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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
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Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Too often we have met in this chamber and said that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is at a critical stage; that the situation on the ground is unsustainable.

Mr. President,

We have all fallen into the paradigm of managing, rather than resolving the conflict.

There are those who believe that the conflict can be solved through peaceful bilateral negotiations and compromises, by addressing the final status issues of borders, security, refugees and the status of Jerusalem on the basis of prior agreements and relevant UN resolutions. That to resolve it you must have two states, living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

Some believe in making unilateral moves that can only lead to a one-state reality that is incompatible with the aspirations of both peoples.

And there are those who believe in violence. Who are convinced that confrontation is the only option. They do not recognise that both Palestinians and Israelis — Jews, Christians and Muslims -- have a legitimate national, historic and religious connection to this land. They believe that one side has to lose, for the other to win; that the land can and should belong to only one people.

Mr. President,

We — the United Nations, the Security Council, the international community – have a responsibility to prove that those who believe in violence and confrontation are wrong. But not only to prove them wrong, but to work with the Palestinian and Israeli leaders to return to the table of negotiations and quickly show tangible results that will empower those who believe in peace and thwart those who uphold terror.

This year will mark the 25th anniversary of the Oslo Accords.

While its daring vision for peace remains to be fulfilled, now is not the time to give up on Oslo. The alternative is not a better deal, but a worsening reality of occupation and humiliation.

Now is the time to push for policies on the ground that rebuild trust; now is the time to engage on final status issues on the basis of international consensus; now is the time to show political leadership to remove the obstacles to a sustainable solution. And what is a sustainable solution, some may ask? I believe it is one that resolves all claims and allows Israelis and Palestinians to separate and live in peace as neighbors and partners, neighbors and partners whose security will be forever linked, yet who each manage their own affairs in a state of their own.

Now is the time for leadership.

Make no mistake, however, while the current negative environment and dynamics may have been exacerbated by rhetoric and recent events, they are not new. The lack of political will to take meaningful action to restore confidence and resume negotiations, and the propensity to take unilateral decisions have been there for years.

During this time, various peace efforts have repeatedly floundered – victims of political agendas designed to sabotage progress towards realizing a two-state solution, or the fear of making historic compromises with the past in the interest of the future.

This paralysis has elicited a heavy price: continued violence and insecurity; an ever-expanding settlement enterprise; a persistent Palestinian political divide; and a deteriorating, unsustainable situation in Gaza under the control of Hamas. Taken together, these elements kill hope, breed frustration, and increase radicalization on the ground.

Our choice today is clear. We either take urgent concrete steps to reverse this perilous course or risk another conflict and humanitarian disaster.

In this regard, let me begin today by expressing my deep concern over funding for UNRWA this year. While the recent U.S. pledge of USD 60 million is appreciated, it represents a significant reduction of its traditional contribution, increasing anxieties for the community of 5.3 million Palestine refugees who have already suffered the longest protracted refugee crisis in the world, seventy years.

Given tensions on the ground, I welcome UNRWA's firm commitment to continue providing services to Palestine refugees on an uninterrupted basis. Shutting down or reducing services at this critical time would further destabilize a region riddled with conflict, insecurity and radicalization.

On 22 January, UNRWA launched a global fundraising campaign, aimed at raising some USD 500 million, to keep its schools, clinics, relief and other services open throughout 2018 and beyond. I thank Member States that have already joined this global campaign to further support UNRWA and I encourage others to follow suit.

Mr. President,

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to exact a steady human cost on the ground.

Protests and a relatively low level of violence across the West Bank and Gaza have continued following the US' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel on December 6th.

Since December 18, seven Palestinian civilians, including three children, were killed by Israeli Security Forces (ISF) during protests and clashes – four in the Gaza Strip and three in the West Bank – and another two Palestinians died of wounds sustained in protests during the previous two weeks. I note the concern expressed on 19 December by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights that the use of force must be calibrated and that lethal force should only be used as a last resort, in situations of imminent threat of death or serious injury, with any resulting fatalities properly investigated by the authorities. I urge Israeli security forces to exercise maximum restraint to avoid casualties in such circumstances.

