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

28 October 2019

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

We meet today as rapidly shifting developments in the Middle East continue to underscore the growing threat to international peace and security.

As new dangerous flashpoints emerge in the region, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also remains one of the drivers of extremism and instability. The occupation continues, and no progress has been made in realizing a negotiated two-state solution. It is a multi-generational tragedy for the peoples of this land.

On 26 September at the United Nations General Assembly, President Abbas announced his intention to set a date for Palestinian elections. If this decision were to materialize, this would be the first Palestinian elections since 2006, giving renewed legitimacy to national institutions.

The international community should support this process if it strengthens national unity and not division. This includes an agreement for elections that take place across the occupied Palestinian territory in line with relevant legislation, international best practices and an agreed national political platform that based on existing agreements.

Madam President,

The past month has also witnessed the continuing deterioration of the situation on the ground.

With no prospect of final status negotiations on the horizon, facts on the ground continue to deteriorate, pushing us even further from a viable two-State solution.

During the past month it has been reported that Israeli authorities advanced plans for housing units in Area C settlements. The exact numbers are yet to be confirmed. Even without this latest advancement, the number of units advanced or approved in 2019 so far is already greater than that for all of 2018.

Settlements are illegal under international law and remain a substantial obstacle to peace. They must cease immediately.

Meanwhile, demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures also continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain, the authorities demolished or seized 51 structures, resulting in the displacement of 80

Palestinians, including 40 children. Four of the structures were demolished based on Military Order 1797.

Demolitions and confiscations of infrastructures and internationally funded humanitarian projects in Area C also continue at a concerning pace. The Israeli authorities must stop this practice, which is not in line with international humanitarian law and compensate for occurred damages befitting the affected population.

Madam President,

Members of the Security Council,

Violence continues to be a major part of the day-to-day reality of the conflict.

In recent weeks we have seen a welcome reduction of violence in Gaza, including in the launching of rockets. The agreements for calm brokered by the UN and Egypt continue to hold. Despite the overall improvement, three Palestinians were killed by IDF, and over 500 injured during protests at the Gaza perimeter fence.

I take the opportunity to reiterate the concerns expressed on 10 October by Deputy Special Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator McGoldrick on the impact that violence at these demonstrations has had on children.

Israeli security forces have the responsibility to exercise maximum restraint and use lethal force when strictly necessary, as a last resort.

I also reiterate the call on Hamas to uphold its responsibility and ensure the safety of children in Gaza, including by preventing them from being used and exposed to the risk of violence.

During the reporting period, six rockets were launched from Gaza towards Israel, causing no injuries. Additionally, for the first time in a month, no fires have been caused by incendiary balloons.

Meanwhile in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, two Palestinians were killed, including one infant following tear gas inhalation. In addition, 88 Palestinians, including 11 children, were injured in various incidents, including during clashes, military operations, and settler-related violence. Six Palestinian Security Forces personnel were also injured by home-made explosive devices during clashes with Palestinians. Four Israelis, including two Israel Security Forces personnel, were also injured, including one by Israeli settlers.

Among the overall incidents, according to OCHA, settler-related violence has resulted in 11 Palestinians and one Israeli injured. In addition, there were 33 incidents resulting in damage to Palestinian property, including some 1,236 trees and 63 vehicles, and one incident resulting in damage to an Israeli vehicle.

I am particularly concerned by the worrying attacks by settlers in the occupied West Bank, in the context of the annual olive harvest. As the olive harvest begins, I call on the Israeli authorities to

ensure smooth access of Palestinian farmers to their land and protect farmers and their property from attacks.

On 16 October, in an alarming incident, Palestinian farmers, Israeli and foreign volunteers harvesting olive trees near Burin village were attacked with stones and metal rods by people from Yitzhar settlement. On 22 October the Yitzhar area was declared a closed military zone and more forces were deployed in it. An 80-year-old rabbi and four foreign volunteers were also injured. One of the alleged perpetrators of these attacks was arrested. In Qaryut, south of Nablus, Palestinians were also prevented from accessing their lands for olive harvest.

During the reporting period, despite attempts to reach an agreement between Israeli authorities and residents of al-Issawiya, tensions remain high in East Jerusalem.

Madam President,

On 26 September, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) held its bi-annual meeting in New York. The United Nations highlighted the critical need to support the Palestinian people, the Palestinian Authority and advance the two-state solution as the only viable option for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Moreover, members at that meeting noted that every effort must be made to avoid further deterioration in the security situations in Gaza and in the West Bank.

The United Nations also reported on progress on the implementation of the package of urgent humanitarian and economic interventions for Gaza, endorsed by the AHLC in September 2018. The interventions have had an important impact across many sectors.

The average daily availability of electricity in Gaza has doubled from 5.5 hours in the first half of 2018 to nearly 12-15 hours in the first half of 2019. This has increased water and wastewater treatment, reduced the need for expensive fuel to run hospitals and lowered costs for private businesses and families.

Almost 450,000 people in Gaza have benefited from emergency healthcare and nearly 400,000 have benefited from the delivery of drugs and medical supplies. As of October, UN temporary job creation programmes have produced more than 16,000 jobs, with another 1,000 jobs expected in the coming weeks.

I thank Member States that have supported the implementation of the AHLC projects so far and urge others to contribute to these critical initiatives.

Despite these vital efforts, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire.

