

(As delivered)

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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

20 May 2020

Mister President,

Members of the Security Council,

I brief you today three days after a new coalition government was sworn into office in Israel following a year of political uncertainty. I look forward to working with the new ministers on the challenges that lie ahead. The pandemic is not behind us. Managing its socio-economic impact, affects both for the Israeli and Palestinian people, and it will remain a serious challenge. Beyond the health aspects of the crisis we need to ensure that cooperation among all sides continues in the interest of peace. To this end the UN will work with the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, as well as with our regional and international partners to create the conditions for returning to meaningful Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Our unfaltering commitment to achieving a negotiated two-state solution remains resolute. The Secretary-General has warned on many occasions of the danger of unilateral action.

The continuing threat of annexation by Israel of parts of the West Bank would constitute a most serious violation of international law, deal a devastating blow to the two-State solution, close the door to a renewal of negotiations, and threaten efforts to advance regional peace and our broader efforts to maintain international peace and security.

Recent polls show that the Israeli public is also divided on the issue.

Countries in the region and many in the international community clearly stated their positions regarding annexation.

The Palestinian leadership announced yesterday evening that it sees itself absolved “as of today, of all the agreements and understandings with the American and Israeli governments and of all the obligations based on these understandings and agreements, including the security ones” and calls on Israel to assume its obligations as the occupying power. The statement by President Mahmoud Abbas also calls for negotiations under international auspices, including by the Quartet, to advance a negotiated two-state solution.

Tomorrow I will be meeting with the Palestinian Prime Minister in order to better understand the practical side of the decision by the leadership and its implications on the ground.

If there is one concern that we all share, that is the need for all to work together to prevent escalation and radicalization.

However, Mr. President,

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If I may speak openly and very frankly on the issue, whatever our individual assessments of the Palestinian reaction to the Israeli threat of annexation may be, it is certainly one thing –

it is a desperate cry for help. It is a call for immediate action.

It is a cry for help from a generation of a leadership that has invested its life in building institutions and preparing for statehood for over a quarter of a century.

The Palestinian leadership is not threatening, it is calling for urgent action to preserve the prospect of peace.

It is doing so at a time in which a new, younger generation comes forward, with its own aspirations for the future, many feel betrayed and increasingly cynical. This new generation, born in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, disillusioned that for over a quarter of a century statehood has not been achieved, we don't know what future they will carve out for themselves, but whatever future young Palestinians and Israelis decide to build, we have an obligation to prevent violence, and protect the chance for peace.

Therefore, I ask you today, to join the Secretary-General in his call against unilateral steps that will hinder current diplomatic efforts to create the conditions for bringing Israelis and Palestinians back to the table.

We owe this to all the young Palestinians and Israelis out there.

I call on my colleagues in the Middle East Quartet – the United States, the Russian Federation and the European Union -- to work with the United Nations and quickly come forward with a proposal that will enable the Quartet to take up its mediation role and work jointly with countries in the region to advance the prospect of peace.

Israel must abandon the threats of annexation.

And the Palestinian leadership to re-engage with all members of the Quartet.

Everyone must do their part.

Mister President,

Returning to the situation on the ground, let me note that it continues to be dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite growing political tensions, Palestinian and Israeli authorities have continued their notable coordination around efforts to limit the spread of the virus and are taking careful steps to reopen their economies and lift virus-related restrictions.

Relatively successful prevention efforts in the OPT have thus far ensured that the limited capacity of the health system has not been overwhelmed. However, there remain considerable concerns regarding the ability of the Palestinian health sector to cope with a potential surge in cases, especially in Gaza. In particular, there are continuing shortages of critical supplies including

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testing materials, personal protective equipment, ventilators and essential Intensive Care Unit (ICU) equipment, due to funding gaps and a shortage in global supply.

The UN and its partners have continued to work to address these gaps and their ramifications. Thus far, over 50 per cent of the amount requested in the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Response Plan, some USD 23 million, has been raised. Including resources outside the Response Plan, some USD 39.5 million have been mobilized to support COVID-19 related activities in the OPT.

Following an agreement between the Palestinian and Israeli authorities, over ten thousand Palestinian labourers crossed into Israel from the West Bank on 3 May. They are part of an estimated 40,000 who were granted permits to stay in Israel until the end of Ramadan. On 4 May, Israel approved new regulations obliging employers in Israel to provide medical insurance and appropriate accommodation for Palestinian workers.