On 9 January, an Israeli civilian was shot dead in a drive-by shooting attack near Nablus. There is no justification for terror or for those who condone it, praise it or glorify it. The perpetrators of this attack must be brought to justice.

Subsequently, on 18th of January in Jenin, one Palestinian was killed and several others arrested during a raid that the Israeli military conducted reportedly in search of perpetrators of the 9 January attack.

The reporting period also saw Palestinian militants fire eight rockets and mortars from Gaza with three falling inside Israel, causing damage but no injuries.

In response, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) targeted Hamas military sites in Gaza with no reported injuries as well. The IDF also destroyed a tunnel from Gaza extending into Israel and Egypt under the Kerem Shalom crossing, the third such action over the past three months.

I have repeatedly stated that all militant activity, including the digging of tunnels and the firing of rockets, in Gaza must cease. It threatens the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike, increases the risk of a new escalation of hostilities, undermines calls for lifting the closures, and ultimately damages the prospects for peace.

Mr. President,

Israel's settlement activities continue despite broad international condemnation. On January 10th, the Israeli planning authorities advanced plans for over 1,400 housing units in Area C settlements. Additionally, one plan for nine housing units in Psagot was approved for construction.

Separately, four tenders were published for some 500 units, that had been processed in 2017. In comparison, tenders for only 50 units were opened for bidding in the whole of last year. In addition, the authorities announced that some ten new tenders for 880 housing units in seven settlements will be published in the coming weeks.

Settlement construction is illegal under international law and is one of the major obstacles to peace. Settlement-related activities undermine the chances for the establishment of a viable, contiguous Palestinian state as part of a negotiated two-state solution.

Two recent developments further fueled perceptions that the forces that want to block a two-state solution in Israel are gaining ground.

On 31 December, the Central Committee of the Likud party passed a resolution calling for "unhindered" settlement construction and to "extend Israeli law and sovereignty in all the areas of liberated settlement in Judea and Samaria." While not binding, the resolution increases the political pressure for annexation of parts of the West Bank and further undermines Palestinian belief in peace efforts.

Days later, the Knesset passed an amendment to the *Basic Law: Jerusalem*, which is likely to make it more difficult in any future peace agreement for Israel to transfer control over areas currently within the area it defines as Jerusalem's municipal jurisdiction to Palestinian authority.

Mr. President,

The demolition of Palestinian-owned structures has also continued with 16 structures demolished due to the lack of building permits that are nearly impossible to obtain, as noted in the Quartet report of 2016; 14 people have been displaced by these actions. Four additional structures were destroyed during a military operation in Jenin, displacing another 16 Palestinians. Of particular concern is the risk of demolition of 46 school structures in Area C and East Jerusalem.

As the security forces continue to arrest Palestinians in various security operations — some 400 have been detained over the last month — I want to highlight one particular case. On 1 January, 12 charges were brought against Ahed Tamimi, a 16-year-old Palestinian girl arrested in December. Her detention followed the release of a video in which she was seen slapping and kicking two Israeli soldiers in her front yard. On 17 January, an Israeli military court ruled that she will be held until the end of legal proceedings against her.

As stated by OHCHR on 16th January, detention of a child must only be used as a measure of last resort and for the shortest possible time. I reiterate the High Commissioner's call that the treatment of all minors be in accordance with international law and the special protection that it grants to children.

Mr. President,

On the Palestinian political front, I want to report to the Council that in response to the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and following the U.N. General Assembly vote on 21 December, the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) met in Ramallah on 14 and 15 January.

In its final statement, the Council, *inter alia*, rejected the U.S. as a partner until it cancels this decision and rescinds both the designation of the PLO as a terrorist organization and the closure of the PLO office in Washington.

The Central Council further declared that the Oslo process was no longer valid and tasked the PLO Executive Committee to suspend the recognition of Israel until it recognizes the State of Palestine and annuls its annexation of East Jerusalem; and to halt security coordination and to revisit economic relations with Israel.

