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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE
EAST, REPORTING ON UNSCR 2334 (2016)
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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I will present today the eighth report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2334 covering the period from 13 September to 14 December. I will focus on developments on the ground in accordance with the provisions of the resolution, including on regional and international efforts to advance peace.

Let me underscore that these developments cannot be divorced from the broader context: Israel's continued military occupation of Palestinian territory; uncertainties about the future of the peace process and the two-state solution; Hamas' continuing hold over Gaza, its militant activity; the persistent threat of war; unilateral actions that undermine peace efforts; reduced donor support for Palestine; and turmoil in the wider region.

Before I begin my report, I would like to warn of the dangerous escalation of terrorist attacks, clashes and violence in the West Bank. Over the past days and weeks, there has been an alarming rise in incidents that have led to the tragic deaths of Israeli and Palestinian civilians and Israeli soldiers. My thoughts and prayers go out to the bereaved families.

The security measures put in place in the aftermath of these incidents, search operations in Ramallah as well as clashes and protests that turn violent are adding to an already tense atmosphere. I join the Secretary-General in his call to Israeli and Palestinian security services to work together to restore calm and avoid escalation.

Mr. President,

Allow me to return to my reporting on resolution 2334.

No steps have been taken by Israel during the reporting period 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". This has required by Security Council resolution 2334.

I reiterate that all settlement activities are a violation under international law and a major obstacle to peace.

During the reporting period, plans for some 2,200 housing units in settlements in the West Bank were advanced or approved by the Israeli authorities. The vast majority, nearly 2,000, were advanced in East Jerusalem, further consolidating the ring of settlements to the city's north. 200 are in Area C reached the final stage of approval. This is the lowest number of quarterly advancements and approvals recorded since the resolution was adopted. This period, like the last quarter, saw no tenders issued.

In October the Government approved the allocation of some USD 6 million for advancing the construction of 31 housing units in Hebron, which would be the first new construction there in 16 years.

On 15 November, the High Court of Justice rejected an appeal by two Palestinian families living in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah and allowed the eviction of some 40 family members to advance construction. The decision was based on an ownership claim by an Israeli company.

On 19 November, the Knesset passed legislation enabling, under certain conditions, the planning for residential purposes in national parks located within municipal boundaries. This amendment could facilitate the construction of additional housing units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan.

On 21 November, Israel's High Court of Justice rejected a petition filed by over 100 Palestinian residents of Silwan to stop efforts by an Israeli organization to evict them from their homes. The organization had gained control of the properties by invoking an Israeli law by which Israelis, but not Palestinians, may claim lands they owned prior to 1948.

Mr. President,

Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures by Israeli authorities 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 in Area C and East Jerusalem, 152 structures were demolished or seized by the authorities. According to OCHA this resulted in the displacement of 103 people.

On 21 October, the Israeli authorities also announced the delay of the demolition of the Bedouin community of Khan al Ahmar - Abu al Helu in order to allow for negotiation with the community to relocate them with their consent. Nevertheless, the threat of mass demolition and displacement remains, despite broad international opposition to the move.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to the issue of violence. The resolution "calls for immediate steps to prevent all acts of violence against civilians," however, violence and the threat of war continue.

Overall, 75 Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces (ISF) including during demonstrations, clashes, airstrikes, security operations and other incidents. Seven Israelis, including three soldiers and four civilians, were killed by Palestinians in attacks in the West Bank

and a military operation in Gaza. The reporting period, once again, saw a major escalation in Gaza that almost brought Israel and Hamas to war.

On 11 November, in an exchange of fire following the discovery of an undercover Israel Defence Forces (IDF) unit in Gaza, seven members of Hamas's military wing and an IDF officer were killed. Militants in Gaza immediately launched 18 rockets and mortars. In the following 24 hours some 450 projectiles were indiscriminately fired towards Israeli cities and towns – more than in the entire period since the 2014 conflict. One Palestinian civilian was killed by a Hamas rocket in the Israeli city of Ashkelon. An IDF soldier was also seriously wounded by a missile strike that hit a military bus.

The IDF responded by striking 160 targets identified as militant sites. Seven Palestinians were killed, at least four are reported to have been members of armed groups.

