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and explained that these momentous challenges can only be faced in a collective context where all leaders of the Ummah renew their determination and resolve to work hand in hand according to a clear plan in order to lead their people and bring them to play a central role on the world stage at this critical time for the whole of humankind.


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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL ON THE CAUSE OF PALESTINE AND AL QUDS AL SHARIF

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The Situation in the Palestinian Territories

The Palestinian cause recently witnessed significant developments after the Israeli government implemented its unilateral plan to redeploy its forces outside the Gaza Strip, dismantle all its settlements there and evacuate its settlers from Gaza and some settlements in the Northern West Bank. The Secretary of State of the United States of America exerted earnest efforts leading to an agreement between the Palestinian and Israeli sides over the land crossings linking the West Bank with the Arab Republic of Egypt and a safe passage linking the Gaza Strip with the West Bank.

Despite the positive atmosphere that followed the Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, Israel has recently taken measures to create a buffer zone, hundreds of metres wide within the Palestinian territories in north of the Gaza Strip. Its forces have continued to bomb several regions in the Gaza Strip using aeroplanes, tanks, and mortars, killing scores of people and leaving many injured. The Israeli measures have been criticized by the representative of the Quartet, Mr James Wolfensohn, who described Israel as acting as if there was no withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Mr Wolfensohn also announced that Israel requested the stoppage of the preliminary World Bank studies on linking the West Bank to the Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, Israel continued its incursions into the cities, villages and refugee camps in the West Bank, perpetrated more killings and assassinations, launched a massive campaign of arrests, and continued to impose collective punishments on Palestinians. It also continued the building of settlements, the Wall, bye-passes and military barriers that hamper the movement of the Palestinian citizens. Israel ventured to set aside several roads in the West Bank for the exclusive use of Jewish settlers as part of a recently uncovered racial segregation scheme aimed at creating a new fait accompli on the ground. Under this plan, a large parcel of Palestinian land would be confiscated in order to build more roads for the use of the settlers and to establish crossings, openings and centres for monitoring the movements of Palestinians.

Economic losses

Concerning economic losses, the Palestinian National Information Centre issued a report in which it stated that losses suffered by the Palestinian economy since the beginning of the *intifada* has reached US\$ 15, 633,000,000 (Fifteen billion six hundred and thirty-three million dollars). This is as a result of the Israeli measures such as blockades, collective punishments, shelling and destruction of infrastructure as well as public and private properties. According to the report, the GDP of Palestine has fallen by 40%, its exports by 54%, while investments have shrunk by US\$ 145 million. Unemployment has risen from 10% before the *intifada* to 27% after it, and 67% of Palestinian families have lost their income. Israeli military operations have caused damages to more than 9000 factories, 430 of which were totally damaged. Moreover, 1720 economic facilities closed down as a direct result of the separation wall being built by Israel on the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian labour force has lost about US\$ 3.8 billion because of the inability of Palestinian workers to reach their workplaces due to military barriers and closures imposed on their cities and villages by Israel. The net loss on local income and production has reached US\$ 9, 163,000,000.

Settlement and the Wall

Although Israel has evacuated its settlers from settlements in Gaza Strip and four settlements in the Northern West Bank, it has persisted in expanding its settlements in the West Bank. A noticeable increase was revealed recently in the number of settlers in the West Bank, reaching over 260,000 settlers in August 2005, in addition to more than 180,000 settlers living in 11 settlement neighbourhoods dispersed in and around occupied East Jerusalem since 1967.

The Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank included the recent confiscation of a large tract of Palestinian land. There, Palestinian lands located in the south of Al Khaleel, were confiscated to expand settlements. Also in the heart of the City of Al Khaleel, tracts of land were confiscated to expand the *Ramat Ishay* settlement. It was revealed recently that the continuous curfew and collective punishments imposed by Israel against Palestinian citizens in the City of Al-Khaleel have led to the expulsion of 30,000 Palestinians and the seizure of their homes in the old quarters of the city, to make way for their replacement by thousands of settlers. This is a process of ethnic cleansing aimed at the Judaization of the City of Al Khaleel and the imposition of fait accompli which will hamper the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In addition, land was confiscated to open a new bypass to serve a number of settlements situated to the southwest of the City of Qalqelya. More land was confiscated to expand Ennab settlement built in the City of Toulkarm, in addition to the confiscation of hundreds of hectares of the land in the cities of Nablus and Bethlehem to build new sections of the apartheid wall. The Palestinian Authority published a report saying that Israel's settlement activities witnessed 100% increase in July compared with June. An Israeli government decision was revealed recently which strengthens settlement in the Jordan Valley, and US\$ 20 million (twenty million dollars) were earmarked for a settlement project to be implemented in 2005-2006.