As of the end of September, almost half of essential medications and about a third of essential medical disposables are still missing. Health providers continue to struggle to treat those injured during the weekly demonstrations. Severe movement and access restrictions continue, including for those requiring treatment outside Gaza, and national staff from UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations working in Gaza.

While addressing the humanitarian crisis must remain a priority, I reiterate, once again, that the core of the crisis in Gaza is political.

It is not possible to genuinely and sustainably improve the socio-economic situation in Gaza without significantly easing restrictions on the movement and access of goods and people, with the goal of ultimately lifting them in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), and reuniting Gaza and the West Bank under a single, legitimate Palestinian national authority.

In this regard, I once again call on all Palestinian factions to engage with Egypt on reconciliation efforts.

Madam President,

I am encouraged by the agreement reached on 3 October between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which resulted in the transfer of some USD 425 million of clearance revenues to the Palestinian Authority.

Despite the relative normalization of the fiscal situation of the Palestinian Authority, both sides must engage in a constructive manner with the goal of restoring the revenue transfers in full in line with the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations.

On another positive note, I welcome the Palestinian cabinet's decision on 21 October, to advance amendments to the Palestinian civil status law in favor of women. These include increasing the minimum age of marriage and granting women the right to manage their children's bank accounts. In recent months, Palestinian women have been actively voicing their demands for recognition of their political, social and economic rights and protection against gender-based violence.

I am concerned about the 17 October decision by the Ramallah Magistrate Court which ordered the blocking of some 50 Palestinian and Arabic websites and Facebook pages, deemed critical of the Palestinian Authority and its officials. The fundamental right of freedom of opinion and expression, and its associated freedom to receive information are important and must be protected.

Following criticism from the Journalist Syndicate and a petition from the National Human Rights Institution, the interpretation of the Cybercrimes degree – used as the legal basis for the decision – was referred to the Constitutional Court on 24 October.

Madam President,

Turning to developments in the region, popular protests continue to take place in several countries, from Iraq to Lebanon, with people demanding improvements to their daily lives and end to corruption.

In Lebanon, an estimated 1.5 million Lebanese engaged in largely peaceful demonstrations against the deteriorating economic situation and corruption. In response, the Council of Ministers on 21 October adopted a series of reform measures and finalized the 2020 State budget, with a 0.6%

public deficit target. The protests however continue, with calls for the resignation of the Government.

In Iraq, from 1 to 9 October, anti-government protests took place across the country, notably in Baghdad and in the southern governorates, and turned violent, resulting in scores of fatalities. The report of a government investigation, released on 22 October, put the total number of fatalities at 157, citing a lack of control at a local level by senior officials in addition to the unauthorized use of force, including live ammunition, by security forces. The Government has announced measures to address the legitimate demands of the protesters, including employment opportunities for young Iraqis and housing subsidies for the poor.

A second round of large-scale demonstrations started in the late evening of 24 October in Baghdad and other locations in the South and continues to date. Intense clashes were reported as well as the destruction of public and private property and the presence of armed spoilers. As of 27 October, the Independent High Commission of Human Rights (IHCHR), registered 74 deaths and 3654 injured (most of them treated and left the hospitals), as well as 90 buildings burned.

In Syria, in almost nine years of conflict, we have witnessed the devastating toll on civilians, including serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law; alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity; systematic detention and torture, attacks on medical facilities, on schools, and on IDP camps; and the erosion of norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. A whole generation of Syrian children has grown up in war. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and half the country's population has been displaced.

The Secretary-General and this Council have been clear: a sustainable solution can only be reached through a UN-facilitated, credible political process in accordance with Security Council resolution 2254 (2015). It is hoped that the launch of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva will be the first step in a broader political process that will meet the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians.

Meanwhile, on the occupied Golan, the situation has remained relatively calm. The ceasefire between Israel and Syria continues to be maintained in an environment that remains volatile. Violations of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement, including breaches of the ceasefire line, continue to occur.

Madam President,

As we work to address the threats to international peace and security in the Middle East, we must never forget that preventive diplomacy is one of the most important tools that we can use in order to diffuse tensions before they turn into confrontation. The people of the Middle East has seen enough violence and injustice. The region cannot afford another war and we must continue our efforts to de-escalate tensions and create openings for political solutions in the interest of peace.

In this context I would like to return to the Israeli-Palestinian question and remind everyone that despite our collective efforts to prevent war in Gaza, these efforts cannot be sustained on a purely

humanitarian basis. They need a political perspective that illuminates a path forward to intra-Palestinian unity and ultimately a two-state solution.

We can no longer continue to address Gaza's critical needs on a month-to-month basis, while failing to confront the broader political reality including the stiffening closures, violence and lack on unity.

Similarly, we also can no longer disregard the cracks emerging in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Settlement construction and expansion continues, the PA financial crisis is not fully resolved, and the economy continues to stagnate.

Therefore, we must re-assert, once again, that to advance the goal of a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians the only way forward is to return to the negotiations with the goal of two-states, living side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition, based on relevant UN resolutions, international law and prior agreements.

As in Israel and Palestine, so in the rest of the Middle East, our collective efforts must be guided by the UN charter. In each conflict in the region preventive diplomacy and de-escalation are critical element of our engagement. Long term sustainable peace however can only be based on justice, human rights, and international law.

Thank you.