Mister President,

In Gaza, the health system continues to face immense challenges despite the low number of positive COVID-19 cases. As of the end of April 2020, 44 per cent of essential medicines and 30 per cent of essential medical supplies in the Strip had less than a month's stock remaining.

The Rafah Crossing with Egypt opened for three days between 12-14 May in one direction to allow for the return of 1,168 people to Gaza. Travel through the Erez Crossing has been limited largely to urgent medical cases and their companions, as well as to staff of international organizations and returning Gaza residents. Approximately 460 people were allowed to return to Gaza and some 225 others to exit through that crossing.

Mister President,

As elsewhere around the world, the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Palestinians have been immense. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have lost their jobs, small and medium enterprises are unable to operate, children cannot attend school in person, and violence against women and children has increased. As always, the most vulnerable are at the greatest risk of suffering. Recent gains in Gaza on water, sanitation, electricity, and livelihoods are at extreme risk of being fully reversed.

COVID-19 has damaged Gaza's economy across sectors: around 13,000 industrial workers have temporarily lost their jobs; virtually all restaurants and hotels have ceased operations, leading to the release of over 10,000 workers; while perhaps half of all employees in the ICT sector have also been laid off.

The Palestinian people are experiencing the same shock and uncertainty as the rest of humanity; however their Government is unable to respond to the socio-economic effects with the same agency as an independent, sovereign state. It cannot avail itself of the conventional monetary and fiscal tools that sovereign countries ordinarily use in times of economic distress—it cannot influence interest rates, print money, devalue its currency, or access international capital markets to finance the deficit spending needed to compensate those who have lost jobs and to support businesses to stay afloat.

The vulnerable fiscal position of the Palestinian Authority has been further damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. PA revenues are down sharply due to restrictions on movement and business operations, and lower demand for goods. Given the additional spending required to respond to and recover from the pandemic, estimates are that the PA's fiscal deficit could exceed USD 2 billion for this year.

Israel's announced USD 233 million soft loan for a period of four months, against future Palestinian clearance revenues. It will provide a critical fiscal lifeline for the Palestinian Authority. However, unless combined with a long-term response and reform strategy, including a resolution of the outstanding fiscal issues, this lifeline only delays difficult fiscal decisions to the future.

Working with its international partners, the Palestinian Authority must also adopt emergency budget measures to address the pandemic, along lines recently outlined by the World Bank.

An additional complicating factor as of 9 May is an amendment to an Israeli military order that purportedly holds Palestinian commercial banks liable for processing payments from the PA to Palestinian security prisoners, their families or families of those killed in attacks. This development injects more uncertainty into the already vulnerable Palestinian financial system.

On 24 April, the Jerusalem District Court issued a decision ordering the temporary confiscation of some USD 128 million from the PA as compensation to families of victims of attacks against Israelis during the Second Intifada. The Court ruled that the sum, at least in part, would be collected from PA clearance revenues withheld since March 2019 under Israeli legislation concerning payments by the PA to security prisoners or families of Palestinians killed in attacks.

Mister President,

Clashes between the Israeli Security Forces (ISF) and Palestinians continued during the reporting period.

Overall, in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, two Palestinians, including a teenager, and an Israel soldier were killed. Sixty-five Palestinians, including six children, and two Israelis, one child and one soldier, were injured in various incidents.

On 28 April, a Palestinian man stabbed a 62-year-old Israeli woman in the Israeli city of Kfar Saba, moderately wounding her. The perpetrator was arrested.

On 12 May, an Israeli soldier was killed by a stone thrown at his head during an ISF arrest operation in the village of Ya'bed, near Jenin.

Later that day, a Palestinian man was shot and wounded by the ISF at the Qalandiya checkpoint after reportedly attempting a stabbing attack against the ISF.

On the following day, a Palestinian teenager was shot dead by ISF during clashes in the Fawwar Refugee Camp near Hebron during an arrest operation.

On 14 May, a 19-year-old Palestinian man was shot dead by ISF after carrying out a suspected ramming attack near Hebron. An Israeli soldier was wounded in the incident.

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In Gaza, the calm that has prevailed in recent months continued. On 6 May, a rocket was fired from Gaza towards Israel. In response, Israeli forces targeted Hamas facilities in the Strip. No injuries were reported in either incident. On several occasions, Israeli forces opened fire, injuring four Palestinians.