Concerning the construction of the apartheid wall, Israel has accelerated the construction of new sections of the wall, particularly around the occupied City of Al Quds, so as to join the settlement of *Maali Adumim* to the occupied Al Quds. This means the confiscation and annexing of 12,000 hectares of the land of the West Bank to the fake municipality.

The occupation authorities have completed the construction of most of the wall to the south of Al Quds such that the two cities of Bethlehem and Beit Jala remained behind an 11-meter high wall which has taken thousands of hectares from Palestinian land and has turned the native city of Jesus into a city of ghosts, completely isolated from Al Quds. Israeli occupation forces also turned Bilal Ibn Rabah Mosque situated to the north of Bethlehem into a Jewish synagogue and annexed it to Israel.

In occupied northern Al Quds, Israel completed the construction of new sections of the apartheid wall, which led to the isolation of Palestinian villages situated to

the northwest of Al Quds and turned them into isolated Bantustans completely surrounded with walls. Israel has almost turned the military barrier in Qalandya, in northern Al Quds, into a permanent border crossing separating the city of Al Quds from its Palestinian surrounding.

The City of Al Quds

Israel continued its siege of the occupied City of Al Quds, denying Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip access to the city. Israel also continued to impose stringent restrictions to worshippers' access to the Blessed Al Aqsa Mosque. Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were denied access for worship during the blessed month of Ramadan.

As part of the ongoing efforts of Israel to change the landmarks of the occupied City of Al Quds and interfere in the Islamic Waqf affairs in order to exercise its control over the Islamic religious sites and sanctuaries, the Israeli Department of Antiquities issued a report in which it claimed that the walls surrounding the City of Al Quds have serious cracks which expose a large part of it to disintegration. The Department of Islamic Waqf replied that the Israeli report concealed the intention of the occupation authorities to interfere in the restoration of the historical places in a manner that will serve Israel's interest in changing the landmarks and judaization of the holy city. The OIC Secretary General issued a press statement on the 20th November 2005 on the present conditions of the holy places and historical monuments in the city of Al-Quds as a result of the Israeli measures and excavations under the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque and walls of the old city. The statement stressed the readiness of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to do what is necessary to preserve the Islamic identity in the City of Al Quds, including the restoration and maintenance of its religious and historical sites.

Last October and for the first time since 1967, the Israeli Supreme Court granted permission to a group of Jewish extremists to enter and worship in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This Israeli move came after the repeated announcement by the Jewish extremist group of its intension to desecrate the 'route of the Prophet's night journey' and after the recent unveiling of the extremists' intention to attack the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque with explosives.

Israel also persisted in its attempts to judaize the occupied City of Al Quds and to alter its civilizational, geographic and demographic characters. It completed the construction of 70% of the 130 KM wall which surrounds the City of Al Quds by what is known in Israel as the "Jerusalem Belt". The latter will include around 20 settlements, isolate 250,000 citizens of Al Quds from their geographic and demographic surrounding, and turn East Jerusalem into a set of poor isolated neighborhoods.

Concerning settlement within Al Quds, the Israeli settlement campaign has intensified, with the news that the settlement society known as the Society for the Development of the Old City registered 1300 Palestinian estates in the land register, under Jewish names in order to judaize the Holy City. It was also announced recently that the Israeli government has earmarked 15 million US dollars to strengthen Jewish settlement in the City of Al Quds as part of a plan to establish Israeli settlement projects to prevent the Palestinian demographic expansion. Among these projects are the construction of a park and tourist points around the old city, including a tourist center at the foot of *Jabal Al Zaitoun*; turning Salomon's Cave, where settlers have built a settlement point, into a theater, and opening a road to link the settlements inside the old city with the large settlements surrounding the City of Al Quds. Perhaps the most serious of Israel's latest attempts is the announcement by its government to allocate US \$100 million to restore buildings and roads in the occupied holy city and highlight Jewish architecture there as part of attempts to judaize the holy city.

