celebrate the holy days in and around the Old City in relative peace and without further escalation.

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

Security forces must exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life. I am particularly appalled that children continue to be killed and injured. I urge Israeli authorities to conduct thorough and transparent investigations into all instances of possible excessive use of force.

Madam President,

Against the backdrop of continued settlement activities and ongoing pressure on Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank, as well as heightened tensions, settler-related violence remained high, particularly following the terrorist attacks in Israel.

On 10 April, dozens of Palestinians vandalized and set fire to a Jewish holy site located in Area A in the West Bank city of Nablus before being dispersed by Palestinian Security Forces.

Vandalizing religious sites is unacceptable and has the potential to further escalate the situation. I call on all parties to ensure religious sites and places of worship are respected and protected.

Madam President,

Turning to settlement-related developments, on 27 March, members of an Israeli settler organization accompanied by Israeli police took over the first floor of a historic building in Jerusalem's Old City. The settlers' seizure took place amid ongoing legal proceedings over ownership of the property between the settler organization and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. In a statement issued on 29 March, the Patriarchate called the seizure a "threat to the continued existence of a Christian Quarter in Jerusalem."

On 19 April, thousands of Israeli activists, accompanied by right-wing Members of Knesset, marched to the evacuated Homesh settlement, demanding its re-establishment. Prior to the march, Israeli security forces temporarily closed the main road and blocked the entrances to several villages, prompting clashes with Palestinians; at least fourteen Palestinians were injured by rubber-coated metal bullets.

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

Madam President,

Ahead of and during the month of Ramadan there was a slowdown in the demolition of Palestinian homes. Overall, the reporting period saw Israeli authorities demolish, seize or force owners to demolish 27 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C and 1 in occupied East Jerusalem, displacing 8 Palestinians, including 4 children. The demolitions were carried out due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

On 30 March, Israel's Supreme Court decided to postpone by some six months a ruling on the potential demolition of 38 homes in the Palestinian village of al-Walajeh near Jerusalem, citing progress in discussions between the Palestinian residents and Israeli authorities on advancing a building and zoning plan for the village.

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

Madam President,

Turning to Gaza, the security, humanitarian and economic situation remains deeply troubling. Palestinians in Gaza continue to suffer as a result of years of severe economic and movement restrictions resulting from the Israeli closure regime, as well as the nature of Hamas rule and the ongoing threat of violence.

After several months with no rocket fire, militants in Gaza launched five rockets towards Israel, with one landing in the Israeli town of Sderot and causing property damage. The others were intercepted by the Iron Dome system, landed short in the Strip, or landed in open areas in Israel. In retaliation, IDF conducted airstrikes against what it said were Hamas targets in the Strip, with no injuries reported. Following the rocket launches, Israeli authorities closed the Erez crossing into Israel to Palestinian workers and traders on 24 and 25 April.

I reiterate that the indiscriminate launching of rockets towards Israeli population centers violates international law and must stop immediately.

Madam President,

Some positive developments related to movement and access in and out of the Strip took place during the reporting period.

On 27 March, the Israeli Government approved the issuance of 20,050 permits for Palestinian workers from Gaza to enter Israel, in addition to some existing 2,500 permits issued for traders and businessmen. The Government also allocated some USD 12 million to improving the crossings between Gaza and Israel, as the amount of goods exiting Gaza remained at a relatively high level. In a separate decision, Israeli authorities approved essential medical equipment, such as mobile x-ray machines, and reduced restrictions on the import to Gaza of 56 communications items – many of them routine.

Separately, following agreement by the Palestinian Authority and Israel, preparations are underway to facilitate the entry into Gaza under the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) of dual-use materials and equipment needed for the repair and maintenance of Gaza's fishing boats as part of revitalizing the fishing sector. Success of this initiative should pave the way for a similar easing of restrictions in other sectors.