On 11 October, the IDF announced that it had destroyed a tunnel extending 200 meters from Gaza into Israel. On 17 October, two medium-range rockets were launched towards Israel, one directly hitting a residential building in Be'er Sheva some 40 kilometres away. The IDF responded by firing ten missiles at targets sites across the Strip. On 28 October, three Palestinian children aged 13 to 15 were killed in an IDF strike near the fence in the southern Gaza Strip in disputed circumstances.

Protests at the Gaza perimeter fence and near the beach continued, although their size significantly decreased, and they remained fairly peaceful since the beginning of November. Since early November there have been no reports of incendiary devices, balloons or kites from Gaza causing damage in Israel.

Since 13 September, some 43 Palestinians were killed during the protests and other incidents near the fence and at sea, including nine children. The youngest and most recent victim was a four-year-old who died on 11 December after he was injured by Israeli live fire during protests at the fence.

Meanwhile in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the situation has also deteriorated over the past weeks. During the reporting period six Israelis, including four civilians, and 12 Palestinians were killed in various incidents including terror attacks, clashes and military operations.

On 7 October, an Israeli man and woman were shot dead in the Barkan industrial zone by a former Palestinian co-worker, who was killed in an IDF operation near Nablus on 13 December.

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

On 4 December in the Tulkarm refugee camp, a 22-year old Palestinian with a psychosocial disability was shot and killed by the ISF in circumstances that would seem to indicate that he posed no threat to security personnel or others. Investigations have been launched into both incidents.

On 9 December, in a drive-by shooting near the West Bank settlement of Ofra, seven Israelis were injured, including four children and a pregnant woman whose baby was delivered prematurely and has subsequently passed away. Hamas praised the attack and identified one of the perpetrators, who was later killed in an ISF operation north of Ramallah, as one of their own. The IDF has indicated that there are additional individuals involved in the incident still at large and that a manhunt is ongoing. I want to strongly condemn this attack and reiterate that there is no justification for terrorism.

On 13 December, in another drive-by shooting near the Givat Asaf settlement, two Israeli soldiers were killed and another severely wounded alongside an Israeli woman. The perpetrators, who fled towards Ramallah, reportedly remain at large.

In the operations to apprehend the perpetrators of the Ofra attack, on 10 and 11 December, dozens of IDF troops entered Ramallah, where, *inter alia*, they raided the offices of the official Palestinian news agency, WAFA, and seized surveillance video. Two Palestinians were reportedly injured by live fire during ensuing clashes and over 150 in related incidents around the West Bank in subsequent days.

In a statement issued on 13 December, the Israeli Prime Minister announced a series of measures in response to the wave of attacks, including revoking permits of family members and demolishing houses of the perpetrators of attacks, increasing checkpoints and administrative detentions, and intensifying efforts to capture assailants still at large. The Prime Minister also announced that some 2,000 houses built on private Palestinians land in settlements would be retroactively legalized, and that steps had been taken to advance the construction of 82 new housing units in Ofra and in two industrial zones in the settlements of Avnei Hefets and Beitar Ilit.

OCHA has recorded 49 incidents of settler-related violence resulting in injury to Palestinians or damage to their property. During the reporting period there were also recurring clashes between settlers from Yitzhar and residents of the neighbouring Palestinian village of Urif.

Following the shooting attacks in the past few days, settler leaders blamed the Government for failing to protect them. Hundreds protested, some violently, blocking traffic and throwing stones at Palestinian vehicles. Police arrested some 40 people. Incidents of stone throwing, vandalism, as well as shots fired at Palestinian villages have been reported in several locations in the West Bank.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 calls upon the parties “to refrain from provocative actions, incitement, and inflammatory rhetoric.” Unfortunately, such actions and statements continued during the reporting period.

Hamas continued to use inciteful and inflammatory rhetoric: its officials praised the stabbing and shooting attacks that killed Israeli civilians as “heroic” and “mourned” the killers. Fatah, including on its official social media accounts, also commemorated and celebrated the perpetrators of the

recent attacks, as well as past terror attacks in which Israeli civilians have been killed. In a radio interview, a senior member of the party glorified the perpetrators of stabbing attacks in Jerusalem. In addition, senior Palestinian religious leaders made a series of inflammatory speeches alleging Israeli intentions to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque or change the status quo at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem.