The occupation's municipality of the City of Al Quds has validated a new

settlement plan consisting of the construction of 100 housing units and a hotel for the Jews in the area of *Jabal Al Mokabber*, southeast Jerusalem on a surface of 48,000 square meters, half of which has been allocated to building a synagogue and settlement houses and the rest will be used to build a hotel overlooking the holy city from the Southeast.

Israel has recently declared its intention to build a new settlement point at the heart of *Bab Al Sahira* inside the walls of the old city, and to build a Jewish synagogue on top of which will be a golden dome similar to the Dome of the Holy Rock in an attempt to judaize the Holy City not only geographically and demographically, but culturally as well. Besides, Israeli occupation authorities have issued orders to demolish 120 Palestinian houses in the village of Silwan situated to the south of the walls of the old city of Al Quds under the pretext of building a park and safeguarding alleged Jewish antiquities.

Political Moves

The recent Israeli escalation has dealt a real blow to the international and regional peace efforts and has weakened the hopes of the Palestinians for any serious progress in the peace process. The region witnessed numerous political moves to enhance the peace process. The most prominent of those moves was the tour of the Palestinian President, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, of European and Arab capitals and Washington D.C. and his meeting with the American President.

Within the framework of Islamic efforts to support the Palestinian rights, and pursuant to the Final Communiqué of the 32nd Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Sana'a, the Islamic ministerial delegation, comprised of the Kingdom of Morocco, the Republic of Yemen, Senegal, Malaysia, the Republic of Turkey, Palestine and the OIC Secretary General, held meetings and engagements with members of the Quartet at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, on the sidelines of 60th Session of the UN General Assembly. The Islamic Ministerial delegation held meetings with Mr Kofi Anan, the United Nations Secretary General, Mr Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, and Mr. Javier Solana, European Union High Representative for Political and Security Affairs. The discussions focused on the cause of Al Quds and the dangers it faces. It was also emphasized that the cause of Al Quds was a central issue for the Organization of the Islamic Conference and an international issue that concerns all countries of the world. During the meetings, the delegation called for action to stop the Israeli violations and the blockade of the City of Al Quds, to reject the Israeli measures aimed at judaizing and changing the features of the city, and to stop, as a matter of necessity, the building of the separation wall and settlement activities, including Israel's decision to annex *Maali Adumim* to Al Quds, which preempts the final status negotiation and creates a situation that will prevent the establishment of a just peace in the Middle East. The Islamic ministerial delegation will resume its mission by holding further talks with Washington, London and the Vatican.

Visit of the Secretary General to Palestine

The Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference visited Palestine last May. There, he met the Palestinian President, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, the Prime Minister, Mr. Ahmad Qurea, and a number of ministers in the Palestinian National Authority. The Secretary General and the Palestinian leadership discussed the state of the Palestinian cause and how to support the Palestinian people in their efforts to gain their national rights to freedom and independence and to establish the independent Palestinian state. The Secretary General also visited the City of Al Quds, where he met with its political and religious leadership and saw the difficulties the Holy City was going through as a

result of the Israeli blockades and measures.

The condition today is more dangerous than it seems, as the Holy City is passing through the most difficult stage of its history, a moribund state, which is the result of restriction, isolation and blockade. Arab and Islamic presence is continuously being endangered because of the systematic policy of Israel to judaize the city and impose a fait accompli that cannot be amended. Confronting this policy, therefore, requires a counter policy and programme for systematic action aimed at arresting the acceleration of the ongoing judaization process to create the biggest and most profound change possible.

Preserving the Arab and Islamic character of the Holy City is intertwined with preserving the human presence therein, for that is the only guarantee against the completion of the aforementioned scheme. This requires improvement of the conditions for that presence, the strengthening the material capacities for continuity and steadfastness, and the preservation of Al-Quds that will shoulder this responsibility within the framework of a systematic support programme for Al Quds that caters for priorities, particularly those related to the basic needs, primarily to housing, education, health, culture and the preservation of the Islamic character and identity of the holy city.

Discussion was held with the Palestinian senior officials on what the Organization of the Islamic Conference and its affiliated institutions and bodies can do to support the Holy City and its inhabitants. In this regard, agreement has been reached on the involvement of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), in restoration works in Al-Quds, in collaboration with the Al Quds University.