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SECURITY COUNCIL BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
UNSCR 2334 (2016)
29 September 2020**

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will devote this briefing to presenting his fifteenth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334, covering the period from 5 June to 20 September of this year.

Before presenting the report, I would like to note the recent agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. The Secretary-General welcomes these agreements, which suspended Israeli annexation plans over parts of the occupied West Bank. The Secretary-General hopes that these developments will encourage Palestinian and Israeli leaders to re-engage in meaningful negotiations toward a two-State solution and will create opportunities for regional cooperation. He reiterates that only a two-State solution that realizes the legitimate national aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis can lead to sustainable peace between the two peoples and contribute to broader peace in the region.

I am similarly encouraged by the call to restore hope in the peace process and resume negotiations on the basis of international law and agreed parameters, as made by the Foreign Ministers of Jordan, Egypt, France and Germany in Amman.

The recent moves toward strengthening Palestinian unity as demonstrated by the outcome of the Fatah-Hamas meetings calling for long-awaited national presidential and legislative elections are also encouraging. Elections and legitimate democratic institutions are critical to uniting Gaza and the West Bank under a single national authority vital to upholding the prospect of a negotiated two-State solution.

However, I am concerned by the rising COVID-19 infection rates in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and Israel. UNSCO is working with the relevant stakeholders to address the needs in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. I welcome the initial response from the donor community to the UN COVID-19 efforts and urge increased support, particularly as the health emergency is rapidly becoming a socio-economic crisis. All efforts must be mobilized to respond to the pandemic, particularly in Gaza.

Turning to the report, Mr. President, let me state from the outset that developments during the reporting period cannot be divorced from the broader context: Israel's continued military

occupation of the Palestinian territory; illegal settlement activity and demolitions; the situation in Gaza with more than a decade of Hamas control over the Strip and ensuing rocket fire, militant activity and Israeli closures; unilateral actions that undermine peace efforts; severe challenges to the fiscal viability of the Palestinian Authority; and the persistent risk of military escalation. The global pandemic has further increased the needs and vulnerabilities of Palestinians. These factors collectively erode the prospects of achieving a viable two-State solution, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to “immediately and completely cease all settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem” and to “fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.” No steps have been taken to this effect during the reporting period.

During this and the previous reporting period, there were no settlement housing plans advanced, approved or tendered in Area C.

On 21 June, however, the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced plans for a building with 72 housing units in the occupied East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Beit Hanina.

On 9 June, the High Court of Justice (HCJ) struck down a 2017 law enabling the wide-scale expropriation of private Palestinian land and the retroactive regularization, under Israeli law, of thousands of housing units in settlements and unauthorized outposts. The Court ruled that the law was unconstitutional due to its violation of the rights of Palestinians to property and equality as a protected population in the occupied West Bank.

On 27 August, the High Court also ordered the evacuation of approximately 40 structures in the illegal settlement outpost of Mitzpe Kramim, illegal also under Israeli law, and the relocation of its residents.

Meanwhile, two new outposts were established in Um Zaituna - between the occupied West Bank settlements of Ma'on and Carmel and on Mt. Eival north of Nablus.

On several occasions during the reporting period, Israeli authorities removed or destroyed structures in illegal outposts, in some cases leading to violent clashes between ISF and settlers.

Mister President,

As highlighted in a statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator on 10 September, demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures by Israeli authorities continued across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, reaching the highest demolition rate in the past four years.

Citing the absence of Israeli-issued building permits, which remain almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, 250 structures were seized or demolished, resulting in the displacement of 360 Palestinians, including 179 children and 87 women. Of the structures demolished, 181 were in Area C and 69 in East Jerusalem. In 32 cases, Palestinians were forced to demolish their own homes not to incur the heavy Israeli demolition fees. Health and water facilities, as well as agricultural structures, were also demolished, affecting the services and livelihoods of up to 2,000 Palestinians.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls for “immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians, including all acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation and destruction.” Unfortunately, violence continued almost on a daily basis.

In August, Palestinian militants resumed launching incendiary balloons from Gaza towards Israel, sometimes escalating to rockets and mortars. Israel retaliated by striking targets in Gaza and temporarily tightening the closures until a temporary de-escalation was achieved at the end of the month.

