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PEACE PROCESS BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

18 October 2018

Madame President,

Members of the Security Council,

Every month I brief this Council on the situation in the Middle East and the Palestinian Question.

Every month we speak of how continued settlement construction and the demolition of Palestinian structures in the occupied West Bank undermine the very foundations of the prospect of a sovereign Palestinian state. We condemn terror, violence and incitement that eat away at the trust between Israelis and Palestinians. We call for unity and reconciliation.

Every month we appeal to political leaders on both sides to find their way back to the table for negotiations, to reverse the negative trends on the ground and to restore hope that it is through peaceful negotiations, not violence that both Israelis and Palestinians will be able to live side-by-side, masters of their own fate.

Day after day however we see the situation on the ground slipping in a different direction, we see it sliding into a one-state reality of perpetual occupation and violence that does not serve peace, we see the international consensus on how to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict being challenged.

Yet we all understand that without a negotiated resolution based on the final status issues – as they have been defined by Israelis and Palestinians themselves – there can be no sustainable peace that realizes the national, historic, and religious aspirations of both peoples.

It is our shared responsibility to restore that prospect, to facilitate negotiations, to help the weaker party, to insulate the process from radicals and extremists and to show results.

Madame President,

Before I turn to the most urgent questions related to the situation in Gaza, I would like to begin with developments in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where violence is on the rise and Israeli authorities have continued the demolition and confiscation of Palestinian-owned structures.

According to OCHA, 39 structures were demolished or seized in the West Bank, including five in East Jerusalem, displacing some 33 people and affecting the livelihoods of over 100 others.

Thirty-four of the targeted structures were in Area C, including five installed in solidarity with Khan al-Ahmar - Abu al Helu, the Bedouin community at imminent risk of demolition and displacement.

On 23 September, the Israeli authorities requested the residents of Khan al-Ahmar – Abu al Helu to self-demolish their homes by 1 October or face demolition by the authorities, in line with the 5 September final ruling of the Israeli High Court.

On 8 October, the authorities extended the validity of land requisition orders for roadwork to enable the demolition. The community was given one week to object to the order.

Khan al-Ahmar is among the 18 communities located in or adjacent to the controversial E1 area, where plans for new settlement construction would create a continuous built-up area between the Ma'ale Adumim and East Jerusalem, undermining the contiguity of a future Palestinian state. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator, along with the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, the Arab League and others have called on Israel not to go ahead with its plan to demolish the village.

I once again join this call to cease demolitions and other measures that run contrary to its obligations under international law.

All structures lacking permits from the Israeli authorities in Area C and East Jerusalem, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain, are potentially subject to demolition. And, while the rate of demolitions has declined since the beginning of 2017, over 13,000 demolition orders are pending against structures in Area C, three-quarters of which are on private Palestinian land.

Meanwhile, on 14 October the Israeli Government reportedly approved the allocation of USD 6 million for advancing the construction of 31 housing units in the Jewish settlement in Hebron, which would be the first new construction there in 16 years.

I reiterate the long-standing United Nations position that all settlement activities are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace.

Madame President,

Violent incidents also continued in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Among these, on 7 October, an Israeli man and woman were shot dead by a Palestinian man in the Barkan Industrial Area in the West Bank. The assailant fled the scene and Israeli Security Forces are currently carrying out widespread search operations in the area.

On 12 October, a Palestinian woman was killed, near a checkpoint south of Nablus, injured by stones allegedly thrown by Israeli assailants.

I extend my condolences to the bereaved families. Such incidents must be condemned in the strongest of terms, and I call on everyone to stand up to violence and condemn terror.

Settler-related violence is also a continuing concern. There were 23 attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinians, resulting in one death, 12 injuries and property damage.

To date in 2018, according to OCHA over 1,600 Palestinian-owned trees were vandalized across the West Bank. As the annual olive harvest begins, concerns are particularly high. I call on the authorities to ensure smooth access of Palestinian farmers to their land and that sufficient measures be taken to protect farmers and their property from attacks.

In recent weeks, protests at the Gaza fence have expanded to include night demonstrations. Hamas and other militants continued to send incendiary kites and balloons across the border causing fires on the Israeli side. The Israeli Defence Forces have responded with riot dispersal means and live fire.