Palestinian President Abbas has spoken against the recent surge of violence in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, Israeli officials have also made provocative and highly problematic statements encouraging violence and undermining a two-state solution. In the wake of the recent violence in the West Bank, politicians have called for the deportation of families of attackers. Separately, there have been calls for a “shoot to kill” policy in Gaza, and one politician has gone as far as to call for President Abbas to be assassinated. Others have continued to reject Palestinians’ right to statehood, openly to support widespread settlement expansion, and support the annexation of all or parts of the West Bank.

Mr. 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.” There have been some positive developments, but the negative trends dominate.

Among positive developments I can point to the mobilization of international support for UNRWA. On 19 November, UNRWA announced that the financial shortfall for 2018 – which stood at USD 446 million in January – had been reduced to USD 21 million thanks to substantial new funding by Member States.

In Gaza, the international community has taken a number of steps to improve the lives of two million people, who live under Hamas’ control, struggle with Israeli closures and have little prospect to see national unity.

First, thanks to the generous funding from the State of Qatar, the United Nations has been able to import lifesaving fuel to operate the Gaza Power Plant. Daily electricity supply has increased to more than 11 hours, the highest in over two years.

Private homes, hospitals, schools, water facilities, businesses are all benefitting.

Seventy-five per cent of the sewage can now be treated again, significantly reducing the contamination levels caused by discharge into the sea. Piped water supply has increased by 40 percent, almost fully meeting water demand for domestic household purposes. Drinking water supplied through desalination plants has also increased by 20 per cent, while private businesses have benefited from the reduced fuel costs.

These are substantial improvements.

Finding sustainable solutions to Gaza’s electricity crisis however remains critical. UNSCO and the World Bank have convened the international community to discuss how to stabilize electricity supply in the long run.

Second, on 4 December, the United Nations concluded a comprehensive review of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) together with the Palestinian Authority and Israel. It resulted in several important changes that will be implemented as of 1 January. They will allow the Mechanism to better respond to Gaza's changed needs and increase its functionality, transparency and predictability.

Thirdly, the reconstruction and rehabilitation of 360 totally destroyed houses and the repair of 30 partially damaged homes from the 2014 conflict has also been completed.

Finally, in Gaza, the United Nations has enhanced its project implementation capacity by establishing a Project Management Unit to work with all relevant stakeholders to support project implementation, including of the Ad Hoc Liaison committee package of urgent interventions.

Beyond Gaza, in another encouraging sign, civil society groups continue to mobilize in support of peace. This past month, I participated in a remarkable conference organized by Women Wage Peace, an NGO that brings together Jewish and Arab women advocating a negotiated solution to the conflict. The conference, attended by close to a thousand young women and men, is precisely the kind of grassroots effort called for in the 2016 Quartet Report, it encourages a culture of tolerance and laying a crucial foundation for peace.

Mr. President,

Regrettably, the negative trends however continue to overshadow any positive developments.

The humanitarian, economic and political crisis in Gaza continues and despite Egypt's sustained efforts, there has been no progress in implementing the October 2017 intra-Palestinian agreement. The goal remains that Gaza and the West Bank are reunited under the control of a single, legitimate national Government, with a unified legal framework, that would be responsible for all aspects of governance, including security.

In December Hamas made public the decision of a military court to sentence six people to death, including a woman. Another death sentence was also handed down in Gaza to a man convicted of murder by a criminal court. These decisions are contrary to both international human rights law and national Palestinian legislation.

Mr. President,

Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) calls upon all States "to distinguish in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967."

On 28 November the Chilean Parliament approved a resolution, which called on the Government to examine all of its agreements with Israel to ascertain that they apply solely to the territory of the State of Israel, and not to the territories occupied since 1967.

The Republic of Ireland advanced in the upper house of Parliament, the "Control of Economic Activity (in the Occupied Territories) Bill 2018.", which, if passed into law would, prohibit trade with and economic support for settlements.

Mr. President,

The resolution also called upon “all parties to continue, *inter alia*, to exert collective efforts to launch credible negotiations.” No progress was achieved in this respect.

In the beginning of my statement, I addressed the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements.

On 28 and 29 October, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Central Council (PCC) reaffirmed the decisions taken to suspend the recognition of the State of Israel until the latter recognizes the State of Palestine on the June 4, 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, end security coordination in all its forms, and disengage economically from Israel. These decisions have not been implemented.