Mister President,

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, concerns remain over the situation of Palestinian children in Israeli custody.

On 11 May, Jamie McGoldrick, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, UNICEF and OHCHR issued a joint statement calling on Israeli and Palestinian authorities to immediately release children in detention and emphasizing that “the best way to uphold the rights of detained children amidst a dangerous pandemic in any country is to release them and put a moratorium on new admissions into detention facilities.”

Mister President,

In the reporting period OCHA recorded 20 incidents in which Israeli settlers injured Palestinians or reportedly damaged their property, with a high concentration of incidents reported in the Nablus and Ramallah Governorates. In the same period, there were reports of 23 incidents of stone and Molotov cocktail throwing in which Palestinians injured Israeli civilians in the West Bank or reportedly damaged their property.

On 18 May, Israel's District Court in Lod convicted an Israeli man of the horrific murder of three members of the Palestinian Dawabsheh family, including a toddler, who were killed in 2015 by the burning down of their family home in the West Bank village of Duma as they slept.

As the Secretary-General noted in his report last month, “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.” According to recent reporting by UN Women, Palestinian women and girls are disproportionately affected by the pandemic which is creating and exacerbating pre-existing gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities and is expected to widen inequalities - especially in the economic sphere.

In this context, I remain concerned by the increase in incidents of Gender Based Violence (GBV), especially in situations where families are confined to small living spaces and exposed to increased socio-economic pressures. NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza have reported a rise in cases of life-threatening GBV incidents and have raised concerns about the ongoing lack of protection, sheltering and referral services.

Mister President,

In early May, the Israeli Ministry of Defense approved the seizure of municipal planning authority from the Hebron Municipality at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. This move was justified by the goal of making the site accessible to those with disabilities, while stating that the project "will not change prayer arrangements or the *status quo*."

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The order was issued on 12 May allowing 60 days for objections. The Palestinian leadership, the Hebron Municipality, the Waqf and Islamic authorities, among others, have condemned this move, with some arguing that it violates the 1997 Hebron Protocol.

Any change not agreed by the stakeholders to the delicate balance at holy sites threatens stability and must not be taken unilaterally.

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities demolished 32 Palestinian-owned structures due to lack of Israeli-issued building permits.

Consequently, 16 people, including 10 children, were displaced and another 170 were otherwise affected. Of the structures demolished by Israeli authorities during the reporting period, all 32 were in Area C of the West Bank.

While there has been an overall decline in demolitions and in displacement, any such steps are contrary to Israel's obligations under international law and must stop.

Turning to the region, on the occupied Golan the overall security situation remains stable despite continued violations by both parties including breaches of the ceasefire line and the presence of unauthorized personnel and equipment in the areas of separation and limitation. On 30 April, UNDOF observed three missiles fired from the Alpha side impacting the Bravo side, a helicopter on the Alpha side firing a missile across the ceasefire line, as well as a rocket exploding in the area of separation. The Israel Defense Forces informed UNDOF that they had conducted a strike on the Bravo side. On 3 May, UNDOF observed one aircraft flying from the Alpha side crossing the ceasefire line followed on 4 May by two drones from the Alpha side crossing the ceasefire line and hovering over the area of separation. These developments have a potential to escalate the situation between Israel and Syria. The parties have an obligation to respect the terms of the Disengagement Agreement.

In Lebanon, the Government began formal discussions on 13 May with the International Monetary Fund, following the adoption of a national Financial Recovery Plan. Amidst an uptick in new COVID-19 cases, the Government re-imposed on 13 May a total lockdown for four days, with the exception of essential services, to allow for enhanced contact tracing and testing and to inform the next steps for containment.

The situation in the UNIFIL area of operations, including along the Blue Line, remained mostly stable. UNIFIL convened on 14 May a tripartite meeting with the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces under COVID-19 restrictions to urge the parties to avoid provocative actions and fully utilize UNIFIL's liaison and coordination arrangements to preserve the cessation of hostilities.

Mr. President,

In closing, let me return to my initial words.

I firmly believe that the time has come for all sides to do their part in the coming weeks and months in order to preserve the prospect of a negotiated two-state resolution to the conflict, in line with relevant UN resolutions, international law and bilateral agreements.

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These efforts must begin immediately, there is no time to lose.

The fate of the Palestinian and Israeli people must not be determined by destructive unilateral actions that cement divisions and may put peace beyond our reach in our lifetime.

Thank you.