Thirty-three Palestinians, including nine children, were killed by Israeli Security Forces during demonstrations and other incidents. Three Israeli soldiers were meanwhile injured.

Intense clashes took place at the Gaza fence during Friday protests on 12 October in which an estimated 20,000 Palestinians participated. Seven people were killed and over 150 injured by live fire on this day alone. Incendiary kites launched from Gaza started fires, an IED detonated at the fence, and a group of protesters breached the fence and entered Israeli territory.

In addition, overall during the reporting period, Palestinian militants have fired two rockets which landed in Israel. Israel fired 45 missiles and shells at sites in the Gaza Strip.

In the early hours of 17 October, Palestinian militants fired a rocket from central Gaza towards Israel that hit and significantly damaged a residential house in the Israeli city of Be'er Sheva. The city, some 40 kilometers from Gaza and well beyond the ring of communities in the immediate vicinity of the Strip, can be reached only by medium range rockets. After the 9 August Grad rocket that landed in the outskirts of Be'er Sheva, this was the second projectile to reach such a distance since the 2014 conflict. Three Israelis were reportedly injured. A second rocket landed in the sea southwest of Tel Aviv.

The Israeli Air Force responded with a series of airstrikes, firing at several locations, most of them identified as military sites around Gaza. One Palestinian militant was killed and at least two injured in a strike on a group that was in the process of launching rockets.

On 11 October, the Israeli Defence Forces announced that they had destroyed another tunnel extending from near the city of Khan Yunis in Gaza 200 meters into Israel territory.

In response to violence at the fence, for the third time since March, on 7 October, Israel reduced the permissible fishing area off the Gaza coast from nine to six nautical miles. And again on 17 October, following the rocket attack in Be'er Sheva, Israel further reduced the fishing zone to three nautical miles, and closed all crossings between Israel and Gaza.

Madame President,

I brief you today as we enter a pivotal phase in Egyptian-led efforts to overcome intra-Palestinian divisions.

I would like to convey two very clear messages to this Council.

The first is that the situation in Gaza is imploding. This is not a hyperbole. This is not alarmism. It is a reality.

The World Bank recently warned that the Gaza economy is in "free fall" with an official unemployment rate of 53 per cent, and over 70 per cent among the Palestinian youth.

Every second person in Gaza now lives below the poverty line.

All key indicators – humanitarian, economic, security and political – continue to deteriorate.

We remain on the brink of another potentially devastating conflict, a conflict that nobody claims to want, but a conflict that needs much more than just words to be prevented.

As I have outlined in detail in recent months, the United Nations and its partners have engaged, in response to requests from several UN Security Council members, in an extraordinary effort to stabilize the situation in Gaza and prevent an escalation. We have done so in coordination with Egypt and in full transparency with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The effort has aimed at avoiding war and facilitating a return to the informal understandings reached in 2014 to maintain calm. This will not only alleviate the suffering of two million Palestinians but will give political leaders time to achieve progress in reconciliation. Since the beginning of this process, the UN has firmly held that we need to make every effort to return Gaza to the control of the legitimate Palestinian Government.

But let me assure this Council that, barring substantial steps to reverse the current course, this precarious sense of calm is doomed to give way under the mounting pressure.

It is already beginning to fray.

Recent days have seen tensions and violent confrontations rising again.

This should be of great concern to all of us. The gravity of the situation compels us to take decisive action.

The latest rockets that were fired from Gaza towards Be'er Sheva are a dangerous escalation of the situation. Unfortunately, they also fit a pattern of provocations that seek to bring Israel and Gaza into another deadly conflict. It is our responsibility to do everything possible to avoid that outcome.

I am afraid that there is no more time for words. Now is the time for action. And we must see very clear actions on all sides that de-escalate the situation. Otherwise, the consequences will be terrible for everyone.

Madame President,

My second key message is cautiously more optimistic. There is a growing consensus and determination among key international and regional partners on moving forward to defuse the powder keg that Gaza is.

On 27 September, a ministerial Meeting on UNRWA was held on the margins of the high level General Debate. Member States contributed generously to the Agency, raising some USD 122 million. This has been a very impressive collective international effort that has prevented an immediate shut down of key UNRWA services, including in Gaza.

Nevertheless, a significant gap remains.