Overall, 63 rockets and mortars were fired towards Israel from Gaza, 22 were intercepted by the Iron Dome system and 19 landed in Israel. At least eight Israeli civilians, two of them children, were injured and at least two houses were damaged, while over 400 balloons carrying incendiary devices were launched into Israel causing hundreds of fires in the Gaza vicinity.

Israeli security forces launched over 160 missiles and tank shells against Hamas positions in Gaza. Ten Palestinian civilians – including four children and a pregnant woman – were injured, and at least two houses were damaged. Following one strike, an unexploded Israeli missile was found in an UNRWA school in the ash-Shati refugee camp.

Meanwhile in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, during the reporting period, four Palestinians, including one child, were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) and 40 people injured by live ammunition.

One Israeli was killed and 37 were injured by Palestinians, including three children, in stabbings, clashes, rocket attacks, and other incidents.

On 23 June, a 27-year-old Palestinian man was shot and killed by ISF while reportedly carrying out a ramming attack at a checkpoint near Jerusalem in which one soldier was injured.

On 9 July, ISF shot and killed a 34-year-old Palestinian man and wounded a 17-year-old in the West Bank village of Kifl Hares.

Later in July, several Palestinian workers were severely beaten and robbed of their possessions near Mitar Terminal, south of Hebron. The Israeli Justice Ministry subsequently submitted indictments against five border police officers.

In early August, a 23-year-old Palestinian woman was killed by live fire in her home in Jenin during an ISF operation and ensuing clash with residents. There are contradictory claims over responsibility for the shooting and a Palestinian prosecutor is investigating the incident.

On 17 August, a Palestinian man, who was attempting to carry out a stabbing attack against an Israeli Border Police officer, was shot and killed in Jerusalem’s Old City.

On the same day, ISF shot and injured a 60-year-old Palestinian man with hearing and speech impairments at the Qalandiya checkpoint when he did not respond to their calls to halt.

Later in August, a 16-year-old Palestinian died, and two others were injured, after being shot in a village west of Ramallah. The ISF stated that the three were preparing to throw Molotov cocktails and set alight tires to attack passing vehicles.

On 26 August, a Palestinian man from Nablus stabbed and killed an Israeli man in Petach Tikva. The perpetrator was later arrested.

On 2 September an Israeli police officer and a soldier were injured in an alleged ramming attack south of Nablus. The Palestinian driver was shot and apprehended.

Settler-related violence in the occupied West Bank continued during the reporting period. OCHA reported 73 attacks against Palestinians by Israeli settlers, with 30 injuries resulting from those incidents. Approximately 100 attacks resulting in some 20 injuries and damage to property by Palestinians against settlers and other Israeli civilians were also reported.

On 14 September, an Israeli court sentenced the convicted killer of a Palestinian family in a 2015 gruesome arson attack in Duma village to three life sentences for murder and 20 years for attempted murder, as well as compensation to the victims' family.

Mister President,

Security Council resolution 2334 calls for the parties to refrain from acts of provocation, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric.

During the reporting period, one senior Fatah official said that anyone who cooperates with Israel "should be shot" and in its weekly guidance for Friday sermons, the PA Ministry of Religious Affairs used anti-Semitic language in messaging on the recent normalization agreements that "there is nothing that harms Palestine and its holy sites more than making an alliance with the Jews, being connected to them, and relying on them."

Some Israeli officials also made provocative and concerning statements in support of annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank and rejecting the prospect of Palestinian statehood. One Member of Knesset and former Minister incited to violence, depreciating a video showing restraint by IDF soldiers in the face of a 15-year-old Palestinian child throwing stones at them. Referring to an IDF member's manslaughter conviction, after fatally having shot a Palestinian assailant in Hebron, he said: "I would prefer a thousand videos of Elor Azaria instead of an embarrassing and dangerous one like this."

Mister President,

Resolution 2334 (2016) reiterated calls by the Middle East Quartet for "affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends on the ground that are imperiling the two-State solution."