Mr. President,

We are yet to see whether these decisions will be adopted by the PLO Executive Committee and implemented.

Under the current circumstances however, I encourage all parties to refrain from action and rhetoric that will further undermine the chances of returning to meaningful negotiations and to continue their engagement in the interest of peace.

Mr. President,

Turning to Gaza, the worsening humanitarian and security crisis continue to feed a deteriorating situation.

Implementation of the Egyptian brokered intra-Palestinian agreement has effectively ground to a halt. The two sides have been unable to reach agreement, particularly on key obstacles including the

collection of taxes, the integration of and payment of salaries to public sector employees, the status of the return of Government administration in the ministries and other institutions and, ultimately, security control of Gaza.

These challenges must be quickly overcome, or the process risks being derailed entirely, leaving Gaza primed for a new escalation.

Mr. President,

Despite these setbacks, I am encouraged that the Gaza crossings continue to be controlled by the legitimate Palestinian authorities after their handover on November 1st.

I also welcome the decision on 3 January by the Palestinian President to resume payments for the full amount of electricity (120 MW) purchased from Israel for Gaza, allowing for an increase in supply to six-to-eight hours of electricity per day.

The humanitarian situation however remains dire. With the current funding available the United Nations will not be able to provide fuel to hospitals and critical infrastructure beyond the end of February.

I also take note of Israel's decision to approve some 85 private sector projects through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism since the start of this year.

Yet, these positive developments are not an alternative to the lifting of closures on Gaza and to the returning of the Strip to the full control of the legitimate Palestinian Authority.

The combustible cocktail of humanitarian, political and security challenges must be addressed urgently and effectively.

Mr. President,

In an effort to support the peace process and address the dire situation in Gaza, Norway and the EU will convene an extraordinary session of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) on January 31st at the ministerial level. This important meeting aims to bring all parties together to discuss measures to accelerate efforts that can underpin a negotiated two-state solution and to enable the Palestinian Authority to resume full control over Gaza. I call on the parties to work constructively and produce tangible outcomes that support these objectives.

Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Turning to Lebanon, efforts continue to consolidate stability following the return of Prime Minister Hariri. As part of implementation of the 8 December Paris International Support Group communique, preparations are underway for a conference in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces and security institutions, to be hosted by Italy in late February. Preparations also continue for parliamentary elections in May.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations remains generally quiet. Following the stated intention by the Israel Defense Forces to conduct infrastructure works south of the Blue Line, including in certain areas where Lebanese officials have raised strong objections, UNIFIL's leadership has been engaged with both parties through the established liaison and coordination arrangements. The matter will be discussed at the next Tripartite meeting.

Mr. President,

In closing, I wish to emphasize the gravity of the current challenges.

25 years after the Oslo Accords, we are at a critical point in the peace process. The uncertainty and volatility of the current environment is hardening positions and sharpening the rhetoric on all sides, a situation that plays directly into the hands of extremists and increases the risk of another conflict.

Absent a credible proposal that can become the basis of final status negotiations, the international community must continue to build the conditions necessary for a resumption of talks. We must also reaffirm the international consensus that the two-state solution remains the only viable option for a just and sustainable end to the conflict. We must be unwavering in this position.

At the same time, it is vital to maintain support for strengthening Palestinian institutions and enhancing service delivery to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Allowing the Palestinian project to backslide at this delicate stage risks further destabilizing an already precarious situation. The recent cuts to UNRWA funding only reinforce these concerns.

As far as Gaza is concerned, I call on the international community to support the efforts to return the Strip under the control of the Palestinian Authority. If the process stalls, the people in Gaza face increasingly desperate conditions and will lose hope in any progress. I commend Egypt for its leadership role and continued commitment to this process.

Mr. President,

We can wait no longer to reverse the current negative trajectory of the conflict. Every illegal settlement advancement, every person killed and every failed effort in Gaza makes it more difficult for Palestinians and Israelis to overcome their divisions, to rebuild trust, to invest in the goal of resolving the conflict. It is time to break this destructive pattern and begin again to lay the foundations for peace.

Thank You.