Reconstruction of homes fully or partially damaged during the May 2021 escalation is continuing, albeit slowly largely due to lack of funds. In a new development, around 3,000 tons of rebar entered Gaza through the Egyptian controlled Rafah crossing during the reporting period.

While these developments are welcome, further steps are needed by all parties to further enhance access and trade, and to improve the prospects for economic development of the Strip.

Madam President,

The fiscal condition of the Palestinian Authority remains precarious. While PA revenues have risen in recent months, expenditures continue to grow and adequate budget support from donors has not been forthcoming, making it increasingly difficult for the PA to address outstanding debts and make critical investments in the economy and its people.

Following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, rising prices and market disruptions – which are taking place across the Middle East - threaten food security levels of vulnerable families in the OPT. The cost of UNRWA's quarterly distribution has increased by 42 per cent since the end of 2021 in Gaza where the UN accounts for nearly 60 per cent of food supply, which is in addition to meeting needs for food security, a key stabilizing factor. Spiking international prices for construction materials will also impact reconstruction efforts in Gaza. Without additional funding, WFP and UNRWA will not be able to meet the food needs of the Palestinian population this year, which can have a destabilizing impact across the OPT, particularly in the Gaza Strip. I echo the Secretary-General's appeal for urgent support to UNRWA, which continues to face a critical financial situation.

The parties and regional and international partners must work in concert to move the PA onto a firmer fiscal footing, while addressing broader systemic issues. While we have seen some encouraging initiatives and Israeli-Palestinian cooperation to address economic challenges in recent months, a coherent strategy is needed to ensure that progress made is not reversed. Policy changes and initiatives to better regulate the economic interdependence between Israelis and Palestinians and promote more effective and integrated governance are much needed.

Madam President,

Turning to the region, on 21 April, Jordan convened a ministerial of the Arab League to discuss tensions at the Holy Sites. The Committee issued a statement following the meeting calling for “the respect of the legal and historic status quo.”

The ceasefire between Israel and Syria is being maintained in a volatile security situation characterized by violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement between Israel and Syria by the parties. As always, such developments present the risk of escalation.

Lebanon is preparing for parliamentary elections to be held on 15 May. The UN continues to support the authorities’ operational preparations, encourage women’s political participation, and urge campaigning without hate speech. On 7 April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced a staff-level agreement with the Government of Lebanon that would unlock around 3 billion USD in financial aid, subject to the implementation of major reforms.

At a sensitive time of ongoing tensions in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, I am concerned by the firing of a rocket across the Blue Line into Israel in the early hours of this morning (25 April). No group has claimed responsibility for this attack. The IDF responded with artillery fire into Lebanon. There were no casualties reported and I urge restraint on all sides. UNIFIL continues to engage with the Lebanese Armed Forces to increase its counter rocket launching operations to prevent further such incidents and contribute to stability along the Blue Line.

Madam President,

The violence and spiraling tensions of the past month have underscored, yet again, that efforts to manage the conflict are not a substitute for real progress towards resolving it. We must work immediately to lower tensions and maintain calm. In parallel, collective efforts are needed to address the conflict drivers. Reducing violence and halting settlement activity, while shoring up the Palestinian Authority’s fiscal stability and strengthening Palestinian institutions are crucial. Steps to improve economic conditions must be implemented in a way that lays the foundations for a return to a meaningful political process.

Let me repeat what I said in the Council last week: a serious escalation is avoidable. A sustained calm can open the space for more serious discussions about further improvements and perspectives and I urge the parties to maintain calm through the final week of Ramadan can be celebrated without interruption.

Having said that, we must not lose sight of the imperative to end the occupation and advance towards a two-State reality. The ultimate goal remains clear: two States, living side-by-side in

peace and security, in line with UN resolutions and international law. The United Nations remains committed to supporting Israelis and Palestinians to move towards that future, even as they address pressing political, security, economic and humanitarian concerns and needs. We will continue to work with the parties and with regional and international partners to achieve this goal.

Thank you.