On 3 September, for the first time in nearly a decade, the PLO Executive Committee held its first meeting together with the heads of all Palestinian factions. Speakers focused on the need to restore unity and reform the PLO. President Abbas reiterated his known position that he is ready to launch negotiations with Israel under UN or international auspices, while also calling for popular resistance to confront the annexation threat.

Following an escalation in violence between Hamas and Israel, Qatar mediated a de-escalation arrangement announced on 31 August and provided significant assistance to Gaza, including to support COVID-19 response and to vulnerable families. As a result, Israel allowed the delivery of fuel, reinstated the fishing zone and reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing for goods, and Hamas agreed to a halt to incendiary balloons and other attacks.

Mister President,

The COVID-19 pandemic and the suspension of coordination between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel in response to Israel's plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, have contributed to worsen the already dire humanitarian, economic and political situation in Gaza, and impacted the health and socio-economic situation in the occupied West Bank. The PA's decision to stop accepting clearance revenues that Israel collects on its behalf, has exacerbated an already concerning fiscal crisis, with an 80 per cent reduction in Palestinian revenues, which impacted salaries and service provision. It is unclear whether the Government will have sufficient resources to make any future salary payments or carry out its functions in the coming months.

In Gaza, COVID-19-related restrictions halted the crossing of workers and traders into Israel and prevented revenue transfers to Gaza's exporters. The absence of coordination also delayed critical infrastructure projects, exacerbating high unemployment in the Strip, which is nearly 50 per cent.

In response, the UN has engaged with all sides to ensure the unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance. Agreements were reached with the PA to enable the coordination of humanitarian deliveries under UN auspices and with Israel to streamline its administrative procedures. In early September, the Palestinian Authority also re-engaged on its support to donor-funded projects in Gaza. Still, the lack of coordination has significantly compounded the challenge of confronting the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases throughout the OPT. During the reporting period, three patients, including two children, who needed urgent medical treatment outside Gaza died because of related delays. On 6 September, however, the UN brokered arrangements to enable patient transfers from Gaza with the support of WHO.

Meanwhile, UNRWA faces a USD 200 million financial shortfall in its 2020 core programme budget and seeks an additional USD 31 million to cover its 2020 emergency appeal for critical humanitarian needs in Gaza. UNRWA's extended COVID-19 response plan for USD 94.6 million to cover needs through the end of the year is only five per cent funded.

Concerning arrests have also taken place. On 19 July, Israeli police arrested and detained the PA Governor of Jerusalem. On 9 September, ISF further notified the Governor of an order restricting his movement and banning any communication with listed persons, including PA leaders, without ISF's written approval.

Later on 21 September, Palestinian Security Forces arrested seven members of the Fatah Democratic Reform Bloc.

In another negative development, media reported that the Israeli Security Cabinet passed a motion on 2 September to withhold the bodies of Palestinians killed in armed attacks, or alleged armed attacks, that caused injury or death to Israelis, expanding its existing policy to withhold the bodies of Palestinians whom Israel identifies as known militants.

Mister President,

In its resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council called upon all States "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967." No such steps were known to have been taken during the reporting period.

Resolution 2334 also called upon "all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations."

The agreements between Israel and Bahrain and between Israel and the UAE, which were formalized in a signing ceremony at the White House on 15 September, highlight the criticality of achieving a just, comprehensive, and enduring resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which meets the legitimate needs and aspirations of both peoples.

On 27 August and earlier today, the Envoys of the Middle East Quartet met virtually to discuss these latest developments agreed to remain engaged on the matter and chart a way forward.

On 9 September, the Arab League held a Ministerial meeting. In the final statement, participants reinforced the commitment of all Arab League States to ending the occupation and establishing an independent Palestinian State based on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital and stated that the Arab Peace Initiative remains the basis for achieving a lasting, just and comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

Mister President,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of resolution 2334 during the reporting period.

