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

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Mr. President, Members of the Security Council,

Over the past decades, a broad consensus has been built around the understanding that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can only be resolved through negotiations and on the basis of a two-state solution. This consensus is at the core of the work of the Middle East Quartet, which continues to work with the parties and the region to bring about the necessary conditions for the resumption of meaningful negotiations. The Quartet is also finalising its first report on the impediments to the two-state solution and the way forward.

In a matter of days a number of countries and the Secretary-General will come together in Paris to reaffirm their commitment to a negotiated two-state solution and to discuss how they can support constructively both parties in achieving this goal. All these efforts, Mr. President, important as they are, cannot be divorced from the stark reality on the ground that is affecting the lives of Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Despite the general downward trend in violence, on 18 April a Hamas-affiliated Palestinian teenager detonated a bomb on a bus in Jerusalem injuring 21 people, several of them seriously.

I welcome President Abbas' firm rejection of this brutal attack. It is deplorable, however, that some Palestinian factions chose instead to praise it. The UN's is firm in its convictions that there can never, under any circumstances, be a justification for acts of terror.

Days later on 27 April, a pregnant, 23-year-old Palestinian mother and her 16-year-old brother were tragically shot and killed under questionable circumstances at a checkpoint close to Jerusalem, reportedly by Israeli private security contractors, after allegedly attempting to carry out a knife attack against Israeli security forces. Palestinian eyewitnesses refute this claim and the case has once again raised concerns about the need to calibrate the use of force. I note that

Israeli authorities have initiated an investigation and I encourage them to conduct it in a swift and transparent manner.

The beginning of May, Mr. President, saw the biggest escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas since the 2014 conflict. Two tunnels were discovered and Israel carried out 14 incursions into Gaza in order to destroy them and seek out others. In the violent exchanges that followed, militants fired 40 mortars and eight rockets at Israel and the IDF conducted 13 airstrikes on targets in the Strip. Tragically, a Palestinian woman was killed by shrapnel and several others wounded.

These incidents in recent weeks underscore the fragility of the security dynamics on the ground, particularly the threat to the ceasefire in Gaza, which needs to be vigorously upheld by all sides if we have to avoid slipping into another devastating conflict.

Against this backdrop, the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) met in Brussels on 19 April and expressed concern over the damaging consequences of the current political impasse, the importance of preserving the two-state solution, and the sharp decline in donor aid to the Palestinian Authority. I am encouraged that both sides agreed to work with donors over the coming two years to build a more sustainable Palestinian economy by reducing the budget deficit and stimulating long-term economic growth.

Mr. President,

As Palestinians face mounting financial and institutional challenges, negative developments continue in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials on security arrangements for Area A have all but reached an impasse. I urge both sides to continue to work to bridge existing gaps. It is important to strengthen the capacity, the capability and authority of the Palestinian Security Forces in the areas of their responsibility, continued security coordination between both sides has played and continues to play a key part in reducing violence.

I welcome the announcement by the Israeli authorities to facilitate access to a number of West Bank checkpoints and encourage them to make further efforts to ease movement between communities within the West Bank, including to East Jerusalem.

Mr. President,

I take this opportunity to note the continuation of demolitions of Palestinian structures in the West Bank. While the pace has somewhat slowed compared to last month, the number of structures that have been demolished or confiscated across the West Bank in 2016, exceeds the total for all of 2015. At least 900 people have been displaced. Although many of the structures that have been demolished are not dwellings, the loss of water wells, solar panels and animal shelters has impacted the livelihoods of over 2,500 people.

Mr. President,

Allow me to turn now to Gaza, where the situation continues to be desperate and highly volatile.

We in the international community have a responsibility not to fail the Palestinians in Gaza, we have the responsibility to help them recover from the physical and emotional traumas of war, we have the responsibility to assist them in rebuilding their lives and livelihoods and, ultimately, to see Gaza and the West Bank reunited and the closures lifted.