On 15 November, President Abbas is reported to have signed eleven instruments of accession to international agreements.

Mr. President,

In closing, I would like to share some broad observations concerning the implementation of the provisions of resolution 2334 over the past year.

1. The continued expansion of the Israeli settlement enterprise, in all of its aspects, is illegal under international law, undermines hope among the population, trust between the parties, and the two-state solution, itself.

Settlement planning and tendering continued during 2018 but at lower rates compared to 2017. In Area C settlements, plans were advanced or approved for some 4,800 housing units, compared to nearly 7,000 during 2017. Tenders were announced for some 2,900 units, slightly less than the 3,200 tendered the previous year. In East Jerusalem settlements, plans were advanced or approved for 2,100 units in 2018, compared to about 3,100 in 2017, and a tender was announced for the first time in two years. About one quarter of the units advanced, approved or tendered in 2018 are planned for settlements in outlying locations deep inside the West Bank.

In this context, this year saw some worrying moves. These include the continued construction of a new settlement, Amihai, located in a strategic location that further consolidates the cluster of settlements to the east of Shilo in the very heart of the West Bank. Israeli authorities also approved new construction in Hebron after a lull of some 16 years. In addition, several judicial and administrative decisions taken during 2018 have removed long-standing obstacles to the use of private Palestinian land for the benefit of settlements.

The UN continues to monitor closely the threat of demolitions and displacement to Palestinians in Area C and East Jerusalem. Between January and November 2018, there were 422 Palestinian-owned structures demolished or seized by Israel on the grounds of a lack of building permits -- 245 in Area C and 167 in East Jerusalem. Some 411 people have been displaced. This represents a slight increase in the number of structures demolished compared with the equivalent period of 2017.

Particularly concerning is the situation in the community of Khan al-Ahmar – Abu al Helu. Moving forward on the demolition of the community could amount to a serious violation of

Israel's obligations under international law and undermine the prospects for a two-state solution. I call on all concerned parties to work towards resolving the issue in a manner that is consistent with the community's will and genuine needs, and in line with Israel's international legal obligations.

2. In terms of violence over the past year, although Gaza has been the most volatile, the risk of an explosion in the West Bank has also grown.

I am concerned by the recent incidents and rising tensions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. During the past three months, we have witnessed stabbing, ramming and three lethal shooting attacks against Israelis, one of which led to the heartbreaking death of a baby. We have also seen the death of a Palestinian woman, killed by a stone. There can be no justification for any brutal acts of terror and I call on all to join the UN in condemning them unequivocally. They feed mistrust and hatred among people.

Israeli responses to recent events in the West Bank have been harsh as some of the perpetrators of recent attacks have been killed. Unfortunately, incidents, like the shooting of a Palestinian man with psycho-social disabilities, as he was walking away from the security forces, fuel a climate of fear and anger. These actions continue to fuel a climate of hatred and fear and drive Israelis and Palestinians further away from a resolution to the conflict.

Settler-related violence has also been on the rise during 2018, with the highest number of incidents recorded since 2014. Thousands of Palestinian-owned trees and more than hundreds of vehicles have been damaged. Settlers have continued to enter Palestinian locations, triggering clashes, some of which involving Israeli soldiers. Such incidents have resulted in the death of two Palestinians. While I acknowledge efforts by the authorities to prevent and investigate settler related violence, I call for further measures to ensure that Israel fulfills its obligation to protect Palestinian civilians and to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for attacks.

And while Gaza has been quiet since the last escalation in November, it is critical that events in the West Bank not lead to reigniting the Gaza fuse; the people in Gaza have suffered enough and must not be made to pay the price for violence elsewhere.

Each time, as the parties came frighteningly close to the brink of war, tireless efforts by Egypt and the UN prevented a full-fledged conflict. Ultimately, reuniting Gaza and the West Bank under a single, legitimate and democratic Palestinian Authority and putting an end to the occupation will ensure long-term peace. Meanwhile however, it is imperative that the current calm be preserved at all costs. No one can afford another war in Gaza.