1. Resurgence of COVID-19 is having a devastating effect on the ground. The UN and its partners will continue to support Palestinians in responding to the pandemic, including by addressing critical gaps in medical supplies and equipment. It is important to focus particularly on Gaza, given the unique situation and extreme vulnerability of the population. Any increased responsibilities taken on by the UN should be limited, time-bound and not replace the responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority or the Government of Israel. I urge the parties to find a path forward to address this urgent health crisis. I urge support for UNRWA as well as for the Inter-Agency Plan for COVID-19 and the UN Development Response Plan in support of the Palestinian Government.
2. We must also remain focused on addressing the steadily eroding situation on the ground. While over the past two reporting periods we have seen limited settlement advancement, I remain concerned by plans for settlement construction in the E1 area and other sensitive locations of the occupied West Bank, which are pending approval by Israeli authorities. As clearly set out in UN resolution 2334 (2016), the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, have no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law.
3. I am deeply concerned by the serious spike in demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. I urge Israel to cease this policy immediately, in line with Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law.
4. Israel's suspension of plans to annex parts of the West Bank removed a critical threat that had the potential to upend peace and regional stability. Annexation would have constituted a most serious violation of international law and deal a devastating blow to prospects for a two-State solution. The threat, however, to the viability of a two-State solution posed by continued settlement expansion and demolitions remains. In this regard, I am concerned by recent discussions in the Israeli Knesset which demonstrate the intensifying pressure on the Israeli Government against Palestinians living in Area C.

5. Given the severe economic and health crisis faced by the Palestinian people, I take this opportunity to call on the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to urgently re-engage and strengthen efforts to advance the goal of a negotiated two-State solution. This financial crisis can and must end. Both sides should re-examine the nature of their economic relationship and improve it to the benefit of both peoples.
6. Daily violence continues to fuel mistrust and drives us further from a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Settler-related violence continues, and I urge Israel, as the occupying power, to ensure the safety and security of the Palestinian population and to hold the perpetrators of the attacks accountable. I reiterate that Israeli security forces must exercise maximum restraint and may use lethal force only when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life and investigate all incidents of possible excessive use of force swiftly, thoroughly, and independently.
7. I also emphasize that the launching of indiscriminate rockets and incendiary devices towards Israeli population centers violates international law and call on Palestinian militants in Gaza to halt these attacks. Likewise, children and schools should never be the target of violence by any party, nor should children be exposed to violence at all.
8. I also welcome the 13 August understandings that have de-escalated tensions in and around Gaza and appreciate Qatar's continued, generous support to the population. I nevertheless remain seriously concerned about the fragile calm and the unacceptable suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. The risk of another major escalation has not been eliminated. No amount of humanitarian or economic support alone will overcome Gaza's challenges. The fundamental problems are political. They require the necessary leadership to reunite Gaza and the West Bank under a single democratic, national leadership as well as to lift Israeli closures in line with Security Council resolution 1860 (2009).
9. I welcome the recent meeting of the PLO Executive Committee and Heads of Palestinian factions and subsequent efforts made by the leadership to strengthen Palestinian unity. It is critical that the important Egyptian-led intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts also continue. The UN firmly supports all efforts and I call upon all Palestinian factions to build on this momentum to reunite Gaza and the occupied West Bank under a single, democratic, national government and advance towards general elections, critical for restoring belief in the democratic Palestinian leadership and institutions. Gaza is, and must remain, an integral part of a future Palestinian State as part of a two-State solution.
10. I am concerned over reports by Palestinian rights groups of arrests by Palestinian security forces in Gaza and West Bank based on political affiliation without clear charges or accusations. Such politically motivated arrests should stop, and the rule of law should prevail.
11. I would like to reiterate that the fate of two Israeli civilians and the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in Gaza remains an important humanitarian concern. I call upon Hamas to provide full information on them, as required by international humanitarian law.

12. I also remain concerned by Israel's practice of holding the bodies of killed Palestinians and by reports of a recent expansion of this policy and call for the return of withheld bodies, in line with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

Mister President,

In closing, we are again at a pivotal moment in the search for peace as a convergence of destabilizing factors threatens to pull Israelis and Palestinians further towards a one-state reality of perpetual occupation and conflict. I remain committed to supporting both sides to resolve the conflict and end the occupation in line with relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements in pursuit of achieving the vision of two States – Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, viable and sovereign Palestinian State – within secure and recognized borders, based on the pre-1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States.

I reiterate the Secretary-General's call to the members of the Middle East Quartet, key Arab partners, and to the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to urgently re-engage and strengthen efforts to advance the goal of a negotiated two-State solution before it is too late.

Thank you