21. The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

During the period under review, the Security Council held four meetings in connection with the item entitled “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question”. No decisions were adopted during the period under review. In 2020, during the meetings under this item, the Council continued its practice of holding monthly briefings and quarterly open debates. More information on the meetings, including on participants, speakers and outcomes, is given in table 1 below. In addition, Council members held a total of nine open videoconferences in connection with this item. More information on the open videoconferences is provided in table 2 below. In addition to the meetings and videoconferences, in 2020, Council members held informal consultations of the whole. Under this item, whether in the context of meetings or videoconferences, Council members also considered developments in Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and the Middle East region, including the implementation of resolution 2231 (2015) and the agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

During the year 2020, in most meetings and videoconferences, Council members heard briefings by the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. Council members also heard briefings by the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs once, and remarks by the Secretary-General twice in February and June 2020. The Vice-Chair of the Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States also briefed the Council once in January 2020. In addition, in a videoconference held on 21 July 2020, Council

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612 For more information on the format of meetings, see part II sect. II.
613 For more information on the procedures and working methods developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, see part II.
614 See A/75/2, part II, chap. 2. See also S/2020/1142.
615 See also part I, sect. 20.
616 See S/PV.8706.
617 See S/PV.8717 and S/2020/596.
618 See S/PV.8706.

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members heard briefings by Mr. Khalil Shikaki, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, and Mr. Daniel Levy, President of the US/Middle East Project.\footnote{619 See \textit{S/2020/736}.}

On 11 February 2020, in an extraordinary meeting further to the release by the United States of its “Peace to Prosperity” vision for Israelis and Palestinians, the Secretary-General affirmed the full commitment of the United Nations to a just and comprehensive peace between Palestinians and Israelis.\footnote{620 See \textit{S/PV.8717}.} At that meeting, the Special Coordinator briefed the Council and reported that in the days since the United States’ proposal was unveiled, sporadic violent incidents in the Palestinian territory were witnessed, including in East Jerusalem. He also mentioned that the United States had announced that it would establish a joint committee with Israel to produce a more detailed version of the conceptual maps included in the proposal, which would allow it to recognize an Israeli decision to apply its laws in specified areas in the West Bank. The Special Coordinator cautioned that the possible annexation of territory in the West Bank would have a devastating impact on the prospects for a two-State solution and would severely undermine opportunities for normalization and regional peace.\footnote{621 \textit{Ibid}.}

During the review period, the Special Coordinator provided regular briefings to the Council in the context of monthly briefings in February, May, August and November, whether in person or via videoconference. In those instances, the Special Coordinator reported to Council members on the political situation including the process of intra-Palestinian reconciliation, coordination between the two parties, the violence in the occupied West Bank including East Jerusalem, and on the status of the negotiations including the meetings of the Middle East Quartet. The Special Coordinator also reported on the deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions in Gaza, further exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19, and on the threat of annexation by Israel of areas of the West Bank. He urged Member States to provide additional resources for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which faced a historical funding shortage. In his monthly briefings, the Special

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{S/2020/736.}
\item \textit{S/PV.8717.}
\item \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
Coordinator also covered developments in Lebanon and the Golan. During discussions, Council members condemned the continued occupation of the Palestinian territory and called for the resumption of negotiations based on a two-State solution. While cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians in fighting COVID-19 was welcomed, several Council members called for this effort as well as the international community’s support for Palestine to be intensified. On 25 August 2020, the Special Coordinator reported on the agreement reached between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stopping Israeli annexation plans over parts of the occupied West Bank and including the normalization of relations between the two countries. He said that the agreement had the potential to change dynamics across the region and created new opportunities for cooperation. The Special Coordinator also focused on the situation in Lebanon, and in particular on the 4 August 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut which left over 180 people dead, with 30 persons still missing and several thousand injured, as well as on the situation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operation and in the Golan Heights.