Since March, tens of thousands of people in Gaza took part in demonstrations along the perimeter fence, many of which turned violent. Throughout this period, hundreds of fires were started in Israel by incendiary devices, balloons and kites coming from Gaza. From May through November, we witnessed the most serious escalations since the 2014 Gaza conflict, with over 500 rockets and 700 mortars fired towards Israel by Hamas and other militant groups.

Some 175 Palestinians were killed by Israeli live fire, including 32 children, two women and three medical workers. One Israeli soldier was killed by sniper fire during the demonstrations.

The indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars against Israeli towns and villages violates international law, placing hundreds of thousands of civilians under imminent threat, and causing great fear and mental trauma, particularly for children.

Serious concerns remain over the loss of life, especially of children, in the context of these hostilities and protests. The death of four-year-old child is a tragedy that must not be repeated; I mourn his short life. The killing of children is absolutely unacceptable. Israeli security forces have a responsibility to exercise restraint and should use firearms only when strictly necessary in order to protect life or prevent serious injury from an imminent threat. Hamas also has an obligation to protect children, ensuring that they never be put in harm's way.

3. Ongoing instances of incitement, provocative steps, and inflammatory rhetoric plague the public language of the conflict. They are highly dangerous and threaten to push an already volatile situation past the boiling point. I have repeatedly stated in my briefings to the Council that leaders have a responsibility to reduce, rather than escalate, tensions; yet over the past year, statements that encourage violence continued. Such rhetoric, particularly if it denies the right of existence of one of the sides, or their right to statehood, or glorifies terror, is dangerous and plays into the hands of extremists beyond Israel and Palestine. I also reiterate, to political, community and religious leaders, the resolution's call to clearly condemn all acts of terrorism.
4. Regrettably, this year has seen no affirmative steps by the parties to reverse negative trends nor serious progress on implementing important agreements signed in 2017, including on water, energy and telecommunications. On the contrary, significant Israeli administrative and legal decisions are facilitating the legalization, under Israeli law, of settlements on private Palestinian land and threaten to undermine the financial stability of the Palestinian Authority. Meanwhile, restrictive PA measures against Gaza compound the long-standing Israeli closures of the Strip, further widening the political and administrative gap between Ramallah and Gaza. These must end.

Nevertheless, the completion of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism review and more specifically the commitment by the Palestinian Authority and Israel to the mechanism's continuation and enhancement was an important development. This rare example of direct Israeli and Palestinian engagement with UN facilitation shows that there is room for cooperation.

Humanitarian partners have also struggled to fulfil their mandates in the face of rising humanitarian needs against record-high cuts in funding, increased restrictions on humanitarian operating space and attempts to de-legitimize the reputable organizations providing essential support to vulnerable Palestinians. I encourage Member States to support the Humanitarian Response Plan for Palestine for 2019.

The important financial support of the State of Qatar has enabled the UN-delivery of fuel to the Gaza Power Plant and the resulting substantial increase in electricity supply for Palestinians in Gaza. I urge other donors to support additional elements of the package of urgent economic and humanitarian interventions for Gaza that was endorsed by the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee in September in New York.

I also welcome the generous support of donors to meet nearly the full shortfall facing UNRWA this past year. Looking ahead to 2019 I urge donor countries to preserve the funding levels achieved in 2018 and to increase the number of multi-year agreements.

The fate of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two IDF soldiers missing in Gaza remain also an important humanitarian concern for all of us.

5. While there has been no progress on intra-Palestinian reconciliation, it is critical that this important Egyptian-led process continue. The United Nations stands firmly in support of Egypt's efforts in this regard and urges the parties to make serious efforts to ensure the return of the legitimate Palestinian Government to Gaza. Gaza is, and must remain, an integral part of a future Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution.

Mr. President,

In closing let me reiterate that I remain concerned by the weakening of international consensus and the absence of collective efforts to achieve an end to the occupation and the realization of a negotiated two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions and prior agreements.

I believe that I speak on behalf of all of us today when I say that we all share a concern that at the end of 2018 we are nowhere closer to reviving efforts for a negotiated solution. Without a political horizon, all our collective and individual efforts merely contribute to managing the conflict rather than resolving it.

It is only by realizing the vision of two states living side-by-side in peace, security and mutual recognition, with Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Palestine, and all final status issues resolved permanently through negotiations, that the legitimate aspirations of both peoples can be achieved.

Thank you.