In early April, Israel suspended the private import of cement following the diversion of a substantial amount from its intended legitimate beneficiaries. After 45 days and intense efforts by the United Nations team on the ground, this suspension has been lifted. I highly appreciate the constructive work by Palestinian and Israeli authorities to successfully address the situation. All sides need to ensure that cement is used for civilian purposes only. Individuals or groups seeking to benefit from the deviation of construction materials -- for corruption, for building tunnels, or other reasons — must understand that they selfishly compound the suffering of their own people and sow the seeds of future violence.

Reconstruction is a lifeline for the people of Gaza, however Gaza's chronic energy and water crisis needs to be tackled without delay. Today, residents receive at most eight to twelve hours of electricity. On May 6th this crisis turned to tragedy, as three children from the al-Hindi family burned to death when their house in Gaza City caught fire from a candle lit during a power cut. It is deeply regrettable that some factions sought to use this tragedy to trade accusations and score political points, instead of uniting to address the energy crisis.

Gaza's hardships, Mr. President, seem to have no limits!

Palestinians in Gaza are growing ever more desperate, seeing their prospects for living a normal life and recovering their economy blocked by Hamas's military build-up, by Israel's security measures and closures, by the lack of Palestinian unity, and the insufficient fulfilment of aid pledges by donors.

Recent events clearly demonstrate that the spectre of violence looms ominously over the territory. Unless radically more is done to address the chronic realities in Gaza, it is not a question of 'if', but rather of 'when' another escalation will take place. I once again encourage donors to fulfil their commitments to support Gaza's reconstruction, recovery and development.

I welcome the recent opening by Egyptian authorities of the Rafah crossing on 11 and 12 May this year during which 2,090 Palestinians entered and exited. I encourage Egypt to explore ways to facilitate more frequent openings of the crossing, particularly for humanitarian cases, while respecting its legitimate and pressing security concerns in the Sinai.

Mr. President, I want to turn briefly to one extremely important development, that is Hamas announcement of its intention to implement a number of death sentences.

International law limits the application of the death penalty to the "most serious crimes" and pursuant to a trial and appeals process that scrupulously follow fair trial standards. I have serious doubts as to whether capital trials in Gaza meet these standards. There are also disturbing media reports indicating that the sentences could be carried out in public. This raises even more alarms as public executions are prohibited under international human rights law.

What is also concerning is that these executions will be implemented without the approval of the Palestinian President, which is required under Palestinian law. Palestine is one and Gaza and the West Bank are its two integral parts.

I urge Hamas not to carry out these executions and I call on President Abbas to establish a moratorium on the implementation of the death penalty.

Mr. President,

As circumstances on the ground continue to deteriorate, to many, lamenting the disappearance of a negotiated two-state solution has become a default narrative. And yet, according to a recent study conducted by Tel Aviv University, close to 60 percent of the Jewish population and over 70 percent of Palestinians remain in favour of conducting peace negotiations.

The will to advance towards peace clearly exists. What remains glaringly absent is the political will and bold leadership to make genuine progress a reality.

We need collectively to ask ourselves whether those Israelis and Palestinians who today support a return to negotiations will continue to do so next year, or two years from now, if the prospects for peace remain out of reach. Prolonging the current impasse will sap any remaining optimism for finding a solution to the nearly 50-year old occupation.

Mr. President,

Turning briefly to other regional matters, you will be briefed separately on Syria later this week. With regard to Lebanon, the Secretary-General and the Security Council reiterated their calls yesterday on the Lebanese political parties to build on the holding of the municipal elections and elect a President of the Republic, a post which has now remained vacant for two years.

In closing, Mr. President, let me welcome the recent statement by Egyptian President Sisi expressing Egypt's readiness to mediate a reconciliation between rival Palestinian factions so as to pave the way toward a lasting peace agreement with Israel. His call also to Israelis and Palestinians to continue the historic step towards peace taken by Israel and Egypt 37 years ago must not go unheeded, not in Israel, not in Palestine, and certainly not in the rest of the Arab world.

I urge Palestinian leaders in Gaza and the West Bank to take up this opportunity and to deliver, at long last, to the Palestinian people an end to the issues that divide, and a commitment to strengthening the ties that bind them. And I also urge Palestinian and Israeli leaders to engage, through the initiatives that have been put forward, to bring a just, comprehensive and enduring peace to the people of Israel and Palestine.

As delivered

Thank you.