At that videoconference, most Council members welcomed the agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates to normalize relationships, which also included the suspension of Israel’s plan to annex part of the West Bank. Some Council members called on Israel to abandon the annexation plan indefinitely, and others urged the Palestinian Authority and Israel to take the opportunity provided by the suspension of the annexation plan to resume peace negotiations. Council members also addressed the response of the Security Council to the 20 August 2020 notification by the United States concerning paragraph 11 of resolution 2231 (2015) concerning the lifting of the arms embargo on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most Council members agreed that the notification by the United States to invoke the “snapback mechanism” provided for in the resolution was ineffective, given that the United States had ceased to

622 See S/2020/430, China, France, Germany, Indonesia, Russia and Viet Nam; and S/2020/596, Belgium, China, Estonia, France, Indonesia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Tunisia.
624 Ibid., Belgium, Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, United Kingdom and United States.
625 Ibid., Belgium, France, Germany, Indonesia and Russian Federation.
626 Ibid., Belgium, Dominican Republic, France and United Kingdom.
participate in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The representative of Indonesia, who was the President of the Council for the month, responded to the question from the representatives of various Council members concerning the position of the Presidency on the letter of the United States. He said that after having consulted with members and receiving letters from many Member States, it was clear that one member had a particular position on the issue, while a significant number of members had differing views. He added that, in his view, there was no consensus in the Council and the President was therefore not in a position to take further action. At a videoconference held on 18 November 2020, the Special Coordinator reported on the signing of bilateral agreements between Bahrain and Israel, and urged the Middle East Quartet, Arab partners and Israeli and Palestinian leaders to use the progress to resume peace negotiations. Council members also welcomed normalisation agreements between Israel and several Arab states, and urged that the agreements be used as a springboard for the resumption of peace negotiations.

Every three months, monthly briefings, whether in the form of meetings or videoconferences, were also used to report on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016). During those briefings that took place in March, June, September and December, the Special Coordinator continued to report on the lack of progress in the implementation of the main provisions of the resolution, namely, with regard to the Israeli settlement activities, the violence against civilians including acts of terror, incitement, provocation and inflammatory rhetoric, the steps and efforts to advance the peace process as well as the actions by all States to distinguish in their relevant dealings between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. At a videoconference held on 30 March, the Special Coordinator praised the far-reaching measures that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority had taken to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. He noted that the coordination put in place and the joint commitment to tackle the threat to both populations was exemplary. At these meetings most Council members

627 Ibid., Belgium, China, Estonia, France, Germany, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, United Kingdom. For further details on the discussion, see part V, sect. II.B.
628 Ibid., Russia, China and South Africa.
629 Ibid. For further details on the role of the presidency, see part II, sect. IV.
630 S/2020/263.
expressed concern at the lack of progress with respect to the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), and reaffirmed their commitment to a two-State solution. Council members viewed the COVID-19 coordination among Israelis and Palestinians as an opportunity for relaunching peace negotiations. Some Council members reminded Israel of its obligations as the occupying power under international law to protect the lives and safety of the Palestinian population, including by providing them with vaccines for COVID-19.631 Other Council members expressed concern at the violence against children, and emphasised the need for accountability through thorough and transparent investigations.632 In 2020, as it happened in 2019, the reports of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016) were submitted in writing twice, the fourteenth report in June and the sixteenth report in December.633 During a videoconference held on 24 June 2020 with six Council members participating at the ministerial level, the Secretary-General delivered his remarks. The Secretary-General expressed concern over the continuing threat of annexation by Israel of parts of the occupied Palestinian territory. The Secretary-General affirmed that if implemented, annexation would constitute a most serious violation of international law, grievously harm the prospect of a two-State solution and undercut the possibilities of a renewal of negotiations. He also called on the Government of Israel to abandon its annexation plans and encouraged regional and international supporters of the two-State solution to help bring the parties back to a path towards a negotiated, peaceful settlement. He called on the Middle East Quartet to take up its mandated mediation role and find a mutually agreeable framework for the parties to re-engage with it and other key States, without preconditions.634 The Special Coordinator also focused on the threat posed by annexation to a future viable Palestinian state, and provided a briefing on the fourteenth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). He highlighted the widespread opposition to the annexation plan among the international and regional communities, as well as among civil society in both Israel and Palestine. He also shared his concerns over the impact of the recent decision by the Palestinian Authority to stop accepting the clearance revenue collected