On 27 September, the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) agreed on the implementation of an urgent set of humanitarian projects in Gaza. These interventions are aimed at addressing the immediate needs of the population in energy, water, sanitation, health care and economic

conditions. The goals are concrete. They are realistic. And they are achievable. There is no discussion here of projects – such as airports or seaports or sea channels.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Government of the State of Qatar for its swift and generous response to the AHLC call by providing USD 60 million for fuel to increase the supply of electricity in the Gaza Strip.

Madame President,

Relieving the humanitarian pressure on the ground will reduce the threat of escalation and give space for Egyptian-led efforts to return the legitimate Palestinian Government to Gaza.

The Middle East Quartet has also endorsed this approach.

Disengaging from Gaza, plunging it into another conflict or tightening the closures furthers the divide with devastating humanitarian and political consequences for the Palestinian national cause.

Madame President,

I appeal to you, to all Council Members and to all friends of Israel and friends of Palestine, to join the United Nations in calling on all sides to step back from the brink.

All parties must maintain their continued commitment to the 2014 ceasefire arrangements.

Hamas and other militant groups must immediately and effectively stop all provocations and attacks, including rockets and mortars, IEDs, attempts to breach the fence, incendiary balloons and kites, and tunnel construction, and rein in all violence at the fence.

Israel must restore the delivery of critical supplies to Gaza and improve the movement and access of goods and people; and Israeli security forces must exercise maximum restraint in the use of live ammunition.

The Palestinian Authority must not disengage from Gaza and must continue its engagement with the international community to help alleviate the suffering of its people in Gaza.

Any effort by any party to block the provision of critical assistance designed to relieve humanitarian suffering must not be tolerated.

Madam President,

These steps are only temporary and aim at avoiding war. We must never forget that, at its heart, Gaza is not a humanitarian problem, it is a political problem.

The humanitarian efforts are taking place in coordination with, and in support of, Egyptian efforts to bring Gaza back under the full control of the legitimate Palestinian Government.

The Government's return to Gaza and the lifting of the suffocating movement and access restrictions are necessary for addressing the humanitarian and economic needs of the population in a sustainable manner, but also addressing the important political challenges ahead.

In addition to the unification of all Palestinians under one single, legitimate democratic Palestinian national authority, the bigger picture must also be addressed: an end to the occupation; and the

realization of the two-state solution based on relevant UN resolutions, with Gaza as an integral part.

And make no mistake, the consequences of failure will be severe, just as the benefits of success will be profound.

Madame President,

Briefly turning to Lebanon, the country has entered its fifth month without a government. Prime Minister-designate Hariri continues consultations for an agreement on a national unity government. I hope that political stakeholders will soon overcome their differences and provide Lebanon with a new government that can deliver on its commitments vis-a-vis its citizens and the international community.

While the situation in South Lebanon and along the Blue Line remained calm, the rhetoric between Israel and Lebanon underpin risks of miscalculation. It is essential that the parties refrain from provocative actions and renew their commitment to resolution 1701 in word and in deed. Furthermore, I call on Lebanese authorities to complete the investigation into the 4 August attack on a UNIFIL patrol.

Turning also to the situation on the Golan, military conflict on the Bravo side ceased in late July, with the Syrian Government regaining control of parts of the area of separation that had previously been under the control of various non-State armed opposition groups. In recent weeks, low levels of military activity have been observed in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. UNDOF has assessed that this has been due to controlled detonations of explosive ordnance as part of the clearance by Syrian security forces.

I personally visited UNDOF facilities in the Israeli-occupied Golan on 4 October and was encouraged with the progress made in implementing the phased UNDOF plan for the continued return of forces to the Bravo Side. I welcome the re-opening on 15 October of the Quneitra crossing, which was facilitated by the parties to the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

Madame President,

In closing let me reiterate that we must break out of the endless cycle of emergency responses and stop-gap measures. The Palestinian people – whether they live in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, whether they live in Gaza, or as refugees in the region – deserve sustainable and just solutions. Both deserve a chance to restore their dignity and build a better future for themselves and their families. Just as the people of Israel deserve to live in peace and security, Palestinians deserve to be masters of their own fate, to be governed by democratically elected institutions, to have a state of their own that lives in peace and security with the State of Israel, without the walls of occupation, without the fear of reprisal or displacement, and certainly without the fear that the entirety of their lives will be spent struggling with no end in sight.

Thank you.