631 See S/2020/1275, Indonesia, South Africa and United Kingdom.
632 Ibid., Belgium, South Africa and United Kingdom.
634 See S/2020/596.
by Israel on the welfare of the Palestinian people. Council members shared the Secretary-General’s concerns and opposition to Israel’s annexation plan and called for a restart of the peace negotiations. On 29 September 2020, the Council held a meeting in the Economic and Social Council Chamber, which was the first meeting under this item since February 2020. During his briefing, the Special Coordinator presented his fifteenth report on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), covering the period from 5 June to 20 September. He also noted the recent agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and that the Secretary-General welcomed those agreements, which suspended Israeli annexation plans over parts of the occupied West Bank, and reiterated that only a two-State solution that realized the legitimate national aspirations of Palestinians and Israelis could lead to sustainable peace between the two peoples and contribute to broader peace in the region. He also reported on the various provisions of resolution 2334 (2016), including the settlement progress and demolition of Palestinian structures in the West Bank, acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, acts of provocation, incitement or inflammatory rhetoric, as well as on affirmative steps taken to reverse negative trends imperilling the two-State solution. The Special Coordinator also addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ground, which was having a devastating effect. In closing he reiterated the Secretary-General’s call for the members of the Middle East Quartet, key Arab partners and the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to urgently re-engage and strengthen efforts to advance the goal of a negotiated two-State solution. During the discussion, Council members called for the resumption of negotiations between the parties, a halt to the expansion of Israeli settlements and demolitions of Palestinian houses in the West Bank and for progress in intra-Palestinian reconciliation and elections. Some Council members welcomed President Abbas’s call for an international conference with all concerned parties to engage in a peace

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635 Ibid.
636 Ibid., St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Indonesia, Tunisia, United Kingdom, South Africa, Viet Nam, Belgium, China, Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Niger and Russian Federation.
637 See S/PV.8762.
638 Ibid.

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process based on international law, United Nations resolutions and other internationally agreed parameters.\(^{639}\)

In 2020, the practice of holding quarterly open debates was heavily impacted by the pandemic and the inability to hold them in the Security Council or the Economic and Social Council Chamber. As a result, further to the first open debate which took place on 21 and 22 January 2020, the members of the Council held videoconferences in connection with this item on 23 April, 21 July, and 26 October. In the context of these videoconferences, Council members delivered statements as did the representatives of Israel and Palestine.\(^ {640}\) In addition, in accordance with the written understanding reached among Council members for the conduct of videoconferences, written statements were submitted by Member States and other entities, later compiled in letters by the President of the Security Council. In his briefings during the quarterly videoconferences, the Special Coordinator focused on the prospect of annexation by Israel of parts of the occupied Palestinian territory as a result of the political agreement that opened the way to the formation of the national emergency government in Israel, the continued violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the humanitarian situation in Gaza as well as the dynamics created on the ground by the COVID-19 pandemic. He also touched upon the situations in Lebanon, the Golan, and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). In January 2020, during the first open debate of the year under this item, the Council was briefed by the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs as well as the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.\(^ {641}\) At that meeting, the Council also heard briefings by the Vice-Chair of the Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and the Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States. The Under-Secretary-General recalled the Secretary-General’s call on all leaders to exercise maximum restraint and emphasizing that the world could not afford another conflict. She stated that with the political process deadlocked, negative developments continued to undermine the prospects for a two-State

\(^{639}\) Ibid., South Africa, China, Indonesia, Tunisia and Germany.


\(^{641}\) See S/PV.8706. The first open debate of the year under this item took place over two days, 21 and 22 January 2020, due to the financial difficulties faced by the United Nations, which resulted in meetings of the Security Council being restricted to take place only from 10 am to 1 pm and from 3 pm to 6 pm.
solution, namely, the continued expansion of settlement activity and the threat of annexation of parts of the West Bank, and the ongoing clashes and arrests in East Jerusalem. Regarding Gaza, while still extremely fragile, she noted that there had been a notable and welcome reduction in violence in and around Gaza. Despite the progress in some areas, she also noted that humanitarian and economic steps would not resolve Gaza’s immense challenges, since at their core these were political and required political solutions. She also reported on the statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, announcing that the preliminary examination by the Court had concluded with determination that all the statutory criteria under the Rome Statute for the opening of an investigation had been met. In doing so, she expressed the view that, among other things, war crimes had been or were being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. In closing, she emphasized the continued urgency of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of relevant United Nations resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.642 The Assistant Secretary-General briefed the Council on her six-day visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory where she had met representatives of Palestinians and Israelis, as well as representatives of the international community. She stated that the meetings conveyed hardships, challenges and opportunities for positive change.643 On 21 July 2020, the members of the Council held a videoconference in connection with this item. At the videoconference, Council members heard briefings by the Special Coordinator as well as by the Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, and the President of the United States/Middle East Project. In his briefing, the Special Coordinator warned the Council of the complex and destabilizing three-pronged crisis facing Palestinians and Israelis; an escalating health crisis as both struggled to contain the rapid spike of COVID-19 cases, a spiralling economic crisis as businesses closed, unemployment soared, protests increased, and the economy suffered the financial impact of months of lockdowns and restrictions, and finally, a mounting political confrontation, driven by the threat of Israeli annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank, and the steps taken in response by the Palestinian leadership. The Special Coordinator also informed the Council of the challenge in confronting

642 See S/PV.8706.
643 Ibid.

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the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases in Gaza due the ending of coordination between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The President of the United States/Middle East Project suggested that the Security Council, along with the Secretary-General, explore a mechanism to assess and evaluate its record and effectiveness on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that they examine convening a commission to appraise new approaches to resolve the long-standing conflict. The Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research urged Council members to protect the legitimacy of the international system and reject the United States’ “Peace to Prosperity” proposal, which would jeopardize a two-state solution.

During the open debate and videoconferences, Council members reiterated their opposition to the annexation, citing violation of international law and hindrance to the peace process. Council members also called on Israel to cease the building of new settlements and the demolition of Palestinian houses and property. A number of Council members urged the international community to provide more support for Palestine, including through UNRWA, to provide necessary humanitarian assistance, noting the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority of Council members also expressed support for an international peace conference as proposed by the President of the Palestinian Authority in an effort to restart negotiations. Some Council members reminded the Council of its responsibility and mandate to ensure implementation of its resolutions.

Table 1
Meetings: The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting record and date</th>
<th>Sub-item</th>
<th>Other documents</th>
<th>Rule 37 invitations</th>
<th>Rule 39 and other invitations</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S/PV.8706 and S/PV.8706 (Resumption 1) 21 and 22 January 2020</td>
<td>32 Member States&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Seven invitees&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All Council members, all invitees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/PV.8717 11 February 2020</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, President of the Observer State of Palestine to the United Nations, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States</td>
<td>Secretary-General, all Council members, all invitees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/PV.8730 24 February 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Special Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/PV.8762 29 September 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All Council members, Special Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Azerbaijan (also on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Bahrain, Bangladesh (also on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, Portugal (also on behalf of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and United Kingdom), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, the Sudan (also on behalf of the Arab Group), the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>b</sup> Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Vice-Chair of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations, Permanent Observer of the League of Arab States, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

<sup>c</sup> The meeting was presided over by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defense of Belgium.

<sup>d</sup> The Special Coordinator joined via videoconference from Jerusalem.

### Table 2

**Videoconferences: The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Videoconference date</th>
<th>Videoconference record</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Decision and vote (for-against-abstaining) and record of written procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 March 2020&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>S/2020/263</td>
<td>Letter dated 31 March 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 April 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/341</td>
<td>Letter dated 27 April 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Videoconference date</th>
<th>Videoconference record</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Decision and vote (for-against-abstaining) and record of written procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 May 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/430</td>
<td>Letter dated 22 May 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 June 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/596</td>
<td>Letter dated 26 June 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 July 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/736</td>
<td>Letter dated 23 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 August 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/837</td>
<td>Letter dated 27 August 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 October 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/1055</td>
<td>Letter dated 28 October 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 November 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/1128</td>
<td>Letter dated 20 November 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 December 2020</td>
<td>S/2020/1275</td>
<td>Letter dated 23 December 2020 from the President of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the Permanent Representatives of the members of the Security Council</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to technical difficulties, instead of open, the videoconference was closed. For more information on the procedures and working methods developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, see part II.